



Scale, Equity, and Agility in Workforce Development with Van Ton-Quinlivan

Leading Learning Podcast
Transcript for Episode 299

Van Ton-Quinlivan (00:00):

That was the reason why we put a line in the sand, to challenge ourselves to design for scale, to design for equity, and to design for agility.

Jeff Cobb (00:14):

I'm Jeff Cobb.

Celisa Steele (00:15):

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

Jeff Cobb (00:24):

This episode, number 299, features a conversation with Van Ton-Quinlivan. In 1975, her family escaped from the Vietnam War and was able to start again in the U.S., thanks in large part to the opportunities opened up by education. Her past has made Van passionate about paying it forward now. She's a workforce development expert and CEO of Futuro Health, a nonprofit launched in 2020 with the mission of improving the health and wealth of communities by growing the largest network of credentialed allied healthcare workers in the nation. Allied healthcare covers a wide range of roles, from medical assistants, vocational nurses, and care coordinators to help desk support specialists and ambulance drivers.

Jeff Cobb (01:08):

Most allied health roles don't require a bachelor's degree and can be trained with industry credentials, which is precisely what Futuro Health is doing. Van has lots to say about partnering effectively and being attuned to societal and workforce needs that we think will be helpful to Leading Learning Podcast listeners. She and Celisa discuss addressing situations that require more than incremental solutions, the clarity provided by having clearly articulated goals, and the essential role an ecosystem of partners plays in delivering scale, equity, and agility. Celisa and Van spoke in March 2022.

Van Ton-Quinlivan (01:52):

My expertise is workforce development. I did it in the private sector, where I headed up workforce development for a company of 20,000, bringing them from having no opinion in workforce development to become coming a nationally recognized best practice. Then I was appointed by the California's Governor Brown to be the executive vice chancellor driving the

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workforce mission of the California Community Colleges, which is really the higher education system that is the workforce engine for the state, and brought workforce from being an afterthought to actually becoming a policy priority and growing public investment in career education programs from \$100 million to over \$1 billion under the two terms that I served.

Van Ton-Quinlivan (02:36):

After that role, I was approached by Kaiser Permanente and a union called SEIU-UHW, and they had this dilemma, which is, when you're looking at numbers as big as 500,000 skilled workers needed, and you want this workforce to reflect the communities that are being served—because especially in healthcare, health outcomes correlate to whether or not you have culturally competent workers—it's a DI dilemma in addition to a volume of talent that is needed. They realized that incremental solutions really can't tackle that type of a shortage, and it would take a different strategy. So one strategy I had at my disposal was we could become an accredited institution, and we decided that was too slow, couldn't scale, and couldn't produce at the volume.

Van Ton-Quinlivan (03:28):

So instead the design of Futuro Health as a nonprofit is to build an ecosystem of partners, each partner doing what they do best. Because of that we're able to go from zero students two years ago to now over serving 5,000 adults towards their healthcare credential, with the type of diversity that everybody salivates for—so 80 percent diverse, over 51 percent bilingual, 73 percent female. So it's a very diverse adult population that would not otherwise be moving into healthcare. We're able to bring them into education and training at a moment in time when nationally there's a severe decline in enrollment across all systems, the four-year system and dramatically with the community college system, which has traditionally been the engine for training workforce.

Celisa Steele (04:26):

I saw that Futuro Health has articulated a goal to graduate 10,000 new licensed and/or credentialed workers by 2024 to meet the nation's critical demand for healthcare workers. I have a two-part question about that goal: (A) How did you come up with that goal? And then (B) what value do you see in having articulated that goal and publicly committed to it?

Van Ton-Quinlivan (04:52):

We wanted to put a line in the sand because our challenge was scale. Right? Given the magnitude of the labor shortage, the worker shortage, how do we design an education journey that works for diverse adults, but do so at scale? The dilemma that I saw when I was with the community college system was that there were classrooms that could produce medical assistants, but it was here's 25. Here's another 25. Here's another 25. That's a lot of 25s that you have to add up in order to start breaking the 1,000s. So, when I share with you that we've gone from zero to over 5,000 adults in just the two years, that means we're practicing scale. We had to design workflows and a set of partners that could handle that kind of scale and provide also the live touches that are so important, especially to diverse student, even as we operate at scale.

