



## Who and What: The Capacity Challenge

Leading Learning Podcast  
Transcript for Episode 285

Jeff Cobb (00:00):

You can know something, but then you have to do it actually. And there's often a gap between that. And I think it's often capacity that represents that gap because you can have great ideas, but, if you're not really able to execute those great ideas, execute that strategy, execute that vision, if you don't have the capacity for doing that, then you're just not going to have a thriving learning business.

Jeff Cobb (00:29):

I'm Jeff Cobb.

Celisa Steele (00:30):

I'm Celisa Steele, and this is the Leading Learning Podcast.

Jeff Cobb (00:38):

Welcome to episode 285, the final episode in our seven-part series on the learning business MBA.

Celisa Steele (00:46):

We've covered a lot of ground in the first six episodes in the series. We've talked about strategy, marketing, innovation, continuous evolution. We've talked about diversification of revenue and diversification of the portfolio of your offerings. We've talked about the role of learning technology. We've talked about COVID-driven pivots, financial modeling, and more. And all of those topics are good and practical areas of study for our mythical learning business MBA, and they're of real-world importance to learning businesses.

Jeff Cobb (01:20):

We have largely talked about topics—skills and knowledge and behavior needed for a learning business to survive and thrive. Knowing those topics, the needed skills and knowledge, is important, but the other key part is, of course, finding those skills and knowledge. So we want to focus this last episode in the series on capacity, which includes the people, the human resources, a learning business needs.

Celisa Steele (01:46):

Staffing and human resources have come up some along the way. Jeff, I know you and Steven Schragis talked about hiring. I talked with Mary Byers about her personal learning road map and using that with staff to focus their ongoing development. And Jim Obsitnik talked about involving the full team in understanding client needs and wants and not relying on product managers to translate and filter customer input for developers. So we have touched on human resources some, but we want to dig more deeply into capacity in this last episode of the series.

*This transcript accompanies the episode of the Leading Learning Podcast  
available at [www.leadinglearning.com/episode285](http://www.leadinglearning.com/episode285).*

Jeff Cobb (02:23):

So, first, we'll talk about why we're using the term *capacity* and what we mean by it. I know, in my mind, it's basically that ability to execute. When you've got that strategy, when you've got that vision, you've got to have the knowledge and the skills, the attitudes, the behaviors, the culture, to be able to actually execute. It's a focus that is really important in the context of our Learning Business Maturity Model, which we talk about often here on the show, and there's a question we pose as part of that model, as part of an assessing maturity using that model, and the question is "Does the organization (the learning business) have sufficient capacity in terms of human resources and technology to pursue the vision and strategy effectively?"

Jeff Cobb (03:13):

And we talk about, in stage 4 of the maturity model, this is the innovative, the most mature stage a learning business can be in, there we say that the learning business has the necessary resources, and those are both human and technological, to address current needs as well as resources to support ongoing innovation and growth. Processes are well defined, and they are continuously evaluated and improved, and the business consistently invests in staff and volunteer development.

Celisa Steele (03:46):

And when we talk about human resources, we're talking about staff and contract help. We're talking about the internal team and any consultants or volunteers involved in the learning business. I like talking about capacity because it's broader than just people. Yes, you need the people, the human resources, but you also need the tools and technologies and the training and the learning—all of which cost money—to support those people in doing their work.

Jeff Cobb (04:17):

Yeah, and a note about costs. You're right that creating, building, maintaining capacity definitely takes money. It is a cost, certainly, but we also like to think about it as an investment because money spent on capacity should provide a good return.

Celisa Steele (04:34):

And I think that it's always important to invest in your people, invest in building and maintaining capacity, but I think maybe it's especially important in the current moment. I mean, we're experiencing what's being called the Great Resignation, where you have everybody, or not everybody, but a lot of people leaving their jobs. And so I think that part of what a learning business can do to attract and retain good talent is by making sure that they're continually investing in those people once they have them and making sure to do that continuously, ongoing, to not do it in a haphazard way, to really focus on it and give it the dedicated time and money that it needs.

Jeff Cobb (05:25):

If you're looking for a technology partner to help you grow your capacity, check out our sponsor for this series.

Arianne Urena (05:30):

The COVID-19 pandemic catalyzed the merging of events in education for organizations across the globe. Organizations have realized that synergizing their education and event strategies produces immeasurable benefits, but they need a technology solution that facilitates that merge.

