LEARNING UNCUT EPISODE 30
SPARKING LEARNING ENABLEMENT PT1 – LIV WILSON AND KERRY PEGUERO

Michelle Ockers: Welcome to another episode of Learning Uncut. I'm Michelle Ockers ...

Karen Moloney: And I'm Karen Moloney.

Michelle Ockers: ... and today we're talking with Liv Wilson and Kerry Peguero from Spark NZ. Spark is a telco who've done some truly transformative things with learning over the past two years. In fact, they've done so much that we've had to spread it over two episodes. So today you're listening to part one of the Spark story. Welcome, Kerry and Liv.

Liv Wilson: Hi.

Kerry Peguero: Hi. Michelle. Thanks for having us.

Michelle Ockers: Hello. It's an absolute pleasure. We're excited to share your story. Kerry, you've been with Spark for over nine years, the past three of those in the learning function. Can you please introduce us to Spark and tell us what you enjoy about working there?

Kerry Peguero: As you mentioned, Spark is a telco, and like a lot of telecommunications companies it has had to evolve to stay relevant. That's one of the biggest reasons why I've enjoyed and have continued working for it as long as I have. I'm onto my fifth job description and my fourth role within nine years, which I think's a pretty big testament to how it shifts and responds. The other thing is about the calibre of the people that we get to work with and the opportunities that are available to us.

Michelle Ockers: So Kerry, can you tell us a little bit about the geographic spread of the company and some of the main job roles in the organisation?

Kerry Peguero: We have retail points of presence. There's about 80 retail points of presence across the country. They have teams that vary from between 5 to 20 team members within a location. We've got contact centres that are based in Christchurch, Hamilton, Auckland, agents at home, plus we've got a contingent that's based offshore in the Philippines. In addition to that there's the back-of-house function as well. Our team primarily deals with frontline, so those who I refer to as customer-facing.

Michelle Ockers: Okay, thank you. And Liv, you've joined Spark within the past year. As you've settled in, what stood out for you about the organisation in this time, and in particular any observations about the organisation's culture?

Liv Wilson:	It's a really good question. I joined within the last eight months, and what really appealed or what comes through really loud and clear about working at Spark is just how vibrant and quick everything is to move. If we notice something isn't working quite right for us or for our customers, the pace of change is phenomenal. It isn't a long tail. It's very quick.
	The company operates in an agile manner, so we have chapters and tribes and we do sprints, and we have variations of that in terms of our front of house, our customer-facing have an agile light, and then our back office are an agile heavy, and that means that there's different ways of working. And the way everyone works together to achieve the great customer outcome, that's what appeals.
Michelle Ockers:	So it sounds really dynamic, which of course places certain demands on your learning function to match the pace of business and the dynamism of the business, right?
Liv Wilson:	Of course. Part of the way the Learning Enablement Team has been set up at Spark is through having a core function that looks after the innovation of learning and how we can really break down some barriers and break the rule book, and then we've got our learning partner wing, which is where Kerry and I come from, where we really are embedded in the channels that we support and we really talk with the business more than we learning initiatives. They underpin everything we do, but we just partner with the business.
Michelle Ockers:	Okay. Speaking of innovation, a lot has changed in learning at Spark over the past two years. Kerry, tell us what learning looked like at the start of this period and why a decision was made to do things differently.
Kerry Peguero:	So, a little bit like Liv was already mentioning, there was a change within the entire business, a move towards agile, that the entire business, not just those that were involved in software development or anything remotely technical. The entirety of Spark moved to an agile way of working. Historically we probably had an L&D function that was very, very similar to a lot of businesses around the world where we were treated as a cost centre. So it was something that was seen as necessary, but it wasn't necessarily valued.
	Our level of success was measured in the number of completions. If you were lucky, there was a token survey sent out to people where you asked them what they thought of the training and they gave you very polite answers but nothing that was necessarily actionable intel.
	The change that was happening within the business itself, whilst it was moving to agile, meant that it required a different level of support that our traditional structure just didn't allow for. The change was such a steep curve that was coming so quickly it just wasn't sustainable to do what we'd done before, and it just didn't provide the support that our people needed to cope with their change.

