Celisa Steele (00:00):

The true purpose of a maturity model is helping you discover what to do to improve and move to the next stage. A maturity model should give you a learning plan, a guide that shows you what to work on to get better and to become more efficient and effective as a learning business.

Jeff Cobb (00:25):

I'm Jeff Cobb.

Celisa Steele (00:27):

I'm Celisa Steele, and this is the Leading Learning Podcast. We're dedicating this episode to maturity, maturity in the context of learning, of course.

Jeff Cobb (00:41):

And this is episode 290, so it feels like the podcast has attained a certain maturity or at least we hope so. But we shouldn't confuse longevity with maturity. So let's start by talking about what we mean by maturity.

Celisa Steele (00:57):

If you look it up in the dictionary, *mature* is one of those words that has many definitions. But one of my favorites and one that has relevance for our conversation today is the definition that describes mature as "having attained a desired state." This is the definition of *mature* that gets used to describe cheeses and wines. A fine wine or a good cheese is one that has aged enough and in the right way so as to have attained a desired state, to be good, to be delicious. And what I like about that definition, for our purposes, is that it focuses on maturity not as a defined final destination, a place you arrive at and then settle in, but it couches maturity as a process to get to a desired state, a state that someone defines and describes as desired.

Jeff Cobb (01:50):

I mostly like that it compares us to a fine wine or a good cheese, two of my favorite things. But, really, what you're saying is that that definition focuses maturity less on the destination and more on the journey. And so often we can get tripped up by what I've heard referred to before as the arrival fallacy. And this is the idea that you will eventually arrive at a place where everything is essentially perfect; no more effort is needed. But I think a big part of being mature is realizing that you never really arrive. You just evolve into new states that then present their own opportunities and challenges.

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Jeff Cobb (02:29):

Now, if we add the learning lens to this definition, there are a couple things worth noting. First, I'll mention that, as learning businesses, we're working with mature learners, meaning adult learners, and we're helping learners become more mature. We're helping them to attain a desired state.

Celisa Steele (02:48):

That future focus, that desired state is important when we think too about the learning business. It's that desired state that's the foundation for our Learning Business Maturity Model. It's about, as you said, Jeff, the journey. How do we get from where we are as a learning business to where we want to be?

Jeff Cobb (03:10):

For listeners who might not be familiar with it or for those who need a refresher, the Learning Business Maturity Model articulates the characteristic and practices of a mature learning business, as well as the stages that typically precede full maturity. And it's intended specifically for market-facing organizations that focus on lifelong learning, continuing education, and professional development, and that's versus, say, corporate training departments or degree-granting programs, for example.

Celisa Steele (03:42):

We developed the Learning Business Maturity Model and first released it back in 2016 because, over our years of working with market-facing learning businesses, we've seen common problems and issues and common opportunities for growth and improvement. And so the Learning Business Maturity Model really kind of collects and consolidates that knowledge that we have gained over our years of working with learning businesses, and it spans four stages of maturity. So first we have Stage 1, which we describe as Static, then Stage 2: Reactive, Stage 3: Proactive, and then Stage 4, the final one in our model, is Innovative.

Jeff Cobb (04:26):

And then, within each stage, maturity is gauged according to characteristics and performance in five domains that we've found to be critical to the success of the businesses that we've been involved with over the years. And those are Leadership, Strategy, Capacity, Portfolio, and Marketing. We've talked about the maturity model on the podcast before, so at leadinglearning.com/episode290 we'll include links to some of those past episodes and also to other resources related to the Learning Business Maturity Model. But, for the moment, we want to focus less on the logistics and the specifics and more on the purpose of the maturity model.

Celisa Steele (05:09):

The most important outcome of the Learning Business Maturity Model, like all maturity models worth their salt, isn't finding out what stage you're at. It's not about getting identified as Stage 1 or Stage 2 or Stage 3. The true purpose of a maturity model is helping you discover what to do to improve and move to the next stage. A maturity model should give you a learning plan, a guide that shows you what to work on to get better and to become more efficient and effective as a learning business.

