



Learning Uncut Episode 186: Building L&D from Scratch

– Elyse Toomey

Michelle Parry-Slater

Welcome to Learning Uncut. We're going to be thinking today about what it takes to start from nothing and to build up to something that works.

Before we begin, in the spirit of reconciliation, let me acknowledge the traditional custodians of country throughout Australia and their connections to land, sea and community. We pay our respect to elders past and present, and we extend that respect to all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples present today or listening online. It is my absolute pleasure today to talk to Elyse. Elyse will introduce herself a little.

But what an amazing opportunity to talk to somebody who's literally started a learning and development department from virtually nothing. And we're going to hear what it takes to make that work. And you will not be surprised to hear that this story involves thinking about strategy.

So, Elyse, tell us a little bit about who you are and where you work.

Elyse Toomey

Yes, thanks Michelle. Well, yes, my name is Elyse. My role currently is Head of Learning and Development and I've worked in the financial services industry now for 20 years.

We are a diversified financial services business. So recently we've actually done a rebrand. We are now Ironbark Financial Group and we look after three financial advice, or financial services, businesses. And yeah, I guess like you said, 20 years in the industry, I didn't start out in L&D. I actually worked for over 10 years in the financial advice teams. So, I did a relationship manager role and worked my way into HR, and then fortunately in the last three years was given the opportunity, I'd like to think, of starting out a learning and development function from scratch.

Michelle Parry-Slater

It is an absolutely typical route in that we come into L&D having done the work ourselves. So, I'm sure that stood you in very good stead.

But paint the picture for us a little bit. You know, when it was Invest Blue and now, as you say, Ironbark, when you came into this role, what did L&D look like at the time?

Was there anything?

Elyse Toomey

Well, there was something.

It was very fragmented.

We had, I think at the time there was just over 300 employees, about a hundred of them offshore. I think we're sitting now at around 550. We had what were known as our client experience coaches and our advice and compliance coaches. So, we had a very strong coaching model where a lot of these coaches sat across the business in what we had as village structures. So, we would have a lot of our financial advice teams that fed through into a village-type structure, and those coaches sat across the top.

They would primarily do a lot of one-on-one coaching, so that was sort of the extent of learning, so we would have new people come into the business, those coaches would be responsible for doing one-on-one training in whatever format that looked like.

We also had fortnightly learning and development training sessions. And I guess in reflection now, looking back at them, they were really just information dumps on a fortnightly basis where these coaches would scramble together to put together some sort of topic that they would deliver to, you know, between 50 and 100 people that would dial in on a fortnightly basis. At the time and it is still one of our growth strategies, we did a lot of mergers and acquisitions.

So, at the time too, we would be integrating a lot of financial advice businesses, sometimes standalone teams, sometimes into an existing team. And those advice and compliance and client experience coaches would be responsible for all of the training of those newly integrated teams.

So that's pretty much what I came into.

When I was asked to start, basically that was the brief.

It was "we know we need an L&D function, we need you to go and start one." That was my brief.

Michelle Parry-Slater

So go!

Either a huge brief or a very tiny brief, it depends how you read it, but essentially we have nothing to speak of. So, all respect to the coaches and I know we'll hear later on that they are still involved, so don't worry, anyone out there who is a coach. It was an opportunity for you to centralise and to give something a little bit more consistent.

There's the opportunity of course to onboard all of these new organisations that you're merging and acquiring as well. So clearly you were asked to sort of set up L&D.

Where do you start?

Like what do you do when you're faced with an open book, "go away and make that happen?" What on earth did you do next?

Elyse Toomey

It's actually a funny story, because before I even came into the role, I remember sitting in my living room and listening to this exact podcast and I'd be scrambling, writing notes and notes and listening to all these professionals talk about all the amazing things that they were doing.

And so it was always a big dream of mine, though I'd always think I'd never be able to get there. And so then being offered this opportunity to go and start a function, I actually thought to myself, I don't know how I'm going to do this. But the first thing I thought of was, well, why wouldn't I immerse myself into a conference where I'm surrounded by people that are doing this role?