Michelle Ockers:	We're going to talk about hashtags and campaign hashtags because I think that you went through three hashtags, and I think the transition through the hashtags is a great way to follow the changes and what kind of change you were looking for with your learning strategy. So, could one of you walk us through those hashtags, what they meant to communicate, and internal marketing that goes along with those hashtags to shift mindset and approaches to learning?
Kerry Peguero:	People need to be able to understand why it is that they're making that connection with you, and because we were asking them to connect with us in a different way, we needed to get really smart about how we told that story. Hence came about the slightly tongue-in-cheek #Trainingisdead. We have a disdain amongst our team for traditional L&D. We're a bunch of misfits. We're not comfortable with that. Quite often you'll hear us talk about L&D, you'll see our shoulders go up around our ears. So, we kind of rolled with that for want of a better term. We decided to embrace that and get a bit cheeky with it. So we came up with a hashtag #Training is dead. #Long live learning. #Longlivecuriosity. #Longliveproblemsolving.
Michelle Ockers:	Great.
Kerry Peguero:	There's about 30 different hashtags that we've come up with.
Michelle Ockers:	That's a lot of hashtags. Some of those are communicating the shift. So training is dead; you're moving away from training; you're moving towards problem-solving, moving towards learning, moving towards curiosity. So that's part of a shift you were trying to create?
Kerry Peguero:	Yeah, there's a big difference between training and learning. Training is, my understanding and my interpretation of it is something that's quite often external. It's something that's done to you, whereas learning is deeply personal. It's where you're taking knowledge and it's becoming part of your own. So we wanted something that was going to be conversational, something that people could get on board with and be part of the story and have an intimate understanding about what it could mean for them. Traditional L&D quite often has an unintended outcome of institutionalising people where they believe they can only learn if training is provided to them, and we wanted to stop that in its tracks.
Michelle Ockers:	Okay, and what was your sense of how ready people in the organisation were for this change? Was this some that just kind of felt was comfortable and aligned with what they wanted anyway, or did you feel like you were trying to create some sort of shift in people's minds as an expectation?
Kerry Peguero:	No, they definitely weren't ready for it, because we have an interesting mix of a massive amount of tenure and very, very new people at Spark. We've got a very

diverse background from people who have worked when it was formerly a state-owned enterprise through to millennials who are having their first job straight out of high school. So we've got a wide spectrum who we deal with, and there are a lot of people that come through from traditional education, even to an extent within schools, which is where the tools that you need to do your job are provided to you.

Michelle Ockers: So you were going out through a marketing campaign, using hashtags, having conversations with people about making a mindset change. Now, it's one thing to encourage people to change their mindset. It's another thing to encourage behaviour, and the two kind of play off each other of course. Spark's done a lot of things to build learning skills, to shift people's behaviour in regard to learning and to help make them more active learners. One of those is user-generated content.

So, let's talk about user-generated content. Why is user-generated content important at Spark?

Kerry Peguero: So a big part of the user-generated content is they are the subject matter experts. There's a massive amount of talent within our people and they're the ones who are best positioned to explain to somebody else how they might go about something, rather than somebody from L&D who doesn't understand that subject having to become upskilled to translate it into a form that other people can consume. That's a massive amount of time that's lost and doesn't necessarily provide as much value as it can do with the credibility that comes from somebody who is known as a subject matter expert. And it does a few things. It generates content that benefits others, but it also builds the profile of that individual who's built content. They've developed a new skill set and they've developed a profile within Spark as a result of that.

Michelle Ockers: Okay. And it gets learning and development out of the way of being the middleman, so it allows things to happen quicker, to link in with the storyline earlier on from the conversation. I think that's a great point, Karen, for you to dig into, how user-generated content has happened at Spark.

Karen Moloney: When you talked about internal marketing, which sets up the expectation of what you wanted to do and starts to shift that mindset, but how did you go about getting people to actually create that content?

Kerry Peguero: A big part of that that Liv was also mentioning about is how our team is split in two very distinct roles: the innovation team, or the geeks within our squad, do a lot of the things that are far, far smarter than what I can do. And then the learning partner arm who specifically go out and build relationships, and we're embedded within channels within Spark. So we've got somebody who's embedded within our retail arm, we've got someone who's embedded within our contact centres, and they sit with the leaders of that team or that part of the business, and they learn about how their business works. They see all of

those opportunities, they can raise the opportunities, they can start those conversations. They get really curious.

