



Learning Uncut Episode 185: Learning as Investment, Not Cost – Tina Schust Robinson & LaTanya Foster

Michelle Parry-Slater

It's great to be back on the Learning Uncut podcast. And today we're thinking about learning when it's seen as an investment, not as a cost.

Let's begin in the spirit of reconciliation as we acknowledge the traditional custodians of country throughout Australia and their connections to the land, sea and community, particularly to the Combomerie People whose land I'm joining you from today.

We pay respects to their elders past and present, and we extend that respect to all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples present and listening today.

Today I'm joined by guests from Los Angeles. So, it's still yesterday for them as I'm joining this recording fairly early in the morning in Australia.

But we're going to speak to people who are going to challenge the way we think about investing in our people. So, Tina Robinson is the founder and chief exec of WorkJoy, and she can tell us a little bit more about what that is, and joined by one of her clients, LaTanya Foster, who's vice president of People at BÉIS.

They're a global travel accessories brand. So, if you've been traveling around the world, it is likely that you have got some of their travel products with you right now as you're listening to this podcast. Many of us do listen on planes, trains, and automobiles.

But before we get into it, I'd love to hear a little bit more about both of you. So Tina, tell us, what is WorkJoy?

Tina Schust Robinson

Well, thank you so much for having us on the call and I love your opening. I feel a day behind, which I always feel when I'm talking to my friends on the other side of the world.

I have nearly 30 years of experience in what I call humans at work, work. That's everything from management consulting to HR technology, sales and operations, as well as hands-on human resources and leadership development.

And it was in that latter role when I was working with multiple brands, including Savage X Fenty, Rihanna's global lingerie brand, that I met the wonderful LaTanya Foster, who was the head of people for that brand.

In 2017, I launched my own brand called WorkJoy to allow me to do the work that brings me the most joy, specifically leadership development in all forms: coaching, training and workplace advisory.

And I'm a brand new author of a brand new book that I will be talking about later in the program.

Michelle Parry-Slater

Wonderful, thank you. Okay, so LaTanya, you met in 2017 and then the journey brought you to working together. Talk to me a little bit about what you do.

LaTanya Foster

So I'm LaTanya Foster. I'm the vice president of People at BÉIS. Yes, we are an incredible, global fashion accessory travel brand. Luggage, rollers, handbags, all the things. You need one.

I have been in the People space for 20 years and have lived through all the different iterations of what it means to drive people at work.

Started out in government, then went to higher education. I did run my own consulting firm for a number of years and then I moved more into D2C and fashion brands, which is where I am today. And yeah, my journey so far and I say so far because I'm sure I have many a year left, my journey so far has really been about building and scaling the people operations, and that's what I love to do.

So, I'm happy to be joining Tina, she's one of my favourite people, but also she's just so great to work with and has been just an incredible partner in all this.

Michelle Parry-Slater

Well it's wonderful to have you both with us today and I'm very much excited about your story.

I mean you're working, LaTanya, in an industry which has had a lot of external forces upon it recently.

Obviously, COVID hit, obviously we've got things like travel disruption going on in the world, shifting consumer behaviour as well, that sense of should we be flying all over the world or should we actually be taking the train.

So, there's lots going on in that space which creates a lot of noise, particularly around leadership. So, I can see why you ended up getting together.

Tina, congratulations on your recent book publication. Let's do get into that a little bit later on.

But first, I'm curious to know about this strong case study. Now this case study came out of your book, as I recall, is that right?

Tina Schust Robinson

The theme of the book, which is called *Developing Your Business Leaders: A Guide to Investing at All Levels*. My publisher keeps reminding me, Tina, if you don't tell people that you wrote a book, nobody is ever going to buy the book. Get used to saying the name of the book.

The book is written as a primer to help talent development professionals create a business case for investing in their leaders. Because LaTanya and I have seen this throughout our careers.

If you start with the how if you start with the execution, if you start with the coaching, if you start with the workshop, if you start with the online training and then you try to reverse and work your way into a business reason, it undoubtedly fails.

And then you throw your hands up and go, why? Why did it fail? Because it wasn't linked to what mattered to the business.