So that was sort of my first line of thinking. I went to the L&D Symposium and immersed myself in that conference, not knowing anything that anybody was talking about. But one lady actually said to me, have you ever thought about reaching out to a woman named Michelle Ockers?

And I thought, my God, I've been listening to her for the last six months in my lounge room writing all of these notes.

So yeah, that's where I started. I immersed myself, I got some key contacts at this conference that I still from time to time will liaise with, but reached out to Michelle and started that conversation, because I don't know, looking back, how I would have started otherwise.

Michelle Parry-Slater

I love it. I love the fact that you're talking about the conference. We're heading into conference season. They're all coming up. And this is the exact reason why. Who are you going to meet? Who are you going to sit next to?

There's a beautiful serendipity in conferences.

And when I moved to Australia, I have to say the L&D Symposium keeps coming up. Lots of people, and I've said, where do you go? Where's the one thing to go to? And people say, you know, ILP, AITD, and always the Hunter Valley experience.

I don't know if it's the wine or if it's the conference, I'm not sure.

Elyse Toomey

Both! Probably both!

Michelle Parry-Slater

But it's certainly great to be around other professionals. And so, hugely recommend that for sure. So you met Michelle, having listened to the podcast, which is just such a lovely sort of end of the circle experience. And you then went through Learning Uncut's Strategy Builder process and that product that we offer.

And then you also tagged on the operating model as well.

Walk us through that. What did it feel like?

You know, it's a very focused, strategic thinking process. It's to build your own learning strategy. How do you do that in a business that runs at pace like yours?

Elyse Toomey

It was really challenging. And I probably should have mentioned that. Yeah, whilst we're integrating businesses, there's so much change and I'm sure a lot of people can resonate with that, but it's literally just get stuff done and get it done very quickly.

So, it was really challenging in a sense of knowing that I had to actually deliver something and show some sort of value, but at the same time, know that there's all of this work that has to get done.

To build it, I knew that if you're going to do it you have to do it right.

So I guess, look, it started with lots of the sessions with Michelle. I think there was so much levelling up and coaching that I needed in my seat to even know what is an L&D strategy and like, what does that even mean, and how do you execute that, and where do you start.

So part of our process and the reason why I think building and shaping the strategy worked so well, is if I go back to our coaches: our coaches were such a big part of the journey.

We knew from very early on in the onset that we would need to take them along the journey and help them shape up what that strategy actually looks like, particularly because they got a lot of fulfilment and I understand and resonate with that.

They got a lot of fulfilment from teaching and coaching a lot of these team members one-on-one.

So to be able to come in and be like, you know, we're actually going to change all of this up as part of our strategy, we knew that we would have to take them along the journey with us and help shape up the strategy with them.

Michelle Parry-Slater

Were they full-time coaches?

Yeah, they were full time. Yep.

Michelle Parry-Slater

Full-time coaches?

Elyse Toomey

Full-time coaches. And they did give a lot of time to building this strategy, right? So, if I reflect back, we had lots of weekly project meetings, we interviewed across the whole business, we must have done over a hundred interviews, surveys, you name it.

And they were part of all of that process of gathering data and meeting with us.

And I think why it worked so well and maybe it comes back to a little bit of being within the business for 20 years, is that we've all built some really great foundations and relationships with a lot of these people. I can't underestimate the power of connection and relationships as part of this process too.

Michelle Parry-Slater

I can very much recommend that when you've got people who could potentially not be advocates, to bring them with you on the journey. It was my experience at Girlguiding for sure.

I wanted to make sure that all our trainers knew that I respected their position when we were moving from face-to-face into digital.

And this feels quite similar, you wanted to make sure that those who were close to the front line of learning were actually involved in that project group.

Is that really how it panned out?

That you wanted to bring them in to make sure that you had their expertise as well as their advocacy.

Elyse Toomey

Yeah, so one of the things that we knew we had to do really quickly was get some runs on the board.

