



At the Intersection of Coaching and Learning with Jen Lewi

Leading Learning Podcast
Transcript for Episode 340

Jen Lewi: [00:00:00] Coaching helps learning. It helps fill the gap between the training and the action that's needed to take on that training.

Celisa Steele: [00:00:14] I'm Celisa Steele.

Jeff Cobb: [00:00:15] I'm Jeff Cobb and this is the Leading Learning Podcast.

Jeff Cobb: [00:00:24] Welcome to episode 340, which features a conversation with Jen Lewi. Jen oversees career development and conferences at the School Nutrition Association. She's also an executive and career development coach and deeply interested in the intersection of coaching and learning. Jen and Celisa talk about pandemic-driven portfolio changes, the power of peer sharing, cohort-based learning, and the importance of truly understanding your learners and how you can best serve them. They also discuss coaching as a natural complement to training. Near the end of their conversation, Jen references an article she wrote for Leading Learning on how learning businesses might incorporate coaching into their portfolios. After listening to this episode, we encourage you to read that article, which you can find by visiting [leadinglearning.com/episode340](https://www.leadinglearning.com/episode340). Celisa and Jen spoke in December 2022.

Celisa Steele: [00:01:25] Talk a little bit more about the School Nutrition Association and the work that it does and maybe a little bit more about your role there.

Jen Lewi: [00:01:33] Sure. So the School Nutrition Association has over 50,000 amazing members who work in school nutrition programs across the country. And it's everyone from the person who's working on the cafeteria line serving kids lunches and breakfasts every day to the menu planner in the school district to a procurement expert to the director who is overseeing an entire program for a district. In addition, our members are the industry people and partners who serve food and supply equipment and technology to the school nutrition programs. So that's a pretty robust group of people and at different education levels as well. So

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it certainly makes it a challenge for us when we are trying to create a learning portfolio to reach that many people with different training options. And I guess my role is to give our members the training they need to succeed on the job and grow professionally.

Celisa Steele: [00:02:41] That's interesting when you're talking about the diversity represented among your membership and how that can create a little bit of complication around delivering training and the education. Maybe, to give us a little bit more insight into that, would you talk a little bit about what the portfolio of learning offerings looks like at SNA? Maybe things like how many offerings a year and how many people you tend to serve annually? Just some highlights to give us a sense of those offerings.

Jen Lewi: [00:03:11] Absolutely. So our learning portfolio is built around professional standards or core competencies that it takes to operate a successful school nutrition program. And I think our secret sauce is this mix that we have of instruction and the ideas that people can share that work—so those practical ideas they use in programs across the country. Like most associations, we offer a mix of in-person, self-paced, and virtual conferences. We have about four in-person conferences that continue to grow and do incredibly well for us post-pandemic. So we're still seeing that major need for in-person. In addition, virtual conferences, self-paced learning, lots of successful Webinars. We have a flagship program called Lead to Succeed, which is a training program on leadership and communication that we built in partnership with Georgetown University business school professors. And it's a combination of their theory and practical case studies of what happens in school districts across the country—so issues, leadership challenges—and it's self-paced, but there is also a trainer network. So our trainers go out and train people across the country on this program.

Celisa Steele: [00:04:44] Wonderful. Thank you for giving us a little bit more detail about what you offer. And you began to get into it in what you were sharing about the portfolio there, but I'm assuming that the pandemic affected your portfolio, as it did essentially all learning businesses. And so I'm just wondering if you have pandemic-driven changes that you're rolling back or if you have pandemic-driven changes that you're keeping and making a part of your ongoing portfolio and if you've seen any new or emerging needs from learners as the pandemic happened and now as we're emerging from the pandemic.

Jen Lewi: [00:05:24] The pandemic rocked our world. We had a definite education strategy pre-pandemic. And then—most people don't know this—but when schools closed during the pandemic, kids still had to eat. So our members were out there serving kids food outside schools. They had to find new ways to deliver food to kids across the country. They needed to

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figure out how to package the foods so that there was social distancing, minimal touching. And so they really had to change their entire operations. In addition, many of our members are older, and they still were out there serving kids. So we put a pause on some of those big-picture, strategic initiatives, and, from an advocacy perspective and a professional development perspective, which are two core competencies, we supported our members. We really needed to help them through this. And I think one thing that we learned during the pandemic was there is no roadmap. There isn't one solution. You can't just do a perfect little training course to be like, "Here's how you can get through a pandemic." So they we brought them together to learn from each other. We brought outside experts where we could, but so much was around, "Okay, how are you doing this? How are you planning a menu when half the school needs to be, the district needs to be served here?" Etc. So a lot of sharing of ideas. And we've kept that. We've kept that idea of sharing the learning from each other more than ever because now what they're dealing with are supply chain challenges and staffing challenges, and there's certainly no roadmap for that as well.

Celisa Steele: [00:07:11] It sounds like you already had that emphasis on success and sharing success cases, but the pandemic really encouraged you to double-down on that and let your learners share with one another, do that idea-sharing, talk about what they're struggling with, and what's working so that others could adapt or borrow that tactic or approach.