And so I learned that really early in my career, it is the theme of the book, because I don't think it's a lesson that's absorbed by many of the folks in our profession.

I'm blessed that LaTanya instantly understands this and this is how she works as well.

So, when she and I were talking about this leadership development program for BÉIS, it began with a very clear business why.

Michelle Parry-Slater

It's so typical that we in learning and development are approached by our stakeholders with a solution. They already have got something in mind. Everyone thinks they know about L&D because they went to school.

And of course they come to you and say, I'd like a course, I'd like a leadership course, or I'd like an e-learning about this. And so, it's really refreshing to hear that this is about helping organisations build business cases and helping them to really understand why we're doing what we're doing.

So, let me come to you LaTanya. What was the problem that you were trying to solve?

If it wasn't a learning solution that you were coming with, what was the actual problem?

LaTanya Foster

Sure, I think you're right. The season, the past few years that we have been in, it's just been so volatile, right? There's just so many things that have changed in the landscape, in our industry, but just in the world as a whole. And I would say when I came on board at BÉIS, one of the main tasks outside of just continuing to build our people team as we really built it in-house was to develop the very fast-growing team that we did have.

It was a very small team for a very long time and as we were growing, there were different layers that we were building into the organisation. As we were building in those layers, the distinctive layer that we were building into was the director level.

And so, where there had been a few people wearing several different hats across the organisation, we were now at operationalising that so that each channel had its own owner, its own leader, and therefore its own KPIs and a team under that.

So, with that, there was sort of a half-and-half situation where we had people that had been there, established and had grown with the business, we promoted those people into the director roles. And then where we needed support or had not had that expertise in the business, we then hired directors into the company.

Of course, that, along with a myriad of other things, we were sort of in a learning crisis, right?

Like we just had this whole brand new team of leaders and I think a thought around how we wanted to develop them, how we wanted to help them gel together, but it was conceptual at best.

The thought was we have to get them together in order for them to be successful.

We have to continue getting the executives together in order to get them successful.

But we also need a learning path for everyone in the organisation in order for everyone to be successful.

So, that was sort of the charge and the mission at the beginning of all of this. And what I have absolutely loved and will always continue to encourage is the evolution of that one concept and

what that looks like from when we first started versus what that looks like now and what we will continue to build upon, because learning and development to me is an ever-going process.

It's not something that "I took this learning", "I took this course and great", "I'm done".

It is an everyday, yeah . . . "I'm cured", "I know everything!"

But we did start with a very specific diagnosis. And we needed to have some answer to, but then unearth that one thing, a whole other subset of issues as time went on.

And I'm sure we'll get into the meat and potatoes of all of this. But I think ultimately, it's the pivoting that really made all of this work, just the ability to adjust slightly as we were moving forward with the plan. But that is how we started here.

Michelle Parry-Slater

There's so many things to unpack here, isn't it?

The iterative practice, the networking, the pooling together, the community, the culture change. Tina, tell me, how did you actually get to the clarity of what specifically needed to shift?

How did you arrive at, "what are we going to do to work together here?"

Tina Schust Robinson

Yeah, and that's such a great question.

And I'm going to add to what LaTanya was saying, because we know that middle management, they're the filling in the sandwich.

So, at the director level, it's expected that you can have managers reporting into you. And so, it is such a pivotal point in the leadership journey, because by the time you get to director, we hope that you have learned how to be a good people manager.

You've learned how to coach, you've learned how to give feedback, you've made the transition from individual contributor to somebody who directs work.

You've learned how to delegate, you've learned how to let go. And many people get to director without having learned those lessons. So, by the time you get to director, you're in a position to influence a whole level of frontline leaders.

So, it's almost like at the director level and folks can't see me, but I'm hitting the ceiling here, if you don't get leadership right at the director level, that's it. Someone's personal career path is ending. And if you promote people who do not figure it out at the director level into senior leader roles, you're really putting your whole organisation at risk.

So I find it and I even said this at the recent global SHRM Talent conference, I find it just so frustrating that organisations, in the spirit of flattening and efficiency, are tearing out their layers of directors and middle managers exactly when that is the layer that is so critical to invest in.