*This transcript accompanies the episode of the Leading Learning Podcast available at [www.leadinglearning.com/episode285](http://www.leadinglearning.com/episode285).*

Cadmium is focused on providing a full suite of technology solutions, enabling organizations to meet the changing environment head on. From a host of event technologies to integrated learning management and content creation tools, Cadmium offers everything an organization needs to generate revenue and drive engagement. Learn more, and request a demo to see how Cadmium can help your learning business at [gocadmium.com](http://gocadmium.com).

Celisa Steele (06:17):

We're grateful to Cadmium for sponsoring this series. Please visit [gocadmium.com](http://gocadmium.com) to learn more.

Jeff Cobb (06:25):

Now, you could make the argument that we were illogical or somewhat misguided, I guess, in giving more air time to those topics of the learning business MBA before we talked about team. What I have in mind here is the idea that Jim Collins, a great thinker in innovation and strategy, bestselling, mega-selling author of *Good to Great*, he had the concept of getting the right people on the bus, and he framed this as "first who, then what." And we've been talking quite a bit about the what. Now we're coming around to that who, but Collins might have said we should have been talking about that in the first place. And the way he looks at it is that those who build great organizations make sure they have the right people on the bus and the right people in the key seats on the bus before they figure out where they're going to drive that bus.

Jeff Cobb (07:19):

They always think first about who, and then they think about what. And when you're facing chaos and uncertainty—and certainly there's plenty of that to go around right now—you can't possibly predict what's coming around the corner so your best strategy is to have that whole busload of people who can adapt and perform brilliantly no matter what comes next. Basically, great vision without great people is irrelevant. I'm basically paraphrasing, quoting loosely from Collins in saying all of this.

Celisa Steele (07:49):

Now, if your learning business is new, if you're a startup, that concept of "first who, then what" could be really helpful. For an established learning business, it's maybe a little bit trickier, unless you're planning to clean house and fire and rehire, which probably isn't the case. For established learning businesses, I think what's more helpful is to talk to everyone on the bus to make sure you understand their skills, their skills gaps, their desires, and their mindset. And through that conversation, you're going to better understand what you might need to do to address capacity in your learning business.

Jeff Cobb (08:31):

I think I have in my mind now this vision of a big yellow school bus rolling down the road with everybody engaged in conversation. Now, of course, school kids love to talk about capacity, so what an appropriate analogy. But among the things you might do to address capacity is get some supplemental help. That might mean hiring a contractor or, dare we say, a consultant for a specific project, and you might get them to help you basically learn how to fish. I feel like any consultant who comes in particular really should be aiming at helping an organization develop capacity. They're going beyond what just a freelancer is going to do for you. But even a freelancer can help teach you how to fish so that you are actually building that capacity in the organization using supplemental resources. And you might get that from volunteers too. Volunteers can certainly fill out what you're able to do in terms of your capabilities, your skills,

*This transcript accompanies the episode of the Leading Learning Podcast available at [www.leadinglearning.com/episode285](http://www.leadinglearning.com/episode285).*

your knowledge. Some of those volunteers might be able to teach you how to fish as well and help build that capacity with your existing staff.

Celisa Steele (09:31):

And then another way to address capacity is by hiring new staff, and that could be through natural attrition as you have staff retire or move on to other jobs, or, if you happen to have the resources or the business case for it, it might mean that you're expanding the team because maybe part of what you get out of talking to everyone on the bus is that, "You know what? We really have this empty seat here that we need to fill." And so you might fill that by hiring someone new.

Jeff Cobb (09:57):

Then the third way to address capacity is to invest directly in training and development of people on the team. I just referenced, well, you might be able to get to any consultants or contractors who come in to share their knowledge and informally help your team grow. But this is very directly investing in it, saying, "We're going to get the training and the development that we need in these specific topical areas so that we have that knowledge and those skills going forward." And we just know anecdotally, what we've witnessed in organizations, and we've surveyed around this a little bit in the past too, that learning businesses often aren't doing enough of this. It's the classic cobbler's children sort of thing. You're investing in everybody else's education and learning, but you may not be doing enough with your own staff. You're so focused on those external learners that you forget about your internal team.

Celisa Steele (10:49):

You can forget, or there can be other barriers there. I think one reason that the investment in training and development of the internal team sometimes doesn't happen is it can be a resource issue. Training and development often take money, and, even if you find free materials, that training and development still takes time. So time or money or time *and* money can be a barrier to really delivering that internal training and development to your team.