Jen Lewi: [00:07:35] Exactly. And I think what the pandemic did is a couple of things that were incredible for us. Pre-pandemic, we had a hard time getting a lot of members to virtual training. If you think about it, the people who are serving kids in the cafeteria are not necessarily at a computer all day, but the pandemic forced everyone to embrace virtual learning and virtual meeting. So we were able to do so much more in the virtual space and reach so many more people within our membership. So that's obviously something that we've kept, and the success of virtual conferences, things that we never thought could work as well for as broad an audience, are working well. So, of course, we're continuing those, and we built some great standalone virtual conferences and training, and we're continuing to do that at the point of need for the members.

Celisa Steele: [00:08:32] I know that one other thing that happened during the pandemic—this is less about SNA and more about you personally—is that you decided to pursue the Associate Certified Coach credential. I believe that's the right credential. Is that right?

Jen Lewi: [00:08:46] I call it the ACC. Sure, yes.

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Celisa Steele: [00:08:48] Talk a little bit about what prompted you to go down that path.

Jen Lewi: [00:08:55] I think, during the pandemic, a lot of people reevaluated their mission, right? Like, what was their purpose? And, for me, I've always wanted to be a coach and had the time to actually take some classes. And what was so interesting for me after taking all these coaching classes is, in addition to helping me become a coach, they help me become a better manager, a better learning expert, and a better parent. So it was very interesting. And so I really value the fact that I was able to take the time to do all of that then.

Celisa Steele: [00:09:36] It's interesting you said that you always had wanted to be a coach. Do you remember what originally inspired you or what drew you to coaching?

Jen Lewi: [00:09:46] I think I have been a manager and leader of people for a very long time, and watching people identify their strengths, maximize their strengths, give feedback so they can progress is something that is very rewarding.

Jeff Cobb: [00:10:08] As someone who listens to the Leading Learning Podcast, you should know about the Leading Learning newsletter, which you can subscribe to at leadinglearning.com/inbox. The newsletter is inbox intelligence for learning businesses and helps you understand the latest technology, marketing, and learning trends and grow your learning business. Best of all, it's a free resource. As a subscriber, you'll get Leading Links, our monthly curated collection of resources to help you grow the reach, revenue, and impact of your learning business; the podcast digest, a monthly summary of podcast episodes released during the previous month; plus periodic announcements highlighting Leading Learning Webinars and other educational opportunities designed to benefit learning business professionals. Subscribe, for free, at leadinglearning.com/inbox. And, if you're already subscribed, point a colleague to leadinglearning.com/inbox.

Celisa Steele: [00:11:06] I'm curious to know, though, how do you define coaching? You mentioned how it's already helping you with parenting. It's helping you with managing. And I'm thinking that often good teachers use coaching techniques. And so I'm especially interested in how you define coaching but also how you distinguish it from teaching or facilitation.

Jen Lewi: [00:11:28] That's a really great question, and there's definitely overlap between teaching, facilitation, and coaching. However, coaching to me is helping people articulate their values, uncover a new awareness, address some limiting beliefs, sometimes getting a better understanding about themselves, and then, once they've uncovered that type of awareness,

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creating a path forward toward their goals and then helping them be accountable to themselves for achieving those goals. So it's a long-term process that is built around asking powerful questions to drive awareness. Whereas with teaching, you often have an expert who is helping transfer knowledge, and, based on their expertise, you're learning. As a coach, you don't necessarily have the expertise the person has. Your expertise is in helping that person get some self-awareness. And then facilitation often happens in groups. Coaching can happen in groups or at the individual level. And facilitation often has a very targeted goal. Facilitate a strategic plan, or you could facilitate what the big priorities are. But I think there's a real beginning and end to facilitation.

Celisa Steele: [00:12:52] So it sounds like coaching is this less-defined, bigger-picture endeavor in your mind. But then, of course, learning could become part of what coaching might lead the coachee towards. Based on now this better awareness of their own interests and values, now go out and learn X or Y or Z.

Jen Lewi: [00:13:16] Absolutely. And I think that coaching, if you think about it from a learning perspective, coaching helps learning. It helps fill the gap between the training and the action that's needed to take on that training. So it's almost like supporting the behavior change or helping address the forgetting curve that we have as part of a training program.

Celisa Steele: [00:13:45] What possibilities do you see for coaching to be part of a learning business's portfolio? You began to get into there in terms of benefits in general but maybe also some specific ways that a learning business could really incorporate a coaching offering, a coaching product or service, in its line of business.

Jen Lewi: [00:14:12] I think there's so many opportunities for coaching and learning businesses. So I think that the most obvious place to start is offer coaching classes. Coaching is a big buzzword right now, so helping managers become better coaches, as an example. Another simple way is offering your members or your clients access to coaches or even certifying your own coaches. That's another possibility. I think the areas that are really interesting for learning businesses are a mix of coaching and training or coaching and consulting. So the coach-sulting model, where you take an expert, and their expertise is combined with helping drive new awareness and asking powerful questions of the people who are learning, is a very effective strategy. And I will say we're doing that at SNA. I'm such a believer in coaching that we are working with a learning expert to help us uncover what we could be doing better. Where are we? Where do we need to improve in our education strategy? What are we doing internally that could be enhanced so we get to better results? And what's so incredible about this is, even

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though we've just had a few sessions, we're acting on it right away because we have ownership over the decisions.