And I think, you know, they were, like I said, part of that journey, but they were going to help us get some runs on the board in terms of helping us build out what that strategy looked like and help do some of the work.

So yeah, look one of the initiatives I think that we worked on quite quickly was, you know, we've got all of these M&As coming in, we know we need to onboard them at scale, and they're the ones with the expertise.

So, one of the things that we did first was this concept of peer-to-peer onboarding through a platform called Make Shapes, which is still running three years later in terms of how we do that.

So, if I think back to the model before we went with that and the coaches helped shape up what that actually looked like, we were onboarding all of these teams and we were doing it six different ways across the villages.

So, we really wanted to start bringing these M&As in and leveraging the coaches to build that content for us.

Yeah, that was sort of one of the first initiatives that we did quite quickly.

One, to bring the coaches along the journey and have them part of shaping up what success looks like.

But also to then be able to go back to the business and say, we're now able to integrate more M&As at pace through building out what this initiative looked like.

Michelle Parry-Slater

So, you've got relationships, you've got quick wins, you've got making sure that those that potentially could be against you are for you because they're part of it. These are all really good ways forward.

I want to go back to that relationship really.

Was there a particular example where the relationship made the biggest difference?

You know, maybe opened a door or made a hard conversation possible. Because building relationships in an organisation I think is probably the number-one win when it comes to any type of work, let alone strategy work.

I'm just curious, is there any relationship that really opened a door?

Elyse Toomey

At the time I actually had and I still do have a very good relationship with the managing director. And we share the same passion around learning and development. I'd love to use that one in a sense of it being really hard to go back to the executive team and the managing director and say, we need a little bit more time here.

You know, we want to do this properly.

And so I think having built that relationship with him in particular, I personally think it made it a lot easier to have some of those harder conversations around: hey, yes, we need to get quick wins on the board and yes, we can sort of do some of these things on the side, but at the same time I also need to buy time to do these things.

We need to work on these things as well, which was all of the interviews and the research.

We don't just want to be going out on a limb here and creating a function from scratch with nothing built out. So, I think that to me is one of the relationships that stands out, having that relationship with him.

Michelle Parry-Slater

It's always good to have a senior person kind of on your side and enable you to have those conversations. Because you're right, you do have to put quick wins on the board, and the Make Shapes project sounds like it worked for you in that regard.

But the whole point of our Strategy Builder process is that you do the diagnose phase. You really do that good thinking.

I always say the quality of your thinking affects the quality of your output. And oftentimes in learning and development, we jump to solutions.

We don't actually go slow enough to think about: what is really going on here?

How do we really understand the business? What is the evidence pointing towards?

So, we're pretty firm in that part of our process for a reason. And I feel like what you're describing is why that's the case.

So talk us through a little bit about that sense.

In the conversation we had before we started, you talked about needing the permission to be imperfect. Because of course, when you're doing diagnosis, when you're moving towards strategizing, it's not going to be perfect. There's going to be more thinking and then iterations of your thinking and then more thinking. So, talk us through this phrase you've used "permission to be imperfect."

Elyse Toomey

It was my philosophy and it's still my philosophy now three years on, is we just start with something and we know it's imperfect.

Look, I think when we initially did the Strategy Builder and the diagnosis and put together our initiatives, we had so much work that we wanted to get done.

And I think the reality quite quickly was: we're not going to be able to do all of that. And if we are going to be able to do it, we have to do it imperfect, or we just have to start somewhere.

And so that has essentially been something that we have run with for the last three years. And I think it's a testament to why we have been so successful.

And look, we still have challenges, but you just have to start with something and know that it's not going to be perfect. And I'll use the example of Make Shapes: we implemented this new tool,

having these coaches have never done any training, they're not trainers, they've always just done one-on-one coaching and sort of demonstrating things.

And so, we knew very quickly that we want to deliver all of these really great onboarding experiences and, you know, this is going to look really beautiful and these M&A teams are going to integrate in and they'll know exactly what to do.

But the reality was we then had to teach the coaches how to be trainers, how to create content.