All it takes is one person to go, "Yeah, I'll stick my hand up and have a go." Like we just had this week, somebody identified a trend that was happening on some calls that we were receiving. They went and did a bit of digging into it. They found a solution, they built a module, they developed the comms to go and share it with the rest of their channel. They've built their brand and they've solved a problem for the business at the same time.

Karen Moloney: That's fantastic. What sort of support did those people need in terms of ... you know, because it's one thing identifying that there's an issue, but there's another actually creating that content. So, what format does that take and how do people do it? Because this would be quite new for the majority of people, yeah?

Kerry Peguero: Yeah. One of the biggest helps for us has actually been getting Rise licenses because if its ease of use, and literally just this week the team member that I had a conversation with was, "Here's a link and a login. Follow your nose and if you get stuck you know where I am to have a conversation." A few hours later she sent me a draft module.

Karen Moloney: Okay, and Rise is, just for the people that don't know, an e-learning authoring tool?

Kerry Peguero: Yes, that's correct.

Karen Moloney: So, is that the only kind of content you create? Is there video, is there kind of PDF user guides? What sort of content are people creating, or is it sort of embedded within those modules or is it done sort of animated? How does that work?

Kerry Peguero: It's anything that anybody feels that they're comfortable with developing. So, we're a telco organisation. We've got a great deal of mobile phones spread out all across the country, so it's really quick to be able to have a conversation with somebody and film that. And because of so much of the value that our frontline provides is around conversations. Being able to model conversations is incredibly helpful, and to get that insight from different parts of the country, and it also means that we get different flavours of content.

Liv Wilson: One of my favourite pieces of content we had recently was a kids' smart watch. The product owner, the person who's responsible for the sales and the performance of this product had an actual child record a video about how awesome the watch was, and then embedded it within the learning content. So, we're hearing from actuals users of the products at the same time. It's just completely let go of all the chains. We've just said, whatever resonates with your audience, use that. And it's working.

So, what we're seeing with user-generated content is that prior to that, people were spending on average one minute on a piece of learning content. Now they're spending an average of 10 minutes on a piece of learning content.

Karen Moloney: And I think as well, with that we were just talking about giving people the freedom to generate that content in the way that they feel most appropriate, it isn't clinical and it doesn't follow the same format all the time. And so the levels of engagement are higher because people are ... they're not sure what's going to happen next, so they want to stay involved with that content and go on that journey.

Liv Wilson: Exactly.

Karen Moloney: This all sounds really exciting to me in terms of that user-generated content and obviously people are embracing this and coming up with some really creative ways of putting that content out. But I would imagine that it's not just something that you can have this idea and people go, "Yeah, this is great," and everybody jumps on and it's all hunky dory. There must be some issues and challenges that I've come up against with that approach. What are they and how have you tackled them?

Kerry Peguero: There has been that change from how can you guarantee that the content's going to be good; what's going to happen if somebody communicates something that's not right/ how is it that you mitigate that?

Those problems aren't excluded when they're developed by an L&D team in the first instance, because inevitably there's how many iterations that happen traditionally when you're trying to generate a piece of content? How many people does it have to get seen by before it gets released? We're bypassing that, so we're surfacing problems quicker and in turn we're able to respond much quicker.

Karen Moloney: Yes, I suppose in terms of what's right and how you kind of monitor that content, obviously with L&D there would be a process that we'd go through where that content would be tested and signed off by the relevant people. How is that happening, or is that happening with the user-generated content because you still need to be able to maintain the integrity of the content that's being put out there?

Kerry Peguero: We're utilising a lot of peer reviews. Our learning partners are there as support, so we play a part in that and we can suggest ... quite often our suggestions come around tweaking language and about clarity of purpose and that kind of thing. So there's a lot of coaching that goes through as these people are developing these skill sets as well. But there's also that peer review that happens.

Karen Moloney: By the same token I would imagine that, because you're operating in an agile way as an organisation, that the time lapse to get those approvals through is a lot quicker than it would be in a traditional learning project management situation.

Kerry Peguero: Yep, and we've also got less precious about that as well, too. You don't need a Rolls Royce to deliver the milk.

Karen Moloney: Very true.

Kerry Peguero: Everything doesn't have to be polished before it goes out. Is the information correct? Is it clear enough to understand? Then it's good to go.