Jeff Cobb (05:47):

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To help your learning business improve and become more efficient and effective, you'll need good learning technology partners.

Celisa Steele (05:54):

Web Courseworks is a learning technologies company with an ever-evolving learning management system, CourseStage. CourseStage LMS is leveraged by organizations of all sizes to build a learning business and track education outcomes for proven success. Download the Web Courseworks guide "Four Ways an LMS Can Help Build a Revenue-Generating Learning Business," and learn how your organization can leverage a learning management system to generate revenue for your learning practice. Get the guide at webcourseworks.com/four-lms-revenue-models.

Jeff Cobb (06:31):

We do encourage you to check out Web Courseworks, and you can find a link to the guide "Four Ways an LMS Can Help Build a Revenue-Generating Learning Business" in the show notes for this episode at leadinglearning.com/episode290.

Celisa Steele (06:50):

Jeff, what are your thoughts on the purpose of a maturity model? Where do you see the real value?

Jeff Cobb (06:56):

What you were saying made me think of a fixed mindset versus a growth mindset. Using a maturity model to find out your stage and stopping there, that really represents a fixed mindset. Your learning business is Stage 3: Proactive. It's labeled. It's identified. End of story. But, of course, the real value in a maturity model comes when it's used with a growth mindset. We're Stage 3: Proactive at the current moment. What do we need to do to maintain that and then to move on to Stage 4: Innovative? That growth mindset is a learning mindset. It's about experimenting with investments of time, money, and attention and figuring out what works to improve.

Celisa Steele (07:41):

And this is not to say that a maturity model isn't valuable as a diagnostic. The Learning Business Maturity Model has a lot of value as a diagnostic, and we've created an assessment to help a learning business understand its current stage. But the diagnosis is not where all or even most of the value of the maturity model lies. The greater value lies in using the result of the diagnostic to guide discussion within the learning business and to determine future direction.

Jeff Cobb (08:14):

Definitely, and we've talked about three Ds in regard to the Learning Business Maturity Model: dialogue, diagnosis, and direction. We've had quite a bit of success using the model for all three of these in working with clients, regardless of whether the formal assessment has been used. For example, just putting the model up on the screen during meetings with key stakeholders always sparks useful commentary and insights. And that, of course, would be that first D, dialogue. That dialogue is an important component—really the foundation in many ways—of the second D, diagnosis.

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Jeff Cobb (08:53):

We've suggested on many occasions that a solid diagnosis is really at the heart of good strategy. And it's also at the heart of identifying the operational issues that may be standing in the way of successfully growing and developing your learning business. Now, when you combine diagnosis and dialogue, you're then able to arrive at a clear sense of that third D, direction.

Jeff Cobb (09:17):

And I say "clear" because we're not just talking about generalities here. We're talking about specifically identifying the actions to be taken in key areas like strategy, like hiring and succession, and like general performance. Those are big benefits to be gotten out of a relatively simple tool, but we've seen those benefits realized in organizations that have leveraged the model. And I think the key to realizing them is recognizing that this is a process.

Jeff Cobb (09:47):

And, of course, the reality is that some organizations are better than others at taking themselves through this kind of process, and that's a key reason that we've now introduced the Maturity Accelerator Program. And this is a program that's a structured, team-based approach to help organizations effectively leverage the maturity model in a way that aligns with their specific situation and their specific needs. So if you're listening and thinking that the benefits we're describing sound great, but you're saying, "We really need some help making those benefits happen," definitely check the show notes for this episode for a link to more information about the Maturity Accelerator Program.

Celisa Steele (10:25):

And whether you decide to pursue the Maturity Accelerator Program or take a do-it-yourself approach, another benefit of a maturity model is that it helps to keep us balanced in a few ways. One is what you were just talking about, Jeff. It can keep us focused on dialogue, diagnosis, and direction, and each of those three is important and has value. If we jump straight to direction, to taking action without first diagnosing our situation and current state and without dialoguing and discussing that with others, we might head in the wrong direction. If we dialogue or diagnose without taking action, well then, of course, we're going to get nowhere.