And so I just think you just have to have that philosophy, which I know seems really contradictory for L&D, right?

Because L&D usually wants to have everything perfect.

Michelle Parry-Slater

Not anymore.

Yeah, I'd like to think that as a profession we've switched.

Because you're right, there was a time where I call it polishing the stone, behind the scenes, polish polish polish, and then we present.

Here is the perfect, polished thing!

But actually what we know to be true, from work that's been done in AGILE and I'm talking about the philosophy of AGILE and work that's been done in things like design thinking, universal design thinking, all of those kinds of ideas, that we start somewhere, like you say, and then we polish it together.

We get better with the feedback.

We iterate all of the time.

Have we all moved that way? I'm not so sure.

But it's definitely the direction of travel.

So, it's lovely to hear that you are thinking about that.

Did you do anything that was, you know, more traditional? I'm going to call it traditional, like implement a learning management system or online learning? You've gone from coaching, which is potentially a bit future-thinking, to training. So, I'm just curious about what else did you implement in those early days to learn from?

Elyse Toomey

Yeah, so once we sort of embedded a lot of our onboarding and upskilled our coaches into trainers, we did then move into, so that was not part of our strategy straight away, to implement a learning management system.

Again, going back to imperfect, let's just start somewhere.

We got the Make Shapes tool, we can onboard these M&As at scale.

And we did that and perfected that over a 12-month period. And then it was: okay, now we're at the stage where we need a learning management system because we can't sustain this any

longer. What does that actually look and feel like? And again, going back to being imperfect, okay, well, we know, based on research, that measuring learning metrics is not effective, or it's not a true representation of the value that learning can add.

But we know we have to start somewhere.

So, when we implemented our learning management system, I think we averaged, at the beginning we worked out it was around 40% completion rates at the beginning.

One of the things we'd said was: okay, 40% completion rates ... let's just double that.

Let's just get that to 80%. If we can do the work of embedding a learning management system and moving from no training or fortnightly training to a new learning management system with e-learning, and can get that to 80%, like that would be a win, right?

In a 12-month period, let's just get good at that. And so that's sort of what we focused on. And again, going back to imperfect, we know we want to do more, but that's what we've got to get done first before we can move on to the next. And so I think that's sort of the way we've always operated, let's start somewhere and go from there.

So yeah, a lot of hard work just went into 12 months of trying to get from 40 to 80% completion rates, and us jumping for joy, and the business not really as excited about a 40 to 80% metric, but I mean, for a learning team that had nothing, to now, you know, we're killing it.

We're killing it here!

Michelle Parry-Slater

It is so nice to hear your realism about the metrics.

Because you're absolutely right, many learning teams would stop at the learning metrics, but you're recognising that that's not where you want to be.

You want to be with business metrics, but you've got to start somewhere.

And it's not a bad start to go and double your engagement with your learning management system. And now of course you're beyond even 80%. So, you're definitely tracking in the right direction. And next it's on to business metrics.

And I really respect that whole philosophy around start somewhere. It certainly is something that we recommend when it comes to the Strategy Builder process.

The diagnosis piece helps you to identify where you're at. And that in and of itself is useful information, because I always say: meet learners where they are, meet your organisation where they are, use the language that they talk about.

Meet them in a place which isn't, like you say, they're not interested in learning metrics. They're not interested in learning really. They're interested in what they are paid to be interested in.

And so when we're interested in the same things they're interested in, then suddenly everyone's just getting on a little bit more.

But that whole piece around start somewhere and iterate, that feels quite scary for somebody who isn't doing that. What would you say to a learning and development professional who perhaps is a little bit afraid to start?

A little bit afraid because they haven't got the business metrics, haven't quite done the thinking, or haven't done that diagnosis, haven't got that evidence base behind them, what would you suggest?

Elyse Toomey

In any business that you work in, there's a metric that they are measuring. So, I would be saying: "just find something that you can measure."

I mean, we can't as a learning team say to everybody else that we're trying to teach and better, you know, don't make a mistake.

I mean, that's where you make mistakes and that's where you learn and you grow, right?