And so, to add to what LaTanya said, the directors were the critical bridge between frontline execution and senior level strategy. And they were operating as individual subject matter experts. They weren't collaborating and cooperating with each other to get cross-functional alignment before going to the senior leadership team.

They were going sort of one-off. And when the senior leadership team would push back on them, because it is such a small organisation, which means every group is so tightly interconnected with other groups, the senior leaders would push back and say, did you talk to fill in the blank?

Did you talk to social?

Did you talk to product development?

Did you talk to design?

And they weren't talking to each other. And so everything slowed down because the directors were not a community. They were not a cohesive unit. And that was a real goal in their development, it's not just to develop skills, but to develop them as a unit.

Michelle Parry-Slater

It's interesting to hear and I just want to, for our global audience, when Tina talks about director level and LaTanya talks about director level, we're talking about middle managers, aren't we?

Tina Schust Robinson

Yes, managers of managers.

Michelle Parry-Slater

We're talking about managers of managers. Because I just want to be clear on that. What I've learned from moving around the world is that we have the same shared English, but we use it very differently. So let's make sure that we're talking about that.

LaTanya Foster

True. Yes, and in different industries, directors can mean vastly different things as well. Even within our own cultures, they can mean vastly different things and it might take years and years and years to get to that level in one place where it's a little bit more of a quicker burn. Yeah.

Michelle Parry-Slater

Yeah, yeah. But for the purposes of this case study, this is very much around those squeezed middle, they're often called, where they've got people coming up from below that they've got to manage, and then they've also got to manage upwards as well to that senior level. And so, it is about building peer relationships in order to have the confidence and the connection to be able to do that.

We can identify and have identified the problem that you were trying to solve. And for learning and development professionals listening, I'm sure they recognise this. It is not an unusual scenario.

But in terms of building that business case, in terms of really understanding: how do you go from this is the problem that we have, we want to get a disconnected group of people to work more collaboratively together. How do you build a program around that? Because some might argue, is that a learning program? Is that actually a cultural program? Is that a networking activity?

Now, whatever we're calling it and I think as time goes on in learning our breadth and scope is expanding all over the place because the problem is never uniquely one thing, especially when

it comes to leadership. So, I'm curious to know what did the program look like? Walk us through the program itself. What did you design? Why did you design it the way that you designed it?

Tina Schust Robinson

So, great question about the how. I'm going to go back to the idea of the business case. In a lot of ways, this business case began with the who. It began with the audience, which is a great place to start. You can absolutely start your case with the who, to go, my frontline managers are a hot mess. And frontline manager, to translate that more universally, is supervisor, frontline manager, on an org chart there are lines coming from you, but it's one layer. So, you are directly managing people, whatever that might be, rather than managing other supervisors or other managers of people.

So, there's one layer.

So, we started with the who, and then we got back to the why. Well, why? Why is this layer, why is this group of leaders so important to the business?

How is the business being affected? Well, decisions are being slowed down. Decisions are not as thoughtful or reflective because they do not represent the true cross-functional breadth of the organisation. Decisions are made without the full buy-in or all the information that we need. And in an industry that has been walloped by tariffs and supply chain, I mean, travel as an industry being so disrupted these last few years, the organisation could not afford to slow down decision-making.

So, we got the why, then we got to before we get to the how, we had to think about the what too. But I'll go to the how for now and then we can come back to the what.

The how was, let's make it a combination of skill building, because there are some basic skills that these directors need to learn. And we would use skill building in two ways. We would use it to develop that cohort, so it would be very interactive. And it was only 90 minutes, virtually, because it is mostly a virtual office, but right now mostly, because of the size of the current office, most of the team is remote.

So, it would be virtual, 90-minute monthly skill building over five to six months. And then it would be one-on-one coaching. And the one-on-one coaching would be a time to reinforce and personalise what each of them was learning. Now on top of that, this is where I leaned into LaTanya and her CEO, who were key, you need to hold the senior leadership team accountable for working with their directors and holding them to the behaviours that we are teaching them. And they did a great job. So there was a lot of communication between me and LaTanya to go, this is what we're talking about this month, here's the content, make sure that your senior leaders are aware so that that reinforcement can come from outside on a day-to-day basis.