Michelle Ockers: So, let's look at induction. Let's turn out approach now to induction. How many people need to go through induction every year?

Kerry Peguero: We can have upwards of 300 people across channels that are inducted in Spark within a year, and we would do fairly traditional inductions which is where people were dumped into a classroom and talked at for a period of time, and then integrated onto queues and integrated into dealing with customers or introduced to dealing with customers in kind of a staged approach.

                      We undertook as part of ... and again, it comes out with accreditation, understanding what good looked like, what the behaviours actually were that were demonstrated when somebody was succeeding in their role and when they were delivering great customer experiences, when they were hitting their numbers, all of that kind of thing. We started trying to actually unpack what people would need to do in order to achieve that. So not just the KPI, as I say, the behaviours that underlie that.

Michelle Ockers: So, you looked at behaviours and what sort of behaviours were leading to good performance, but the other thing you did was you applied a journey-mapping approach to look at the employee experience as part of your induction design? Is that right, Kerry?

Kerry Peguero: Yeah, so we talk about the existing inductions that were in our businesses because we had varying levels of success with them. There were parts of the business that just disregarded it completely because they didn't see the value in doing it. After we did our journey-mapping experience we very clearly understood why. To put it bluntly, it wasn't pleasant. We were taking people on board who we'd spent a great deal of time recruiting for and looking for bright, shiny people who were going to be energetic and engaged, and our induction processes largely beat that out of them.

Michelle Ockers: We talked about this before the recording, and you talked about this as an orienteering approach. You used the analogy of orienteering when you

described what induction looked like. In what ways is induction at Spark now like orienteering?

Kerry Peguero: As we mentioned, we identified key behaviours that our people would need to demonstrate in order to be successful in their roles, and as part of that, we designed a series of "I Can" statements. So, rather than the balances and checks that you would have previously where somebody had to go and complete a module and you would say that that means that they can do something, we asked them a series of questions. "Can you talk to a customer about our mobile products and services?"

The understanding is that by the end of their induction, they should be able to do that. There's a clear expectation of that. The way with which they go and learn how to do that is your point talking about the orienteering, where we give them frames of references and ask them some questions, and they have to then go and uncover that information and learn it for themselves. It's not prescribed. If somebody joins us from another telco, so they understand how a mobile network works, they say, "I can explain how the mobile network works." We're taking it as a given that what it is that they say that they can do, rather than forcing them through something that was designed for the lowest common denominator.

It means that we've been able to personalise induction.

Michelle Ockers: Okay, so you're taking it at face value then, if somebody says, "I can do something," that they can, which is kind of a radically different approach to assessment, right? What are the risks around that, and what's your level of confidence, or how do you monitor that to make sure that when someone's says, "I can do something," that they really can do it or they've really understood what it is they're saying they can do.

Kerry Peguero: This is where again, it comes back to accreditation, accreditation being those really clear set of measures about what success looks like both for you as an individual and for the business.

Michelle Ockers: Okay, and there's another little teaser we're going to leave our listeners with for part two of the episode. We're going to dig into a lot more around how the accreditation and the platform that you've developed work to make sure that you're picking up if there's ... I think what I heard you say if people say they can do something, but you're looking at performance data which shows they can't actually do it, you we'll be able to pick that up and then to guide them in a way to close that gap.

So it's not just a one-shot thing that if somebody says they can do something, that's the end of it. There's also some monitoring around that and support provided. Is that right, kind of at a high level, without digging into how that happens just yet?