So, I think it's sort of the same concept internally as a learning and development team, I feel like you kind of have to fail a little bit so that you can continue to keep bettering yourself. And what has worked really well for us is we always reset on a quarterly basis. And our rhythm has been something that even to this day, the business swears by and it's really true. We have a really structured rhythm around annual planning, quarterly planning, monthlies, weeklies, dailies around the Rockefeller Habits, a really good model to work by.

And if I tie that back into start somewhere: you know, have a framework to be able to stop, pause, reflect, what worked well, what didn't. I think that whole process works really well for us in our process of iteration as we're going along. Just pick something. Let's just pick something. If we fail, that's okay. We reset again in the quarter, we reflect, we look ahead, we align with the business, where are we headed?

I just think you just pick something and run with it.

I don't know if that just seems so simple, you know, but that's worked for us. I go back to the Strategy Builder that you talked about earlier and when we did all of that work with Michelle, we had sort of a three-year framework, you know, build out something that you can work towards over a three-year period.

But like, that's impossible for our business.

We just can't, at the pace that we run. And so, I think at that time it was like, well, three years is not going to be feasible for us.

We can only plan 12 months in advance.

So, I just think you've just got to go with where the business is at.

Start somewhere.

Come back to that, iterate, try something, one foot in front of the other.

Michelle Parry-Slater

It's interesting that you say that. We've just had another client we've been working with and they're like, yeah, we're going to go with two years.

You know, it doesn't suit us.

But that's kind of the point.

This work is about really understanding your organisation. And the rhythm that you talk about is really important. I remember when I first started in learning and development and I was working in relocation, never do any learning at the time when everyone's moving, which generally is in the Northern Hemisphere through July and August, ready for the September school start.

So, there'd be no point trying to fit learning into that space because nobody would attend, nobody would do it, because that's the whole point. Understand the rhythm of your organisation, and that's really what comes out of the diagnose phase and that's why we build a strategy.

You say pick something almost like it's rolling the dice and it's random, but actually I know from this annual, monthly, weekly, daily routine that it's not random.

You're picking a good bet.

Elyse Toomey

There was a lot of thought, effort and consulting, put in like I said, we go right back to the beginning, hundreds of interviews and surveys.

We built in a whole lot of here's what we're going to do.

But then it was very quickly realising we are not going to be able to do all of that. So, let's just focus on this.

And then I think that has built momentum for us over the last couple of years around:

Okay, now we've met the business here, now what's next?

Now what's next?

Is sort of the way that we have worked.

Michelle Parry-Slater

It feels like a story of pace and pivot.

That momentum comes from the ability to kind of understand the pace, but also pivot.

And that pivot comes from the iteration as well, we tried it, didn't quite work, let's try something else.

And that's why implement is one of the phases.

You've got to do something at the end of the day, but it's how do you sustain it?

And so, I'm curious to know, there was one of you, there were lots of the coaches, they became trainers, but in terms of leading the team, in terms of focusing in on delivering on that strategy that you had developed, there was one of you.

What happened next?

Did you stay one person?

Are you still one of you?

Elyse Toomey

No, there are six of us now.

Michelle Parry-Slater

In two years?

Elyse Toomey

Yes, I know, I feel very, very fortunate.

But I feel because of the pace and the growth that the business has gone through, we just wouldn't have been able to support the business in all of that growth.

If I think about, even in that first 12-month period, it was: okay, now we were building all of this onboarding, to then within the next 12 months, implement a whole CRM system and have to roll that out, and a learning management system, and roll out compliance training and integrate.

So, I think if you think about that sort of enormity of scale and activity that's going on in the business, the very first recruit was, we already have enough financial services expertise.

We don't have any capability in the design space. And so that was one of the first roles that we brought in.

Okay, well, how are we going to get these trainers upskilled and how are we going to get these trainers training and building content? And so, I recruited Tony, who's our senior learning experience designer, and she works really closely even now with all of our trainers in making sure that they're training to a standard, that the standards are consistent.