Because as a trainer, I'm only there for 90 minutes and then one-on-one. There's only so much I can do. And that's really where you want the accountability to be.

So, I think we had about five months, because we were also recognising that crazy time for this industry. By November, you're starting to get into end of year. So in any kind of fashion-related space, you have really through October and that's even stretching it. By November, everyone's brains are pulled away.

So, it was through the summer and then through the fall.

LaTanya Foster

Yes, I'll pepper in a couple of things here. On the onset, as Tina and I were having these conversations and yes, our CEO, Adila Johnson, was also very much involved in this process, and I think that matters because there was a lot of tone-setting with her leadership. So, I wasn't the one screaming from the mountaintop saying, hey, we have a problem here and we need to dissect it and figure out how we're going to make it better.

This was very much a joint conversation, a joint effort. And we have her at the helm, obviously, who cares deeply about the development of the people on her team, but that has also seeped into the thought process of the rest of the executive leadership team.

So, it's a shared experience. And then as we were developing this and having these very pointed conversations about what is the need right now. As Tina described, the program did look a little different at the end than it did at the beginning over those few months, simply because and this is probably very truthful, it felt like every single month something else was happening at a macro level that we had to answer to. And so that just shifted what the internal team's focus was on.

And so you're trying and it's a lot of whiplash in that because you want to stay the course and say, okay, well, we set out to do X, Y and Z, but it's more critical that you're also solving for what's happening in the business in that moment and how you can relate this beautiful L&D program that you set up to what's actually happening.

And not just: okay, we've set it out and we're going to be rigid about how we're facilitating it. It's more about meeting everyone at the moment. What I can say is, yes, at the beginning it was like: okay, this is great, we really nailed this down. And literally by month one, after that first session was over, we got feedback. We were like, okay, it's going great. And then crash. We were like, oh wait, we might need to switch one of these months. You know what I mean?

Session three is feeling way more critical now than session two. So, let's just switch things around so that we can meet the moment.

And to me that was fun because, you know, we're the kind of people who think these things are fun!

And to say, yes, we can actually, we don't have to just follow the thing we created and laid out. Let's listen to the feedback that we received, let's listen to what's going on in the business right now and then let's answer to that, so that this feels more meaningful and more purposeful.

And those one-on-one calls that our leaders are having with Tina can feel more connected and not just like they're checking off a box which is what I absolutely hate for anyone to feel if they're doing any sort of learning and development.

Michelle Parry-Slater

I do love the fact that in a world where nothing has felt like business as usual for probably the last six years or more, having a program which is genuinely adaptive as opposed to rigidly fixed I think it's the only way forward for anybody. So, it's great to hear your story. I am a little bit curious though.

How did you make it adaptive? Everyone talks about agile and we must be agile in the business, we must be agile in learning and development. But what did that look like on the ground?

You gave us a hint there, LaTanya, because you said month three subject matter might be more relevant in month two. But how could you switch stuff around so easily?

Tina Schust Robinson

It starts with mindset. You can tell that LaTanya and I, for the folks who are missing out on the visual, LaTanya and I are like nodding and clapping at each other. We love working together. We both come from a business perspective. So, this is just how we roll. So, I do think a big part of it is mindset. A big part of it is recognising it's not about us.

It's not about Tina, the trainer, the coach.

It's not about LaTanya as the head of HR.

It's about the business.

And I think there are a lot of people in our space who start with L&D. we know this is the program, this is the program I set up. So, mindset matters.

And then I would reach out to LaTanya at the beginning of the month and go, okay, here was the original topic. What's changed?

And then she'd go talk to the CEO, or would come to our meeting having talked to the CEO and go, yeah, here's what's going on.

LaTanya Foster

Yeah, I would agree with that. And I also think it's, like I mentioned before, a little bit of tone-setting, right? So even when we started the program, we let it be known: this is for you. It's not for us. This is your program. And we want you to get the most out of it that you can. And so there was a lot of onus on the leaders going through the program to tell us if things were not landing and working in real time.