Jeff Cobb (11:18):

Definitely, and it could also be an issue of finding the right content. This whole idea of the learning business MBA came up because Josh Goldman, who's our director of consulting now, but back in the day was director of education at a learning business, at an association, and he saw a need for something that didn't exist. He wanted to be able to give this kind of education or share this kind of learning with colleagues, with peers across other associations who were in a similar field to his, and it wasn't there. So we had developed some initial content years ago to address that need that Josh had surfaced, but now we're bringing it back with this series. And, of course, as part of what we're trying to do with the podcast in general, the reason we tackle the topics we tackle, talk to the people we talk to, is because we're trying to provide that content that's relevant to a learning business.

Jeff Cobb (12:11):

We do that through the podcast. We do that through posts on the Leading Learning site. If you go to the site, you'll see on the home page, if you scroll down, there's the informal learning business curriculum, where we've basically put together different episodes of the podcast and other resources and categorized them according to the maturity model so that you can go through them individually, or, even better—and we always encourage this—do it as a team. Get a study group together within your organization, and use that content that is out there. But, like

we said, oftentimes the content isn't out there for the very specific things that you might need for your particular learning business, and that can obviously be a barrier to the types of internal training and development we're talking about happening.

Celisa Steele (12:53):

Then a third barrier is culture. In order to make sure that you're investing in developing your team, it comes down to having a learning culture. A learning culture is one that clearly values and prioritizes learning, and it rewards the people on the team who pursue learning, and then—because of that learning that's happening—that means the organization is able to change and adapt and evolve as circumstances change, and circumstances perhaps dictate some change. I think learning culture is an asset in any organization, but, for a learning business, it's just that much more relevant. It's about walking the walk along with talking the talk.

Jeff Cobb (13:35):

Yeah, and, for learning businesses, the culture is not confined to that single organization, but it extends out into the broader community, field, or industry that the learning business serves because you're trying to raise capacity not just in your learning business but across that field, industry, that community that you are serving. And, as a prerequisite to supporting the broader culture, the business obviously should have that strong internal learning culture, both because it produces those returns for the organization but because it is that model for the broader community, the broader field, the broader industry. Your modeling the desired outcomes is really crucial, and it's difficult to model what you haven't fully appreciated and integrated into your own practices as part of your organizational culture.

Celisa Steele (14:25):

We bring up these three common barriers—the lack of resources (i.e., time and or money), the inability to find the “right” content, and the absence of a learning culture—because you really have to address all three in order to build capacity. You have to have and allocate sufficient time and money. You have to identify appropriate materials and opportunities that are going to help build the skills and knowledge and behaviors that your team needs, and you have to have the learning culture. Without a learning culture, it's too easy to scrimp on the time and the money allocated or to give up when looking for appropriate materials and opportunities and they aren't something you can find readily. But I think the most detrimental impact of *not* having a learning culture is that, without that learning culture, even if individual team members are learning and developing, they won't be able to use what they're learning to full effect. They may be learning and growing individually, but, in context, in the learning business itself, they're not going to be able to express it fully, use it fully.

Jeff Cobb (15:33):

Yeah, definitely. For me, this is really where the proverbial rubber hits the road. To reference another classic in this kind of business literature world: *The Knowing-Doing Gap*, which I think was Jeffery Pfeffer. I may be misattributing there, but big-seller, and this difference between you can know something, but then you have to do it actually. And there's often a gap between that. And I think it's often capacity that represents that gap because you can have great ideas, but, if you're not really able to execute those great ideas, execute that strategy, execute that vision, if you don't have the capacity for doing that, then you're just not going to have a thriving learning business.

Celisa Steele (16:21):

*This transcript accompanies the episode of the Leading Learning Podcast available at [www.leadinglearning.com/episode285](http://www.leadinglearning.com/episode285).*



To help you assess your capacity, we suggest creating a simple matrix. Imagine that you would have knowledge domains as columns, and then you would have your team members as rows. In the knowledge domains, you might have areas like strategy, marketing, technology, learning science, finance. Those are all obviously really important areas for a learning business to have some acumen in. Depending on where you are as a learning business, you might want to get more granular or add a different domain. You might add product development, which is an aspect of marketing, but you might want to call it out separately, or you might want to call out data analytics or be more specific about the kind of technology skills and knowledge that are needed. Software for course development is very different than software that is going to allow learners to discover courses and launch and track their progress.

Celisa Steele (17:19):

That's just an idea in terms of some of the domains and what you might be thinking of. But, again, you want to tailor it to your specific learning business and what is most important to you.