Kerry Peguero:	Yep.
Michelle Ockers:	Okay, great. Karen, I think it's time maybe to dig into a little bit more about the design of the induction program.
Karen Moloney:	Yeah, I'm just thinking as an approach that ... that orienteering approach really I find quite intriguing, because that traditional induction spoon-feeding model is so ingrained in how most organisations approach that part of onboarding. That's what new employees would expect to happen, so I can imagine a lot of our listeners are out there kind of thinking, "Oh my gosh, that's quite a risky approach to take." Was it, in terms of taking out the content and expecting people to go and find it for themselves? How much risk was it?
Kerry Peguero:	It was a risk if we continued doing what it was that we were doing, because again when we start talking about that content and having to maintain content, the shelf life of content. It's shrinking by the month within our business. Some of the systems and tools that we use are very, very complex and they're getting new iterations as early as every six weeks. So the impact that that can have on training and, well, actually not training but on people's learning and being able to keep up to date with that's also pretty significant.
	What we actually wanted people to come away with, what we discovered we need in our people, is the ability to learn and unlearn. So, to be able to seek out information and make sense of it over and over and over again. Rather than learning one piece of content, we actually needed them to adopt a behaviour and a way of working and a mindset that was going to set them up for success at Spark.
Karen Moloney:	Okay. How did you go about the redesign of that induction program? In terms of who did you involve and how did you go about implementing that new format?
Kerry Peguero:	As I say, a big part of it was actually discovering for ourselves and going through the experience of just how horrific, or how you were made to feel by going through our previous iterations of induction, and being really deliberate about how we wanted our new people to feel, and what they needed to be prepared for by the end of an induction, which is to have amazing conversations with our customers; to be engaged and to be able to uncover the right information at the right time. It doesn't mean that they have to know all of the answer, but they need to be able to find them.
Karen Moloney:	How much do you think the user-generated content has contributed to this, because of the success of that new approach?
Kerry Peguero:	Because people naturally take on board information at different rates, some people need more content around a specific aspect of it. Maybe it's something that they haven't encountered before. They also have a different way of working. So, by having user-generated content, which means that we've got, in

some cases, five different pieces of content that all talk about the same thing but from a slightly different perspective, our people have the choice about what it is that they consume, and being able to consume something that's relevant to them. And in part that comes with having that choice about what you do and how people feel about that.

Karen Moloney: Yeah. I would imagine that being able to select a piece of content that's been created by somebody in the area that you would be working in, so that it's all context-relative, makes you immediately feel a bit more part of the organisation part of the role.

Kerry Peguero: Exactly. I mean, to go and consume a piece of content that's been created by somebody who works in the same office as you, or somebody who works in a different office, and the ability to go and start a conversation with that person as a result of it, it also created greater sense of belonging within our organisation, because that's another by-product that we actually wanted to start instilling, was the ability for people to connect.

Karen Moloney: Do you have any content actually in the program itself that's generated centrally, or is all just down to the process of learner discovery?

Kerry Peguero: There are still cases where we do get involved in content-build, but they're becoming fewer and further between. I'm actually struggling to think of the last piece of content that we had to do.

Liv Wilson: I think literally you'd have to go to the core compliance things like health and safety and consumer guarantees act and things like that. The legislative bits. It's the only thing I can think of.

Karen Moloney: Interesting. Were there any objections to the idea of removing content from the program?

Kerry Peguero: Yes, there was, and there's also been a certain element of asking for forgiveness after the fact.

Karen Moloney: I like that. Let's just do it and then if we need to apologize like that, we'll apologize.

Kerry Peguero: Interestingly, there's been very little apology required. In some cases, some people haven't even noticed that we've removed things, which goes to show the value that it was providing in the first instance. We removed a training platform that was costing us a horrendous amount of money, and we got up to three months before somebody contacted us about its disappearance.

Karen Moloney: Wow, okay, that's interesting. Take note, listeners. So I might just hand back to Michelle here because I know she wants to talk to you about some shifts in outcomes.

Michelle Ockers: If you were to go back and take a look now at the induction experience and the outcomes of induction, what would be different compared to ... and how long ago was it that you made the change?

Kerry Peguero: The current iterations of inductions have been in place for six months now, and they are evolving because these were treated as pilots, because a lot of it was ... we had done groundwork, but we needed to see and qualify what our results were. So we're going through iterations of those as we speak.

There have been inductions that used to take up to 12 weeks, so it could be 12 weeks that we would have these people as part of our business before they were providing return on investment.

Michelle Ockers: Was that 12 weeks in the classroom or was that in and out of the classroom?

Kerry Peguero: In and out of the classroom, but the bulk of it was done in classrooms. Those now have been reduced to six weeks, and they're interacting with the customer sooner, so they're actually being able to contribute to the business at the quicker rate. Not to the same degree as they would have done at 12 weeks, but it helps alleviate some of the business pressures earlier on. It also has a surprising effect on people's ... maybe I shouldn't say surprising, but it has been for some people, effect on a team member's sense of belonging and the validation that they've actually made the right choice to join our company in the first instance.