Jeff Cobb (11:11):

It's a very good point because it's so easy to overemphasize one or two of those at the expense of the other. And, like you said, that will interfere with progress. A maturity model also keeps us balanced by looking both ahead and looking behind. We see the earlier stages, like a Static Stage, and we see the more advanced stages, so all the way out there, Innovative, and we see where we are. It reminds us of where we've been and the experience that we bring along with us. So just as the adult learner brings her prior experience to learning, the same is going to be true for learning businesses.

Celisa Steele (11:50):

And the Learning Business Maturity Model also helps us stay balanced by referring not just to four stages but also five domains of knowledge and skills that are important for the success of a learning business. This is a reminder that we as individual learners and as learning businesses need to be well rounded, at least in terms of certain key domains.

Jeff Cobb (12:14):

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That's very true. And I think it can be helpful to basically imagine a center, a hub, with those five domains as spokes shooting out from that hub. And if Leadership and Strategy, Capacity and Portfolio, if those are all really strong—so you can imagine those are long lines coming out—but Marketing is weak, so it's a shorter line, then you're basically going to get a flat tire if you try to draw a circle and connect the spokes. And if you've got a flat tire, you're not going to make much progress.

Celisa Steele (12:53):

When talking about learning business maturity, there's some danger in—or at least limitation to—using human maturity as a reference point. Human maturity gets me thinking about a life cycle, and death is the end of a living thing's life cycle. The decline is inevitable. But a learning business is an organization, not a living organism. And I believe learning business maturity can be on a continuously upward trajectory, getting better, getting more mature, if an organization does the work to understand what it needs to do to continue improving.

Jeff Cobb (13:34):

And, of course, that doesn't mean that the path will always be up and that the way will always be one of steady, linear improvement. It might be. But the more typical situation is there's going to be some slippage at times. Situations can change. Maybe a new competitor or a pandemic, for example, or the loss of a significant team member can really send a learning business backwards at times.

Celisa Steele (13:58):

And there could be changes that might mean that more than incremental improvement can happen, things that might result in exponential improvement, things that might allow a learning business to leapfrog over a stage. This could be the elimination of a major competitor, or maybe a significant new audience is reached, or maybe there's some stellar new leadership. And because the Learning Business Maturity Model deals not just with a single domain but five, there might even be at times mixed results.

Jeff Cobb (14:32):

Right. Say, a move forward in marketing as you adopt a design thinking approach to new learning products, but then a step back in leadership as a longtime CEO or COO steps down.

Celisa Steele (14:44):

And sometimes the way forward may involve backtracking, intentional or at least essential backtracking. A tactic that worked well in the past may have stopped performing. Those day-long workshops in key metropolitan areas or a big international expo, COVID made those difficult if not impossible. And so I think the corollary here with learning is that sometimes we have to unlearn before we can learn.

Jeff Cobb (15:14):

So continuous improvement, ever-increasing maturity is a possibility, but the reality is it's usually only when we zoom out that we see that the trajectory is clearly up. When we zoom in to the daily level of what's going on, then we see the little ups and downs. But the main point is that stasis isn't really an option. Again, you have to keep that growth mindset and always realize that there is no final destination. There's just the next step.

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Jeff Cobb (15:45):

And we, as learning businesses, really must keep acting and growing to reach fuller maturity and to maintain where we are. Without continued learning and application, we'll lose maturity. We'll backslide, and ultimately our success and then, of course, our survival will be threatened.

Celisa Steele (16:04):

Now, admittedly, Jeff, we've gotten a little vague and theoretical in this conversation, but I think the beauty of a maturity model is that it gives you and your team a concrete focal point. If you go check out our Learning Business Maturity Model, it gets pretty specific about those domains of Leadership, Strategy, Marketing, Capacity, Portfolio. We dig into the skills and knowledge and whether or not you're doing certain things. And the model defines what distinguishes a Static: Stage 1 learning business from a Reactive: Stage 2 one and what separates a Stage 3: Proactive one from a Stage 4: Innovative one.