Jeff Cobb (17:29):

Yeah, and I think it's just really important to get it down because just that process of thinking through, "Okay, what are those categories for us? Where do we really need to be focusing?" We've got the Learning Business Maturity Model and the domains defined there, but you may decide that there are additional domains or subdomains that you really want to be focusing on or need to be focusing on as a learning business. Getting those laid out, and then getting those people who are on the bus laid out, so you're in a position where you can analyze it and, based on your conversations with those people on the bus that we've been talking about, you're really able to assess and then document where you are, where your strengths are, where your gaps are, and figuring out a plan for shoring up those gaps.

Jeff Cobb (18:12):

It's common to say, "Well, we should all be playing to our strengths," which is great for individuals to figure that out. But, as an organization, you've got to figure out where those weaknesses, where those gaps are, because something does have to happen with those. Whether you're going to train people, whether you're going to hire more people, whether you're going to bring in those outside contractors and consultants, you've really got to assess that current situation by doing that. Concrete ideas for where and then how you're actually going to get better.

Celisa Steele (18:42):

You could add a final row and maybe also a final column if you'd like, where you are putting in some notes. The notes that would be a final row would be specific to a domain. If you have strategy as one of your big domains, you might have a note there if you're going to have a big organizational strategy refresh that's going to be happening in the next calendar year. You could make note of that and be thinking about that and implications for your team if you're a learning business that operates within a larger organization.

Celisa Steele (19:15):

A column with notes would then allow you to also make some notes about the individual team members. As you're looking across those domains and where a particular team member has some expertise or has a desire to learn more, you could make some notes around what you might be doing to address that. Then once you have this laid out, that matrix can become a tool

for internal sharing and peer learning. If, for example, you have someone who's really good at or really interested in learning science, maybe you charge that person with sharing their knowledge with the team through a monthly internal lunch-and-learn type approach.

Jeff Cobb (19:55):

Or, along those lines, you might make sure that you pick out a resource—it might be an article, a video, a book, a podcast episode I might suggest—that speaks to one of those domains, one of those categories that you're focusing on and then discuss that with the team. You might want to rotate through different domains over the course of a few months and then repeat that process. Again, this is embedding it in the culture. It's making it an ongoing thing where everybody knows this is something we're going to do to build our capacity, and we've been very clear in identifying where and how that's going to happen, and we're providing resources to make that happen.

Celisa Steele (20:31):

The matrix, as we're describing it, is obviously a very simple tool, but we feel like just putting things down on paper, surfacing them, making them visible so that they can be shared and discussed and learned from, just doing that can be a profoundly powerful step to take in increasing your capacity.

Jeff Cobb (20:52):

Definitely, and that's part of our *modus operandi*—to pull out my bad Latin here—at Leading Learning and at Tagoras. You do need those simple tools. They're deceptively simple because they do help to surface the really big, the really meaty things that a learning business needs to tackle. We do the same sort of thing with the Value Ramp to help you look at your portfolio. We've done the same sort of thing with the Market Insight Matrix to help you really assess and go deeper in understanding your market. This is just another simple tool, certainly not rocket science, to put together a matrix with rows of employees and other resources and columns of areas you're trying to address. But once you do that, like you said, Celisa, that surfaces it. It makes it visible. It makes it something that can be talked about. It becomes what we've often referred to as a social learning object. You've got something everybody can focus on together and have meaningful conversation around that's going to lead to positive change and that we feel is going to lead to building capacity.

Celisa Steele (22:04):

In episode 284, we talked about financial modeling, and, in that episode, we talked about financials at both the product level and in terms of looking at your overall learning portfolio. What we're talking about with assessing your capacity is the same kind of dichotomy. You want to do it both for your overall team, and you want to have individual goals for team members. The point there is that you need to have that focus for each individual employee, but you also really want to emphasize the team nature. You really want to all be working towards the same goals, and so, again, not every team member is going to have to be proficient or strong in all of the domains that you identify as key ones, but you're going to need to make sure that you're covered and that at least some resource is available in each of those key domains.

Jeff Cobb (23:02):

I do think, at the individual level, once you have it laid out in that matrix, and you've had those conversations with the people on the bus (and I'm thinking primarily from the perspective of a leader or somebody who's managing people and trying to set goals for them), I think it's helpful

for people to share their individual goals and progress and for everybody on the team to know what everybody else is working on and where they might be having some successes, where they might be running into barriers. And, certainly, even when people have different areas of knowledge and skills and focus, it's still very often the case that we can help each other out in making progress on our individual goals.

Jeff Cobb (23:43):

And then, of course, you've got that overall team view that was part of the matrix we've described here, so you're all collectively able to monitor that over time and really see how that fills in or changes as that capacity comes online, and you see the individuals realizing their goals, and you see that interacting with other individuals in that matrix, and the whole becomes greater than the sum of the parts.