Michelle Ockers: We talked about content and user-generated content being part of the process of induction still, but with people having more choice about what content they go and use. When you said, when we first started talking about the induction design you talked about giving people a frame of reference and then some questions they had to go and answer. So, part of looking at content, what else are they doing to answer those questions?

Kerry Peguero: In addition to having content we've got a centralised knowledge base which has a lot of the nitty gritty details about the things that people do in their day-to-day jobs. So, what we refer to as SOPs, standard operating procedures, all of that really, really dry stuff, but it is necessary to be able to access. We also have what's customer-facing, so our own website, and it's also where we start curating as well, too, because there's a massive amount of resources that we don't own that aren't produced or maintained by Spark, that can support our people in how to do their jobs well.

We don't want people who are going to be limited in terms of where it is that they look for solutions to problems, so wherever possible we've tried not to give them those limitations in the first instance. We've been really deliberate about the types of questions that we ask to encourage that behaviour, where they think as far and wide as they possibly can.

Michelle Ockers:	So it's very much a process of building up their ability to go and find stuff and find information and find answer when they need it, as they learn through induction, right?
Kerry Peguero:	Yeah, because that's the behaviour that they're going to need. Again, to talk about our systems getting updated on average between six and eight weeks, that means they're continuously having to learn and unlearn and learn and unlearn. We need to demonstrate of we need to instil that behaviour right from the get-go.
Michelle Ockers:	Yeah, I can see how that would work. So, we like to be quite practical on the podcast and encourage people to go and try new things, and user-generated content being one of those things that we've spoken about today. You have spoken about getting less precious about content, about format of content, about the amount of formal review of content. What other key takeaway tips would you have for anyone who wants to get started with user-generated content?
Kerry Peguero:	I'm going to hand this over to Liv because she's dying to say it.
Liv Wilson:	I think it is literally JFDI. You can search for the acronym. We've proven that it isn't the end of the world if you do it. It's not that risky. If you feel like it is too risky for you, then pick the content that isn't compliance or legislative or anything like that. Pick the things that your people are actually the true experts of and let them JFDI.
Michelle Ockers:	So start somewhere, and I like Kerry's point earlier about the risk of not making a change is bigger than the risk of making a change. Like you have to take it from that perspective and find your way through it.
Liv Wilson:	Exactly.
Michelle Ockers:	Yeah. The other thing we've spoken today is about the induction programs and using more self-directed learning approaches within the boundaries of formal learning programs or part of formal learning programs, so building discovery into the approach there. What tips do you have the people who'd like to get started with doing more self-directed learning within formal programs.
Liv Wilson:	I think it's the connection with adult learning principles and future workforce capability. We want to ensure that we embrace curiosity and diversity of thought and things, but yet, if you're doing the classroom learning, you're not setting those people up for future success. So, it does almost fall into that JFDI camp again, because if you want these people to have that mindset where they really go hunting for information, are curious and hungry for more, and how they can be successful in a role, then curate that at the very beginning. Set them up for success as soon as they walk in the door.

Kerry Peguero: I think the key thing, just to iterate on what Liv said, is where we get to the point of offering an experience or an opportunity as opposed to a piece of content being a solution.

Michelle Ockers: Yeah, so experience over content. Think experience first.

Kerry Peguero: And real world as much as possible. Often, that is learning by doing. It's a real customer scenario. We will have these people in front of customers within their first week. We not protecting our customers from our people.

Michelle Ockers: Yep, or protecting your people from your customers.

Kerry Peguero: Yeah, exactly.

Michelle Ockers: Absolutely. Next episode, part two of this story, we're going to dig more into accreditation and the technology platform, so that is an episode you won't want to miss. It rounds out this whole story nicely and fills in some of the gaps in the little bits that we've spoken about. We're going to include a link to Kerry and Liv's LinkedIn profiles if anyone would like to get in touch to find out more about the topics discussed in today's episode. Thank you so much, Liv and Kerry, for sharing your work and insights with us today.

Kerry Peguero: Thanks for having us.

Liv Wilson: Thank you.

Michelle Ockers: You're welcome, and for our listeners, if you are finding Learning Uncut valuable, we'd love it if you could leave a rating review on your favourite listening platform, because it does help to lift the profile of the podcast and get more people listening to great stories such as the one you've heard today. Thank you.