Van Ton-Quinlivan (05:52):

So that was the reason why we put a line in the sand, to challenge ourselves to design for scale, to design for equity, and to design for agility because things are shifting so fast in healthcare, as you can imagine. We were born three months before the pandemic, and, when the pandemic hit

in March, all of a sudden healthcare cut over to telehealth, which was an entirely new way of interacting with patients. With the advent of telehealth adoption, it went from maybe in the teens to the 80 percent adoption rate, and no one expects it to go backwards. So, all of a sudden, instead of physical rooming, where you come in and someone's talking to you and does the intake that you normally experience for your appointment, it became virtual rooming, which meant that there were technology issues that patients may face before they could interact with the healthcare provider, not to mention that there's different norms for interacting online versus in-person.

Van Ton-Quinlivan (06:57):

One of the funny stories that I hear is, for doctors, for example, it's the moment that when they're about to leave the room that the patient comes up with the "Oh, I just have one more question or one more issue I want to talk to you about." Now, if you don't have those physical cues anymore, how does that happen in virtual rooming? Right? So lots of skill sets change and change very dramatically, and so having a system, an ecosystem that could deliver on scale, equity, and agility was really our goal, and we're so proud that we've been able to figure out that model.

Celisa Steele (07:35):

I hear, in what you were saying, that having that really clear goal has helped keep you focused. Right? That you're really dealing very directly with these challenges of scale, equity, and agility, if you're going to be able to achieve that goal of 10,000 new licensed and/or credentialed workers by 2024. Do you think that other organizations would benefit from being that specific and explicit and possibly even public about their goals?

Van Ton-Quinlivan (08:02):

Well, I've always found it helpful to put a line in the sand as a challenge not only to my own organization but others, like my board members, or I would imagine many of your organizations have investors as well. So that also brings in support, as well as focus. What's within the lines and what's outside of the line. So I would encourage everybody to have a North Star and to be able to have a quantifiable North Star.

Jeff Cobb (08:34):

We're grateful to BenchPrep for sponsoring the Leading Learning Podcast. BenchPrep is an award-winning learning platform purpose-built to help learners feel confident and prepared to take difficult entrance, certification, and licensing tests by delivering an intuitive, efficient, and engaging study experience. BenchPrep helps you accelerate test prep revenue growth by offering the tools you need to create market-ready products and data to improve your content and understand learner behavior. Many of the world's leading associations, credentialing bodies, test providers, and training companies trust BenchPrep to power their online study programs, including ACT, the Association of American Medical Colleges, CFA Institute, CompTIA, GMAC, McGraw-Hill Education, AccessLex, and more. More than 8 million learners have used BenchPrep to attain academic and professional success. To discover more, visit leadinglearning.com/benchprep. Now, back to Van and Celisa.

Celisa Steele (09:39):

I feel like *workforce development* is one of those words that gets used frequently, but it's not always clear that people using the term mean the same thing by it. So I would love to get your definition of *workforce development*, how you describe that work.

Van Ton-Quinlivan (09:53):

Every employer's goal is to have the right person with the right skills at the right time. Right? That's what we all want when we're trying to hire. So, if we can post a job onto LinkedIn or Indeed and find a person, then there's no need to do workforce development. Basically, we can transact. But, if we're not finding the talent, the right people with the right skills at the right time, then it's time to do some intentional work, which is called workforce development. So, right now, for example, there's a lot of shortages that employers are reporting. It's more acute in healthcare, of course, but it's pervasive across all industries. One of the mistakes that, or misconceptions that employers have is that they have to do this workforce development on their own, in a silo. There's actually great value in partnering.

Van Ton-Quinlivan (10:53):

Let me share with you the three-legged stool of workforce development, where each party does what it does best. So, as I mentioned, there's a three-legged stool. Let's start with the first leg. The leg is the employer leg. The role of the employer is not to do everything. The role of the employer is to articulate what they need—basically define the specs of what it means to have the right person with the right skills at the right time. That includes your DI goals. Then hire or create internships so that you can eventually hire. That's the role of the employer. The second leg is a set of community organizations or public workforce agencies. There's an infrastructure in every state because of Feds fund these federal agencies called workforce development boards.