Not waiting to the very last point to then say, okay, give us a review of this thing that we've done for the last five months. Like, that's not helpful the program's over, you know? So as much as you can pivot in the moment, the better, right? So we were getting real-time feedback as the program was going on. So right after Tina would have her session, we'd give a couple of days, I'd check in and say, how did things go? How was it?

And if we can talk candidly here, I think the first one or two sessions, there were just so many high emotions all around, just because there were so many things happening in the business and in the world, that there was a lot of testiness toward the program itself. Because when things are happening, you do have to sort of make the case. This too is important. We can't just let this falter because there's a hundred things happening.

There's always a hundred things happening.

But if we as an organisation are saying learning and development is important and a cornerstone of our company and business, then it has to be regardless of whatever is going on. So when things were like, I just don't have time to do this, it's like, we have to speak to that and say, we hear you.

So, how about instead of doing this every two weeks, we stretch this out to every three weeks and give a bit more space? We don't have to say okay, we're going to do this because we said we're going to do this every two weeks.

Together we said, okay, let's stretch it out a little. We'll give you a bit more time. Let this particular week pass and let's go and have this meeting then.

And then to go back to the pivoting of the sessions, this is kind of the same thought process. We're thinking, okay, this is a real business challenge that we're going through in this moment.

This feels way more connected than what we're supposed to be talking about a month and a half from now. Well, how about we just turn it around and switch it?

What we did though, at the beginning, is we laid out all the sessions. So, everyone knew what the content was. And the end result will truly be the same if you just kind of switch a couple of things around, because they're all connected.

So, it wasn't like, you have to have one and two before you do three. It's just, hey, at the end of these five months, you are going to have all of these concepts and they all work in tandem with each other. And that's what we want you to get out of it.

The road to get there can be changed. We can make a left instead of a right. We can make a right instead of a left. But at the end of the day, the destination will always be the same.

Michelle Parry-Slater

That in and of itself is part of the education, isn't it? The ability to pivot, the ability to notice what's going on around you, the ability to respond and be adaptive to real-time business need.

Demonstrating that to the middle management cohort, I'm sure would have made a difference. Now that's my assumption, but what about actually proving the value?

Did you see behaviour change?

Did you demonstrate that something shifted in this five-month period?

LaTanya Foster

Yes, but I won't say it was immediate.

What the demonstration of the behaviour really started with was the conversation around it, right?

So, when we were at an offsite closer to the end of the program, you could hear the language being used, and you could hear some of these concepts just kind of woven into everyday conversations. Now whether they were using them fully is part two, but I think part one is really that you could tell it was seeping in.

I also think there was a lot of changed behaviour just in terms of cohesiveness, because there was now a shared language specific to the director group. The other, even the execs knew what these concepts were, but we weren't learning them in the same way they were, or we weren't tied to them.

And that's what we wanted this to be, because we wanted it to be theirs. And so there was definitely, by the end, a lot more connectivity starting to be shown. But the first time I absolutely

recall noticing changed behaviour was when we were in an exec meeting, just kind of talking about a couple of different things. And one of the other execs mentioned that she was in a meeting with a few of the directors and just had so many great things to say about how they were collaborating together.

And so much of what she was saying was so intertwined with how the Altitude program had been set up. And so, I remember saying, this is a testament to the program they just went through. I want to call that out in real time.

Because we are finally seeing the fruits of that labor, right?

And the catalyst of that was really keeping it top of mind.

So, we had a session toward the end where we really spoke to, what did they learn? And it wasn't just a final last session, it was, okay, let's close it out. And then how are you going to pull this forward?

And LaTanya and I both are very much connected on this piece in particular, you never just let it die. You have to continue pulling these development programs into everything else. So it's a part of their toolkit now. As we're having conversations, if we have new directors, we pull them into the Altitude conversation. Sure, they weren't there for the full cohort, but now they need to learn what those directors learned so they have the shared language.

We will call this back as often as we can, so it's not just a dead language that they have. And as we continued to see that the directors were doing so many of the outcomes that we were hoping would come out, you know, we called it, by the end of this, we hope that you're doing X, Y and Z. They were doing it.