So that was our first recruit. And then we've got our learning coordinator, so we need someone to be able to coordinate all of the change and the programs.

And so that was our next recruit. We've got a learning technical platform administrator. We're now one enterprise with multiple businesses sitting within, and we need someone to be able to have all of that technical capability.

And then of course our last one was our capability partner who works very much around the evaluation space.

So I think, you know, I was very quickly able to go back to the business and say “do we really want to be a business of this size and scale that helps our clients, if we're not able to know whether all of the training we're developing is doing something?”

So, going back and sort of saying, okay, that's the next evolution of where we're headed, right?

We need someone to be able to sit a little bit off to the side in our learning team that's evaluating and working across with all of our leaders on, “are we hitting the mark? What are we actually trying to achieve?”

So that's sort of the next evolution of where we've started to head into now, we've just built all of this training and now we're like.

Michelle Parry-Slater

Does it work?

Elyse Toomey

“what are we doing with all of this?”

“Is it doing what we want it to do?”

Michelle Parry-Slater

Yeah.

It's a wonderful hire.

I mean, I love the fact that we're heading in that direction, absolutely. I'm curious about how you built the business case out for each of those hires, because from one to six in two years, that's many people's dream.

How much did having a clear strategy and having gone through the process help you with having those hires come into play?

Elyse Toomey

Yeah, look, I think whenever the business does their three-year plan on a page and that then filters down their 12-month plan on a plan on a page, at that time is usually when I'm rethinking about our strategy.

Going back to the work that we did originally with Michelle, we still have that overarching strategy, it just flexes from time to time on a 12-monthly basis in terms of - what are the initiatives now that we're going to do?

So, I guess that was the opportunity that I've used each time to be able to reset and say, if the business wants to do this, this year and our team needs to be here, these are the roles that we need.

And look, to be fair, I'm still getting better myself, at knowing how to put forward proposals.

So, I don't know whether I was fortunate enough to have really good connections with the managing director, with senior leaders, to be able to communicate to them around, these are the roles that we need in order to deliver on that strategy.

And I think at the time with those new roles too, we were talking of integrating up to 10 or more M&As a year.

So, I think being able to link back to some of the things that are really important to the business around, “well, you know, we're going to need more resources to be able to enable that scale.”

“We're going to need this resource in particular to be able to get us from, do we want to be a business that just measures learning and delivers hundreds of e-learning modules? Is that the business we really want to be?” I don't think so.

Michelle Parry-Slater

I love the fact that you're grounding this strategy, the business case is in the business needs, but the strategy isn't fixed. You know, the sustained phase of the process is: what does need to

change, what does need to morph, what does need to be revisited. You can't write a strategy and then it's done, that's it. It's a living, breathing document that reflects what's moving within your organisation. And this whole pace of your organisation, I mean, 10-plus M&As a year is huge. So to be able to keep on top of that, I just really appreciate the fact that you recognise that this is not “we wrote it, it's there, it's in the corner, we just leave it over there and then come over there” and do the other work. It's really informing your day-to-day. And I can hear in your examples and what you're talking about there, which is such a grand lesson for everybody, because so many times we do work in learning and development which is reactive.

You know, Johnny needs a sales course.

Okay, well, do you want one on Thursday or one next Tuesday?

And that really doesn't help anybody.

You know, why does Johnny need a sales course? What's wrong? What's going on? What's the business issue that we're trying to solve for? Or what are we trying to build?

In your case, you know, what are we trying to build and create?

So, these are just all great stories to be sharing, Elyse. And I'm grateful, on behalf of the listeners, I'm grateful.

Elyse Toomey

The work that I did with Michelle around this strategy, you know, I'd never been exposed to any of that before. And I'm certainly not, coming into this, in the last three years I've learned so much.

You know, if I think back, Michelle used to say things to me like: you really need to maybe start building out some cases and hypotheses. And I was like, I can't even fathom what that means. You know, to now actually getting to that point. So again, going back to being imperfect and going with the business, that has worked really well. and because we have such structure around our rhythm as a business with the Rockefeller Habits and quarterly planning, the strategy is alive every quarter.