Van Ton-Quinlivan (11:41):

What they do best is go out into the community in order to reach more deeply, to expand and bring in the talent pool. They also serve two very important functions in addition to outreach. They can screen against your criteria, and they can case-manage these candidates through the education process. I remember a case manager who, what she did was she went out, she pre-interviewed, she had put all the candidates... When I was with my company, energy company, everybody was screened on the drug test. Everybody was screened on their background check. They were also asked to climb these poles. These were energy jobs that required you to climb and not have fear of heights, so she was able to screen out candidates.

Van Ton-Quinlivan (12:28):

Then she also tested them for a baseline level of reading and math and created a shortlist of 27 candidates. We looked at them, created the shortlist of 25, and then those 25 went into the next step, which is the third leg of the stool, the education and training. The education and training partner, what it does best is to close the gap between what employers want and where the candidates are. It could be the range. It could be, for example, what we found was that many of these good candidates were falling down on spatial reasoning, and that was the portion where they were failing the pre-employment test. So part of the curriculum that they created was modules on how to, like moving of all the blocks to practice the spatial reasoning.

Van Ton-Quinlivan (13:17):

The other thing that many of these candidates were not doing well on is timed testing because it's been a while since many of these candidates had taken timed tests, so they needed some practice with that, not different from taking PSAT or SAT prep. Another one was we needed candidates who were physically fit, and so they developed a whole physical regimen that included playing soccer and all sorts of exercises to bring the candidate pool into better shape. It was then, that candidate pool, once they closed the gap, then they went through the same pre-employment test as everybody else.

Van Ton-Quinlivan (13:58):

What resulted was a more diverse, quality, and reliable talent pool that my company can hire from. Prior to that, the company was trying to go out to a community-based organization here, community-based organization there, but they could barely get one candidate out of 30, so it was a very frustrating process beforehand. But, with this three-legged stool of workforce development, each time they were able to create a reliable, diverse, and quality talent pool from which to hire.

Celisa Steele (14:28):

You've been involved in workforce development for a long time. I'm curious to know have you seen workforce development evolve in your time spent in the field. If so, what has changed? What are the trends in workforce development, if there are ones?

Van Ton-Quinlivan (14:43):

There's been a few changes. One is that I've seen education institutions embrace the employer partnership much more so, and, in doing so, they're looking for how to stay relevant and current, and the cycle of curriculum development is very challenging. Where employers are able to make available the latest and greatest to education institutions, I think that has been very helpful. You can see that strategy in Grow with Google. You can see it with Amazon Web Services, with IBM. Many are helping to grow a relevant talent pool by actually making available these resources so that education institutions don't have to guess what is relevant. The other area that I've seen is the realization of corporations that it is in their interest as well, especially from retention, to make training and development, tuition disbursement available to their frontline staff at the lower levels.

Van Ton-Quinlivan (15:49):

It used to be your high-potential employees would get all the training resources, but companies, ranging from Walmart to Disney to Starbucks, have all made tuition disbursement available so that frontline employees have access to building skills and credentials. Sometimes it's related to their work, and, for some other companies, as long as they're getting something that is in demand, it doesn't even have to relate to the work that they do on a daily basis. I think these are all positive signs in the area of workforce development.

Celisa Steele (16:22):

Credentials play a big part in workforce development. They're a way for individuals to be able to show employers that they have those needed skills. What have you seen work well with credentialing and workforce development? I'm thinking, for example, maybe the shorter-to-attain credentials, maybe even microcredentials, might be more effective—or more cost effective at least. But, just in general, what do you think tends to work well with credentialing in terms of workforce development?

Van Ton-Quinlivan (16:55):

Well, Celisa, if I said to you, “Hey, you can go get your highest level of education upfront,” so you’re done by 22, for example, and you never have to do anymore skilling for the rest of your life. You would laugh. Right? Yet, most of our education system is set up that way. The reality is, it’s not just a one-time infusion of education. It’s like you should get your highest level of education possible upfront, and then you have to have the upgrades throughout. So, I joke that it’s no different from your iPhone. Your technology is getting periodic upgrades every month or every other month. So what are we doing as humans to make sure that we get our skills upgrade?