Like involving the executive team far less on decisions they should be making, coming together as a team, creating these cohorts on their own. It's been really awesome to see, if I'm being honest. But it also has been a slow process and to me, on this side of things, that's always important too. Some of these things aren't fast results. We have to let it breathe in order to see in real time whether or not it's working. And so we're about six months out since the end of that program.

I would say leaps and bounds, leaps, leaps, leaps and bounds, from where we started, which was almost a year ago at this point.

Tina Schust Robinson

Yeah. And I just want to call out that LaTanya made reference to Altitude.

So, it is a travel accessories brand. And so LaTanya and I even without having any cocktails, we sat and we brainstormed words that evoke travel as well as growth. And I think one of us came up with Altitude. We had a whole bunch on a whiteboard and we're like, Altitude, because it's a plane, you reach altitude. And it landed with everybody.

Michelle Parry-Slater

It's the care that you've actually taken with this program. That level of minute detail, which I think also reflects the brand. You're a high-end brand. It is a care for your customers. And this really does reflect that. And I often say, speak the language of your business. That genuinely is the language of your business. And these things matter. What you're describing, LaTanya, is a

shift towards a learning culture. You're moving people to thinking about how they can grow and connect in their own time,

without the guidance of a coach, without the guidance of a learning program. And I love your comment there, we have to let it breathe to see if it's working.

So many people in learning and development measure learning on the immediacy of the outcome. So here is the happy sheet, did you like the trainer? How good were the biscuits, or the cookies? We're talking to an American audience here. Did that make a difference?

When actually, you've talked about a slow burn, a slow process. Things have seeped in. And it's language, we keep coming back to language. You described how language was seeping in, people were describing things in that shared vocabulary. Language is really important, and it's that nomenclature? I can't say it.

LaTanya Foster

Nom-nom-nom-nom-nomenclature! And I can't even say it anymore. Nom-nomenclature. Yes.

Tina Schust Robinson

Nomenclature!

Michelle Parry-Slater

So language is so important and it's so different from how many people measure learning, which is how many people turned up, how many e-learning's did we get finished? So this is really demonstrating how we prove value. But one thing we haven't talked about, that I'm curious about, you said at the beginning how you and your CEO talked about this program.

You and your CEO were on the same page. And if I were to speak to your CEO, what do you think they would describe as the signs that they have invested in this program?

They've put money behind it, they've put time behind it, they've encouraged their senior leaders to get behind it. How would the CEO describe this? Would it be with the same words? Would it be in the same way? When it comes to that return on investment, which is what a lot of people want in terms of proven value, would they say that there has been a return on the investment?

LaTanya Foster

That's a great question. I would unequivocally say yes. She would share my sentiments about the growth of that team, the cohort in particular, at that level of the organisation. But I also think that she would agree that it's been a slow burn, right?

And that even though we want a little bit more immediacy around these things because we are answering to business challenges in real time, there is still something to be said when we're looking at the same team six months later and can completely say, oh no, this is different. Like, this is a different team. And so I would strongly think that she would strongly echo those sentiments on the back end. But also going into it, there was so much connectivity that we had in developing this so, that not only her being on board with it, but the rest of the executive team as well, because the buy-in is really important for us. But I also think, to your point, that's so much about the culture of each business. So that's ours here at BÉIS, we are very, very rooted in our own values. And one of those happens to be about connection, connectivity and development.

So if it's in our values, we want to stand firm in taking the time to do it right. But I think she would ultimately agree that there's been some monumental growth happening.

Michelle Parry-Slater

When it comes to building the business case, that business case is rooted in the business. It's not rooted in learning, which is something that you said earlier.

Tina, I want to come to you because there's a challenge in our profession. Learning is often seen as a nice to have. And I feel that's when we are papering over the cracks, where we're being responsive to what we're being asked for.

Here is a learning program because somebody's asked for a learning program. This is not that. You have rooted this program very, very carefully and respectfully in the language, in the business itself, even down to the detail of the word that you call the program. So where does the responsibility for that sit?

Is that with the organisations coming to us as learning professionals to say we want this, or is that the gift that we give as a business partner? Help me to understand, you're clearly a consultative person in your approach. What advice have you got for our profession? The urgency to jump straight into the solution, that's not what you've done. You've built credibility and so on and so forth.