We are revisiting that every quarter. We are saying, not just have we delivered these project initiatives, have we actually moved the behaviour dial?

That was something I learned very early on from Michelle around, the strategy has got to do something.

You know, it's not just like, hey, let's deliver all of these great initiatives like onboarding, and update our SharePoint, and whatever all the things that we come up with.

It's, is it actually doing something? And I think having the rhythm that supports us in our business currently, that gives us that opportunity every quarter to be like, we need to flex a bit here. That's not working. We're not seeing the movement that we need. And then getting to that annual plan and saying, did we win this year? And now what's next? Where's the business at and what do we need to do next?

And I think it goes back to that topic you just raised around how did you put together a business case. It's like, well, I think because we are so attuned to what the business is doing, we are there going, “we are here to help bring that vision to life”. We aren't just delivering e-learning on the

side, we are building the maturity and evolution of our team as the business is growing, and I think that is a really big part of it.

Michelle Parry-Slater

This is the real need for people.

You've come out of the business into L&D, but many people have started in L&D. How do they get that business acumen?

You just immerse yourself in that space.

This is like "I work in a bus company." Get on the bus. Understand what it's like to be a driver. Understand what it's like in those spaces that your learners sit within.

So, I think it's been a bit of a blessing that you've come from the business. That was my route into learning as well. I came from within the business and it just helped me to really understand, what do they care about? What is the rhythm? What are their business goals? Why are they doing what they're doing?

But we can learn that stuff. If you've come from an L&D background, you can learn that stuff. And I think it's one of the first things that we need to really learn, because what you're demonstrating is that your understanding of it has meant a real difference for your organisation.

Well, we're heading towards our close now and I'm curious to know: three years on, what do you wish you'd known at the start?

Elyse Toomey

That's a good question.

I keep coming back to the imperfect and the starting somewhere. Like I feel like I really needed to have known that at the beginning of my journey. I mean, I did sort of realise quite quickly, but I still had this motivation to think, no, we're going to be able to do all of that, you know, like we can do it.

So, I'm ever the optimist. And maybe that's part of the success is, no, no, we're going to get through it. But yeah, it's not going to go to plan. And I think sometimes things take a really long time. Like if I go back to thinking, you know, 40% to 80%, anyone might have looked at that and said, easy. You know, whereas I was like, well, that took us a whole year of blood, sweat and tears to get to that 80%.

So I think maybe knowing right at the beginning that yeah, it's going to be really messy.

You may not achieve all of the things that you wanted to achieve and you need to kind of flex and bend and things are going to take time.

Culture takes time. Changing culture takes time.

And I think that's a big part of what learning and development is about, we're building and changing culture. Well, that's certainly our story. We started with nothing.

Michelle Parry-Slater

Yeah, I think it's every bit different. Yeah, we're involved in behaviour change. You know, change is our middle name. Yeah, absolutely, I agree with you. So that sense that you're very ambitious, perhaps bit off a little bit more than you could chew, what's the honest story there?

Because there's an emotion to that, isn't there?

There is a bit of an emotional toll. You know, you're a very positive person, Elyse. I've met you a few times now and you're clearly a very positive person.

But I wonder how the emotional roller coaster kind of went for you in that. Did it take an emotional toll? How did you look after yourself through not quite getting there and the slowness of everything?

Because things do take a long time.

Elyse Toomey

We're, you know, like I said, going back to relationships. There's been 20 years of a lot of great relationships that I've built with a lot of great people. I feel like, you know, a lot of the people that we work with and that's sort of part of the journey of the former Invest Blue business, it does feel a little bit like family. So we're all in the trenches together. That has got a lot of us through a lot of work.

Why wouldn't you want to be a part of starting something new? I mean, when I went to the conference that first day, I remember someone saying to me, "oh my God, how exciting, you get to start something from scratch."