Van Ton-Quinlivan (17:40):

Given that and really just the affordability and how fast things are moving, we need skills delivered in shorter bursts, and, for many, it’s challenging to go the distance in terms of the time it takes to a whole degree. And, frankly, by the time you get the degree, the skill sets may be out of date. The microcredentials or shorter-to-attain credentials are just ways to get those skills upgrade. I think the challenge for all those who are in the education and training space is we need to make sure that they carry value, especially as financial aid, like short-term Pell is associated with them, because we’ll go through a cycle where if there’s abuse of these short-term credentials, then those public funds will go away.

Van Ton-Quinlivan (18:27):

And yet they’re so important. Too, adults are not in a mood right now to go find degrees. You can see that in the drop in enrollment numbers, but they are up for skilling up as a way to ensure that they remain relevant. Offering burst, shorter ways to attain those skills in the form of these credentials and microcredentials is very valuable in this labor market. It’s also important that, for adults, adults don’t want to start from scratch, so, to the extent that the credentials, the microcredentials, they stack on top to each other. For example, if you have a project management credential, what does it take to stack the project management credential to become an AA, like an associate’s degree, like construction management credential? Then what does it take to go from there to a bachelor’s? In healthcare, for example, a certified nursing assistant can stack into a medical assistant, can stack into a licensed vocational nurse, that can stack into a registered nurse. So the more that you design stackability, the less cumbersome it is for adults to really build up their skills.

Celisa Steele (19:38):

That’s an interesting point. I’ve thought about stacked credentials many times, but something you just said just really struck me in terms of its valuing the learner’s prior knowledge, which we know is an important facet of adults, that they want their existing knowledge and experience to be valued. I think what you’re saying around stackable credentials, allowing learners to bring that prior knowledge with them and then continuing to add to it over time, that really struck me in your response there. Now, I know that partnerships figure very prominently in the work that you’re doing at Futuro Health.

Celisa Steele (20:21):

You have this ecosystem of partners. They’re right there on your Web site. You make a big deal of them because they are so important to what you’re doing. I’m wondering what advice you have for other organizations that are looking to create successful partnerships. What have you

found contributing to good partnerships? And/or, if you have examples of it, maybe what tends not to work when looking for a partner?

Van Ton-Quinlivan (20:47):

Yeah. So there's private/private, private/public, public/public, all sorts of types of configurations or partnerships that are possible. I would encourage considering what problems you can solve through partnerships that you can't do alone. The best kinds of partners are the partners that do what they do best and bring what they do best to the table. It's not one where you come to the table with your hands out, asking for resources. That sounds like a one-way partnership. You have to bring value to the collaboration. I'll just give you an example. When the pandemic hit, we had to do a pivot. My board asked, the surge, the first COVID surge was going to be arriving in California in roughly two and a half weeks' time, and what could we do to help the frontline workers skill up? Because they were completely unprepared for what they needed to do.

Van Ton-Quinlivan (21:44):

On our own and frankly none of the parties, Kaiser or Futuro Health on our own, could have operated and delivered in that two-and-a-half timeframe. But, together, we actually came up with the constellation of partners that met that window. We had one of our education partners raised their hand and said, "We'll develop the curriculum, but we need somebody else to host it on the learning management system." Futuro Health said, "We'll put in place the learning management system." Kaiser said, "We'll curate and make sure that the curriculum is good." Then we had two other parties, the Education Fund and SEIU-UHW, say, "We'll pull together all the mailing list so that we can then get the word out that this training is available and design a communication."

Van Ton-Quinlivan (22:34):

All of that happened in two and a half weeks, and we actually made that window and ended up training over 4,000 healthcare workers, incumbent healthcare workers in 20 states after we launched that program. That's the kind of agility that is needed, and it would be very challenging for a single organization to pull that off every single time, in every single crisis. Right? But, in combination, there's some combination within your ecosystem of partners that can pull off a solution. I think that's the benefit of having an ecosystem of partners, other than trying to do it on your own, because there's no organization that has all the resources or even the interest or even the competencies to tackle what lies ahead.