So talk to me, Tina, about how do we partner more productively.

Tina Schust Robinson

Such a delicious question. And I think one of the things that bonded LaTanya and I early on when we were both working at Savage, there were multiple brands and I was the head of leadership development, that was it, it was me.

I would go to LaTanya and I would say, what is your business need?

And then she'd sort of look at me and go, wow, rather than here's what L&D, or talent development, has on its to-do list for 2022. I would say, what is your business need? And then I would connect the dots and I would listen for the alignment with programs that we already had, that we were doing with other brands. Or I would go, okay, you need something that we're not offering yet. Or you don't need one of the programs that we want to push out to the business. You don't need it, you don't want it, it's not relevant, I'm not going to waste everybody's time.

And so I had to take a little bit of a professional risk to be that business partner, because I had to manage up through my own org chart. And I do think that there is some courage that people in our industry have to have.

And I think LaTanya would probably feel the same way being head of HR, is that there are HR initiatives, and LaTanya had sort of dual reporting as well, to the global CHRO for multiple brands as well as the head of her own brand. To say, what is the business need? It's not about me. But that takes courage. It takes experience. And for me, having grown up in this profession, I have made sure to have mentors and role models who were really good at this.

And I also made sure to have mentors and role models outside of HR and outside of learning and outside of talent. So, I wasn't locking myself into some kind of echo chamber.

Michelle Parry-Slater

It's something that we can all do then, isn't it? It doesn't matter where you are in your career in learning and development, you can ask the question, you can talk that business language and you can build the business case with that partner. From the other side of it, LaTanya, being asked that question as opposed to here is our course catalogue, what do you want?

How does that feel?

LaTanya Foster

Yeah, I mean, incredible, honestly. I think it was really just divine timing with that, because even at Savage my direct leadership was also very in tune with development, wanting that for the team. Which I have just been chronically blessed with, I think, over the last few leaders that I've had, is that they understand the importance of development as a concept. But then I always see my role as the bridge, obviously, between a true L&D person, because that is not what I am.

I am vastly impressed and can speak to it, but it is not my role. And I always call Tina the wizard of this, because she speaks the language just innately.

But I am the bridge, right, between the business and any HR function, truly. But in this one in particular, saying, okay, well, let's talk through, at very high level but then also tactically, about what we need in the business to develop our people and to make the right return on the investment for any sort of learning and development that we do. And so hearing that, when I talk to Tina, I'm like, we could do a lot of good things because I don't have to fit the needs of our business in a square box, right?

And say, okay, well, these are the offerings and I have to go with these offerings. I'm not suggesting that if that's all you've got, you can't make it work, but there's so much more that you can do when you plan to be somewhere for a long time and when can create something that's worthwhile specifically to that business.

And so, hearing that was like magic to me. So probably the second call I made after I got my bearings at BÉIS was calling Tina. I was like, okay, great, I know exactly what I'm going to do now because I know we need development, I know there's appetite for it. So, the call meant the same thing, you know what I mean? Of saying, what do you need? And that's the constant question, right? What do you need today? What do you need now? What do you need in this season?

And it makes it so much more valuable.

Michelle Parry-Slater

It's very much what you described earlier in terms of how you could pivot within the program, because you're constantly asking that question for the people that are on the program. It's not fixed. It's not the pathway that we're on. It's actually, what do you need for this to be useful? This has just been such a wonderful case study. I really appreciate you sharing it with us.

So, Tina, you have pulled together your wisdom into a book out March 2026, so quite recent.

I'm curious, who did you write it for, and what do you hope readers take away from it? If someone picks it up and they're a solo L&D professional in a small organisation with no budget, no support, what are you giving them there?

Tina Schust Robinson

I may have written it for the five-year-old Tina who was writing in crayon and thought someday I could write something longer.

So, I was very, very fortunate to be asked to write this book by the global Association for Talent Development, the ATD, which has a very large publishing arm.