I mean, three years in and I'm like, I still feel like there's a mountain of stuff that we have to get through. But if I also look back at what we've started from nothing to now where we are. but yeah, look, I'm actually coming up to my 20th work anniversary.

I turned 40 this year. So, I am actually taking a month off, which is unheard of.

And I am really, really looking forward to it.

So good people have got me through. The idea that I'm taking a month off has also got me through, maybe some champagne, Michelle.

Michelle Parry-Slater

It's one of the beautiful things listeners must know that this is the last thing that Elyse is doing before her month's holiday.

So, we're very grateful at Learning Uncut for you spending the time with us. But it is also, I think, important to note how far you have come. Often when we're looking at a mountain, like you describe, we can only see the peak.

But don't forget to turn around and look at how far up the mountain you've come, because when you're not at the top, there's always more to do.

But actually halfway up is way higher than at the bottom.

So, turning around and having a look at that, I'd love to imagine you on a beach somewhere for the next month thinking about, wow, I've done so much stuff.

But for those people who, like you, were just starting out an L&D function ... off you go. That was your initial instruction.

Not having the luxury of 20-year long service leave. I should just point out that in Australia, it's quite typical if you work in an organisation for a long time that you do have long service leave. This is unheard of in many other countries, not least my own home country of the UK. So people will be just like, she's having a month...? That's crazy!

So, most people aren't going to have the luxury of that. But I just want to reiterate what you said got you through that positivity, that ambition, the excitement of growing something, but the relationships as well. If there's one thing that people can do when they start out an L&D function, would you say nurture relationships is the most important? Or is there another thing?

Elyse Toomey

Yes. No, relationships are so underrated. I mean, I even tell my team, they will attest to this, the first thing I tell them to do when they start, every single one of them that has started in my team, you're levelling up by connecting with the people. That is what you are going to focus on. And that is being in the office, that is getting to know people.

You know, connection, like you just, you can't underestimate the power of it.

And I think in L&D, we aren't a solo team on the side. We are ingrained in the business.

We need to be across what people are doing, and you know, we need favours.

We need people sometimes, right?

I just think never underestimate it. In fact, I did one today, I rang someone today and said, I really need you to help me with something before I go away.

And if you've established such great relationships with people, I think that helps. It really does. And it helps to bounce ideas off when you think you don't know what you're doing.

You just need connection for so many things. Keeps you sane, Michelle, all of the above.

Michelle Parry-Slater

Relationships are definitely not soft, they are strategic. And they're certainly what I feel has held this together for you.

So far be it from me to stand between you and a month off. So, let's wrap this up really. What I've heard today is just phenomenal. You've gone from fortnightly info dumps, which is very typical, you've gone from one-to-one coaching, which is great for those in the one-to-one but what about everybody else?

To now having over 90% of people accessing content from your learning management system. The ability for you to pivot when you need to, to have a really strong, core strategic intent, but to be able to sustain that with these relationships and with your now growing team.

It's all good and it's just such a lovely story. So I thank you so much for sharing it with everyone here listening to Learning Uncut. Where can people connect with you, Elyse? Where would they go if they wanted to learn a little bit more?

Elyse Toomey

I am on LinkedIn, so feel free to add me or reach out. I would be happy. Like I said, connections is at my core. So I think the more of us that band together and bounce off each other, the better each of us are and the better the businesses that we serve, right?

Michelle Parry-Slater

We'll make sure this goes out after you come back, because I don't want you bombarding me whilst you're on your holidays.

Wonderful. Well, thank you so, so much. And if you've been listening to this story today and you're interested in learning more about Strategy Builder, then do look in the show notes information.

We'll be sure to share things there for you if you're thinking about your learning strategy. And if you're really interested in making sure other people find this, do share it with them.

When podcasts are shared, that's when the love is shared and people find out about things. So if you're finding this useful, then share it with somebody because they might find it useful as well.

But all that's left for me to say is have a lovely holiday, Elyse. I'll speak to you when you get back.

Elyse Toomey

Thanks, Michelle. See you later.

Learning Uncut Episode 186: Building L&D from Scratch – Elyse Toomey



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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