Jeff Cobb (16:44):

We talked about defining *maturity* earlier, and it can be useful to do the same thing with the term *model*. One way models are used is to represent or describe something that can't be directly or easily observed. So, for example, a model of an atom. We can't see atoms, but we can look at a model to better understand how atoms work. The role of the nucleus, the protons and neutrons and the electrons. And, similarly, it's hard to see a successful learning business, but a model can help us better understand how one works and what its core components are.

Celisa Steele (17:22):

Yes. And if we go back to our earlier talk of maturity models reminding us that we're on a journey, then I think of maps, and maps are a kind of model. Like a model of an atom, a map is a representation of something that can be hard to see. Knowing how to get from here to there, especially if the distance is farther than the eye can see, that can be tricky without a map, without a model to help us along the way.

Jeff Cobb (17:52):

And so the Learning Business Maturity Model is a visualization, like a map. It helps to make concrete something that would otherwise remain abstract. And so often strategic discussion can feel too vague, and decisions about where and how to invest in resources feel like a shot in the dark. The maturity model, of course, doesn't provide all the answers, but it can bring a lot of clarity to the process. And in times of upheaval and volatility, that seems particularly valuable.

Celisa Steele (18:23):

Models and maps are also good reminders that we're dealing with something of relative complexity. If I can stand here and point to where you should go, then you probably don't need a map. I don't need to draw one for you. Maps and models are most useful and most commonly used not to describe either/or scenarios but to describe more complex situations where gradations come into play.

Celisa Steele (18:52):

If learning businesses were either categorically successful or unsuccessful, that either/or, then we wouldn't need a model. Instead, learning businesses are more or less successful and more or

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less successful along a variety of dimensions, in terms of finances or impact on learners or impact on those learners served, for example.

Jeff Cobb (19:18):

And I think all of that becomes apparent when you use the Learning Business Maturity Model because it helps each individual in the learning business see the components of maturity more clearly, but, even more importantly, it serves as a point of reference for conversation. It's what we characterize as a social learning object, something all of the relevant stakeholders can react and respond to and, in doing so, work collaboratively to unearth the most relevant opportunities and challenges to be addressed.

Celisa Steele (19:49):

Yeah, I think that using a maturity model as a social learning object is a great way to use it. It gets back to those three Ds that we were talking about. It certainly gives you something to dialogue about, and it gives you something that you can then use to diagnose your situation and to set direction. And a model is also about how as much as it is about what. And so, if we get back to that map analogy, a map isn't just "What's the destination?" But it's "How do you get there?"

Jeff Cobb (20:24):

And we keep talking about maps a lot. I didn't point out earlier that, of course, the acronym for our Maturity Accelerator Program is MAP because that's what it's really helping you do is map things. And we're not saying that the Learning Business Maturity Model is the only way to get to learning business success. People, reasonably intelligent people, could argue with it, maybe even should argue with it. You can imagine someone saying, for example, "There are really five stages not four." Or "There's a sixth domain that's equally important to success."

Jeff Cobb (20:58):

And if those are the kinds of thoughts you've had while listening, hey, more power to you. The point is to be thoughtful about how best to grow and how best to mature as a learning business and then to put some stake in the ground and make some progress against it. And the Learning Business Maturity Model is simply our attempt to do that.

Celisa Steele (21:25):

That's a look at maturity and why and how it matters to learning businesses. For more about the Learning Business Maturity Model, please visit leadinglearning.com/episode290.

Jeff Cobb (21:37):

When you get there, you'll find show notes and more about our maturity model, you'll find an assessment to help you determine your current stage, and you can find out how we can work with your organization in a structured, customized way to help your learning business perform better.

Celisa Steele (21:52):

At leadinglearning.com/episode290, you'll also see options for subscribing to the podcast. We invite and encourage you to subscribe. When you subscribe, that gives us some data on how the podcast is doing.

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Jeff Cobb (22:06):

And we'd also be grateful if you'd 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 to leave a review and rating.

Celisa Steele (22:23):

Lastly, please spread the word about Leading Learning. In the show notes at leadinglearning.com/episode290, you'll find links to connect with us on Twitter, LinkedIn, and Facebook.

Jeff Cobb (22:35):

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

[music for this episode by DanoSongs, www.danosongs.com]

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