Celisa Steele (24:10):

You have the matrix that can give you that team view. For individual goals, I think something like the personal learning road map that Mary Byers shared in her episode is equally simple but also equally effective. And so you can marry those up—the matrix that we're talking about and then having the personal learning road map for each individual team member, and then you have both of those tools to really help you focus on how to develop and improve capacity over time.

Celisa Steele (24:38):

I also think that, in the financial projection episode, we talked about time horizons, and you have a time horizon that you want to look at for financial projections. We talked about it's often in that three- to five-year time frame for learning products. I think the same thing can happen with the matrix and with the personal learning road map. You want to have some notion of a time horizon. You're going to have your current skills and knowledge, and then you're going to have some growth targets, and some gaps may take more time to fill. You might see some short-term gains, but I think also it's important to be aware that it may take months or possibly even years to really see the full benefit of investing in the ongoing development of team members.

Jeff Cobb (25:26):

Definitely. I think there's some comfort there in having some confidence that you're investing in the right areas. I think there's a corollary between the capacity matrix and the strategy canvas that we've talked about in the context of blue ocean strategy and we talked about it in some depth in the marketing and strategy episode that we did for the learning business MBA. You want to see where you are now—and either of them can help you understand where you are now—but they can also help you understand where you want to be. Those domains that you include as part of the capacity matrix and how you address them, the specific focus or perspective your learning business brings as you're paying attention to those, you're going to see that potential in there to differentiate, to become unique, obviously to strengthen overall.

Jeff Cobb (26:16):

But, as you're trying to determine those areas to focus on in the capacity matrix, be thinking about that strategically, maybe even be thinking back to those areas that you might have outlined on the strategy canvas. Be thinking back to what you've laid out on your Value Ramp. Where is it you're really trying to excel and differentiate as an organization, and how is the way in which you're building capacity mapping to that and ensuring that you really realize that potential to differentiate and to become unique as a learning business?



Celisa Steele (26:47):

Well, I really like what you were saying there, Jeff, because I do think it's important to approach capacity building strategically because I do think that a learning business's capacity can be a strategic advantage. It's hard for someone else to copy your team and all the capacity that you bring to bear on any projects. Even if a competitor were to poach a person or two from your team, this is a case where the sum is hopefully greater than the parts. If you're really acting as a team, as a cohesive unit unified by common goals, then your capacity really is bringing a strategic advantage.

Jeff Cobb (27:37):

We hope this learning business MBA series has given you some ideas and approaches for deepening and broadening the skills and knowledge of your team. If you haven't started yet, we hope you'll get to work now on implementing some of those ideas and approaches. The capacity matrix can be a great starting point.

Celisa Steele (27:54):

This is the last episode in the learning business MBA series. We'll resume releasing new episodes of the Leading Learning Podcast in January 2022. In the meantime, we invite you to make use of the archive of hundreds of past episodes and the other resources on the Leading Learning site to dig deeper into the critical skills and knowledge needed by learning businesses.

Jeff Cobb (28:17):

If you have suggestions for future podcast episodes, whether those are topics to cover or someone to interview, please leave a comment at [leadinglearning.com/episode285](https://leadinglearning.com/episode285), or e-mail us at [leadinglearning@tagoras.com](mailto:leadinglearning@tagoras.com).

Celisa Steele (28:33):

At [leadinglearning.com/episode285](https://leadinglearning.com/episode285), you'll find show notes, additional resources, and options for subscribing to the podcast. To make sure you don't miss it when we resume releasing new episodes, we encourage you to subscribe. And subscribing also helps us get some data on how the podcast is doing.

Jeff Cobb (28:53):

We'd also be grateful if you take a minute to rate us on Apple Podcast. Celisa and I personally appreciate it, and those reviews and ratings help the podcast show up when people search for content on leading a learning business. Just go to [leadinglearning.com/apple](https://leadinglearning.com/apple) to leave a review and rating.

Celisa Steele (29:10):

Lastly, please spread the word about Leading Learning. In the show notes at [leadinglearning.com/episode285](https://leadinglearning.com/episode285), you'll find links to us on Twitter, LinkedIn, and Facebook.

Jeff Cobb (29:20):

Thanks again, and see you next time on the Leading Learning Podcast.

*[music for this episode by DanoSongs, [www.danosongs.com](http://www.danosongs.com)]*

*This transcript accompanies the episode of the Leading Learning Podcast available at [www.leadinglearning.com/episode285](https://www.leadinglearning.com/episode285).*