And they liked that this book was unlike a lot of the other how-to leadership books out there. Because most of those books are, here's how to coach, here's how to train, here is a whole book of training games you can play. And I have all those on my shelf, they're great, I have lots of execution tools. And I would joke that if you go to a large HR conference and you're walking the expo, it is gleaming with the how, with solutions. There is no vendor there that has a little sign that says, help you define the why, with a little box of candy, right, or some pens. No.

Everything there is assuming that you have identified the business need, you have defined the critical behaviours and skills and competencies, you've narrowed down your audience. They've assumed you've done all of it. But most people walking that large conference room have not and they're buying a solution without first having thought about this.

So ideally, my book can be read by anyone who calls themselves a leadership investor. That is a CEO. That is a head of marketing, that is a CFO, that is a founder, that is a head of a function, that is a chief of people, that is LaTanya, that is a head of talent.

But I never wanted my book to be narrowly focused on talent or HR, so I intentionally called my audience leadership investors.

And I think it's anybody who believes that leadership development is a business investment and not a program. And you could probably tell from the banter that you heard between LaTanya and myself that we're funny.

So, I wove a lot of humor in there. I wove stories I anonymised the stories. But I wanted to make it real and practical and really like a field guide that helps people start with, you do not have to default to the how.

You can reverse engineer back up into the why.

Michelle Parry-Slater

Wonderful. Well, I'm looking forward to having a look at it myself. If either of you have got any final things that have been left unsaid, what would you leave our listeners with? Sort of one thing they could take back to their organisation this week, perhaps. What's not been said yet? LaTanya, let's come to you first as we wrap.

LaTanya Foster

Yeah, I think just in the spirit of all the things that we've talked about today, one of the things I think everyone could take away, just in life in general, is, don't be scared of the pivot, right?

It really does mean something to just be agile and nimble and not get stuck or rigid in a plan. Because that is just not learning in concept. Learning is just that, it's about, hey, I thought one thing, now I know more, so I'm thinking another thing. That's literally how we learn.

So I would love anyone to just take away about the thought of learning and development, being able to pivot is a really, really great thing to do.

Tina Schust Robinson

Yeah, I remember when LaTanya came to me and we had our beginning-of-the-month, what's going on in the business chat. And she said, Tina, this next session has to be about teaching the directors how to show their work.

And I just paused for like five seconds and I'm like, okay, what does that mean?

And I just had to go, fascinating. Tell me more. And I think even just that pause, to get into a place of curiosity, to go, oh, we can do something with that.

And we did. We ended up having a fabulous session and that's become almost a code word at the organisation now show my work.

LaTanya Foster

Yep, it's absolutely a part of the nomenclature of our organisation. You hear people say it a lot, I had to show my work. And they'll walk through how they made a decision or walk through a specific plan. And I love that.

Tina Schust Robinson

So, my plea to the people in our field is: build a large toolbox so that nothing throws you, so that you really can go to a place of curiosity and not panic. So, when somebody says, I need something around showing your work, you don't go ahhh, I don't have that. You go, huh, okay, I can do that. I can make that work.

Michelle Parry-Slater

Beautiful. What a lovely way to end. I'm sure that people will want to reach out to you. So if you're happy for them to connect with you on LinkedIn, we'll be sure to put your contact details into our show notes, of course, alongside your book, Tina, and a link to that as well.

I just want to say thank you so, so much to both of you.

This has genuinely been a practical, honest conversation about what it takes to make learning investments stick, to build that business case and to genuinely partner with each other.

It's been lovely to see the energy bouncing between the two of you. And I'm sure that will come through to our listeners as well.

So, thank you so much. Until next time on Learning Uncut, have a look at how you personally could ask better questions, even if it's just the one that Tina's just given you, tell me more.

Learning Uncut Episode 185: Learning as Investment, Not Cost – Tina Schust Robinson & LaTanya Foster



Learning Uncut are learning and development consultants that help Learning and Development leaders and their teams become a strategic enabler so that their businesses can thrive. We work in evidence-informed ways to drive tangible outcomes and business impact and are strong believers in the power of collaboration and community. We specialise in helping to build or refresh organisational learning strategy, update their L&D Operating Model, enable skills development, and conduct learning evaluation. We also offer workshops to shift learning mindset and practices for both L&D teams and the broader workforce – as well as speaking at public and internal events.

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