Celisa Steele (23:22):

Well, that's a truly inspiring story of partnership doing good in the world. That's impressive, that two and a half weeks, and then to get 4,000 trained in 20 states. That's a wonderful example of partnership at work. One of the things that you have mentioned is the employers and their role in workforce development. When you were talking about the three-legged stool that's involved in workforce development, they were the first leg that you mentioned. I feel like a lot of the learning businesses that I know of sometimes struggle with those connections with employers so they truly understand skills that the employers need and what they're looking for in workers. That, obviously, must have been a nut that you've been cracking and have cracked at Futuro. Do you have any advice around how other organizations can really come to better understand those employer needs so that they make sure that whatever they're offering in terms of training, education, lifelong learning, really aligns with what those employers need?

Van Ton-Quinlivan (24:31):

I actually began documenting the lessons learned, what are the playbooks that work in workforce development. It's in my book that I just published called *WorkforceRx: Agile and Inclusive Strategies for Employers, Educators, and Workers in Unsettled Times*. Getting the skill sets is right, there's several subtleties in that, and it's a little bit less of a science. There's a little bit of an art and science in getting the skill sets right. One is listening to the pain points of the employer. In the book, Dave Meisel, he talked about how, what was keeping him up at night was that he had master mechanics who were on the verge of retirement, and he could see it in the horizon, and he didn't know how to replace them. Right? Or his pain point was that he had the largest fleet of electric vehicles back at the time when this was brand new, and the manufacturers were rolling out these vehicles so fast, they didn't roll out the training to accompany the vehicles.

Van Ton-Quinlivan (25:42):

So, if his mechanics touched the vehicle without having done the training, they would void the car warranty, which is a complete operational dilemma. Right? Hearing him talk, you could hear where are his pain points. Is it a pain point that is recurring, or is it a one-time pain point? The other thing you have to assess is what is the timing of that pain point? On the electric vehicle, that is a within the one-year timeframe, six months to one year, whereas the replacement of the master mechanics, that was the three- to five-year horizon. So the strategies to put in place were very different. On the one that had to do with electric vehicle, the strategy that I suggested to him—and this is what we did—was we would select a set of colleges, and they could select a set of training partners.

Van Ton-Quinlivan (26:36):

But what we wanted to do was leverage the public infrastructure in that case. We selected seven community colleges with automotive programs that were closest to what we wanted. Then we got permission from the manufacturer to train those seven colleges on how to work with electric vehicles. Then those seven colleges went on to train the 300 mechanics across the company in all different geographies of California. That was all done within a two-month window. But what's more important is now we've fed that curriculum, that knowledge into the public system or into the education institutions. Now those faculty will begin producing mechanics with electric vehicle skills. Then industry is not now bearing, dragging, and trying to find, again, it's like posting and praying. Industry has now seeded that knowledge into the production, the normal production of students and creating the talent pool with that.

Celisa Steele (27:43):

These specific examples are always so helpful because, ironically, in the specific details, you begin to see the potential for universal application. You can imagine someone else doing something very similar, where they partner with those academic institutions. And then, like you said, that's seeding the future workforce in addition to addressing the specific, shorter-term need as well.

Van Ton-Quinlivan (28:06):

Yeah. So, listen, with the other case, which was, he had the master mechanics who were on the verge of retirement. We had much smaller volume. He was only going to hire five a year, so he was predicting maybe five, five, five, who were going to leave the workforce, and how would he replace them? Because this is a much smaller volume, instead of having eight colleges, what we did was we picked one college, and we selected 25 mechanics from within our ranks but also

in the ranks of our supply chain because we weren't the only ones having this issue. We invited workers from our supply chain to also attend in order to create enough students. They then they attended a summer program. It was a dedicated program at the end of which our master mechanic gave feedback. So, okay, you five, you've mastered everything. You're eligible for the slots that are coming up this year.

Van Ton-Quinlivan (29:08):

You five, you need to close the gap on this, this, and this. So the master mechanic was giving basically an individual development plan to each person. Then they would then seek out projects on their own in order to fill the gaps and become eligible over time for these master mechanic positions that would eventually open up. We were very successful in creating the talent pool that was needed by the company, but it was, again, that was more a scalpel approach, compared to the electric vehicle situation.

Celisa Steele (29:47):

The learners that you work with at Futuro Health are diverse. I would be interested in your thoughts on, what do you see as your role and potentially the role of other learning providers in diversity, equity, and inclusion?

Van Ton-Quinlivan (30:03):

Celisa, there's a lot of conversation and talk about diversity and inclusion. Question is, can it be translated into action? I think about the Lego set of services or the set of what must come together as Lego pieces in order for diverse and especially adult diverse candidates who successfully make it through education. In almost all cases, it's not just the instructional design alone. There needs to be a high level of high touch, high coaching, high navigation, high supports. The other element is that there needs to be a confidence building on-ramp because many of these adults didn't necessarily have a great experience in education the first go-round, so have some trepidations about reengaging in education, and yet they need the skills.

Van Ton-Quinlivan (30:58):

How do you design for them to successfully on-ramp into education, to test out education, test out education in the online format—remember, many of the folks didn't experience education online—gain confidence. Then there may be language skills in the way. The biggest thing that we see is that they haven't arranged their life and their family to be supportive of them putting in the time into their studies. That ramp is what we've designed into Futuro Health, and that's why so many diverse adults are finding the education journey supportive for them.

Celisa Steele (31:40):

I hear in your answer there that a lot of it is really thinking through the barriers or the issues that your specific audience may be facing and then trying to think through how can you address those, even if it's in something technically not related, like confidence, but maybe that is a key ingredient in helping develop these allied healthcare workers so that they can have that successful learning experience.

Van Ton-Quinlivan (32:03):

Yes. I would love to share my fish story because I think it articulates the value of the three-legged stool of workforce development. When I was at my company, we had made all that effort in workforce development, and there was this young man who came in through the

training. Oh, we loved him. The supervisors loved him, thought he would be a great fit for the company. So he went to the training program, then went through our standard pre-employment tests. Nothing special. Everybody was held to the same standard, and he disappeared from the list, the shortlist on the back end. Because we were in this intentional workforce development program, we asked our community partners, “What happened to Aleki?” It turns out that Aleki, when he was 15 years old, went fishing, and he caught a fish that was too small, and he got a ticket.

Van Ton-Quinlivan (32:54):

As a 15-year-old, he did not pay the ticket. Well, the ticket went to court. He did not show up into court. Now, Aleki had a felony on his record and did not know. What is so tragic is that Aleki was basically barred from probably 80, 90 percent of the jobs in the utility sector because of this background issue, and he did not know, and no employer was going to take the time to tell him. But, in the three-legged stool, employers, that’s not their job. What they’ll do is send out that card, that postcard, or that e-mail saying, “Thank you for your application. We’ll let you know if there’s another opening.” That’s all the candidate’s going to hear. On the education side, I mean, they can train Aleki and give him many certificates, many degrees, but he would never pass the background check.

Van Ton-Quinlivan (33:50):

It was the third party of the stool, which is the community organization, the workforce board. That case manager went back, worked with him to expunge the felony from his record. As an employer, we were able to hire him, and it’s a happy ending—turned out to be a great fit and a great employee. But, again, if we do what we all do best, then we can reach into a deeper, wider, and more diverse talent pool, and none of us have to bear more than we need in terms of the responsibility and the resourcing.

Jeff Cobb (34:30):

Van Ton-Quinlivan is CEO of Futuro Health and author of *WorkforceRx: Agile and Inclusive Strategies for Employers, Educators, and Workers in Unsettled Times*. Van also hosts the WorkforceRx podcast.

Celisa Steele (34:44):

At leadinglearning.com/episode299, you’ll find links to Van’s book, the WorkforceRx podcast, the Futuro Health Web site, and Van’s profile on LinkedIn.

Jeff Cobb (34:56):

In the show notes at leadinglearning.com/episode299, you’ll also see options for subscribing to the podcast, and we’d be grateful if you would subscribe if you haven’t yet, as subscriptions give us some data on the impact of the podcast.

Celisa Steele (35:10):

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Jeff Cobb (35:26):

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Celisa Steele (35:35):

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

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