Jen Lewi: [00:15:45] We're not waiting on a recommendation. We're coming up with the recommendation in combination with the expert. For example, one thing that we uncovered through this process is we have our education department, and then we have our content department. Why wouldn't we work together more closely to have a better, more cohesive content strategy? And so we've immediately acted on that and found ways to be more efficient. So that's one model. The other one is a combination of instruction and coaching. We talked about the Society of Motion Picture and Television Engineers. They have a neat model where they had some self-paced courses, some coursework that people did on their own, and then they came together with a coach or trainer. This is the whole coach-struction, instruction-coaching idea, where the coach or trainer then asks questions about where they're having issues, and they problem-solve together. So it's blending the experts and using a coaching approach to the learning process.

Celisa Steele: [00:17:05] I think those are both really interesting models—combining the coaching with consulting and combining coaching with training. And I especially like this idea of coaching filling a gap, really helping with the implementation or the actual doing that can be associated with learning but sometimes is stymied for whatever reason. In terms of the potential benefit for learners and/or the benefits for the learning business, by adding coaching, what do you see as the net positive effect that might come from that?

Jen Lewi: [00:17:46] I think the net positive from that is accountability. So instead of a learner taking a class, and then sometimes the training fizzles right after that, the coaching will help the training last. So I think that it has more powerful impact, especially in areas that are more soft skills. For example, conflict management, leadership, you can take a class in that, but so much of what you do in those areas are ingrained and require changing habits, so coaching can really support that.

Celisa Steele: [00:18:32] I think that's a great point, that idea of accountability. And it also, to me, speaks to this idea of learning not being the event. If you have the coaching that's more ongoing, it helps serve as that point of reference, the fact that this isn't over. You still have work to do in order to apply the skills and knowledge that you've acquired through a learning experience, and coaching then is there to help make sure that it happens and then to help deepen that learning too, I would think.

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Jen Lewi: [00:19:03] Yeah, definitely. I think that's a great way to put it. It adds depth to the learning, and it personalizes the learning as well.

Celisa Steele: [00:19:10] Personalization. That's a very good point. I'm glad you brought that up. It does make sense that coaching, often being that one-on-one, then is going to help that learner really make the connection to their specific needs, their specific situation, and it will be much more targeted to what they're dealing with. Which seems like a great way to deal with personalization since we know that is just such an important factor in making learning as effective as possible.

Jen Lewi: [00:19:38] Definitely. And I think it could also apply to groups. So you could have a group cohort. For example, you could have a coach with a cohort of about 10 to 15 people, where the coach is facilitating the learning. So it doesn't always need to be individual, but I still think that adds an element of personalization.

Celisa Steele: [00:19:59] Absolutely. That's a good point, that it doesn't necessarily have to be the one on one. The cohort approach could work very well. And, again, that takes me back to some of what you were sharing with what SNA's doing in terms of really putting members, putting learners together to talk about what they're dealing with and what successes they're having and what they're trying and all of that. It seems like, of course, in that coaching context as well, you could have very fruitful peer-to-peer, cohort-based discussions of topics and issues that need to be addressed.

Jen Lewi: [00:20:32] Absolutely. And we've definitely tried the cohort-based learning. We just finished up a yearlong supply chain cohort that was really effective in helping them share ideas and helping us come up with some solutions as well.

Celisa Steele: [00:20:52] We always like to ask folks who come on the Leading Learning Podcast about their own lifelong learning habits. Do you have specific habits or sources or practices that you use to continue to grow and develop professionally? And then, of course, I'd be interested to know what role coaching might play in your own lifelong learning.

Jen Lewi: [00:21:15] Well, Celisa, you know I'm a huge fan of your podcast, and I think this is my favorite question. I love hearing what people say about this one. Obviously, I read a lot, and I love podcasts like these. But, in addition, I think a couple of ways I love to learn is through writing. For example, when you all approached me to write about the intersection of coaching and learning, I jumped on it because writing allows you to really research a topic in depth and

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think through how you want to organize your thoughts around it. And so I love to write because that really helps me think through a topic and research it. It forces me to think deeply. So I love that. Additionally, through my coaching endeavors, I have found some really great books that I go back to pretty regularly that I recommend to my clients, but I also use pretty regularly for my own personal development. So the ones that I recommend are *Atomic Habits* by James Clear—really helpful in terms of habit-forming. People looking to figure out where they want to go next with their career, *The Long Game* by Dorie Clark is pretty fascinating to me. And then for my clients who have this ongoing inner chatter and inner critic, certainly *Chatter* by Ethan Kross is a great book. So what I do is, with my books, I write all over them. I go back to them. I pull out some quotes. And that's really a great way to learn as well.

Celisa Steele: [00:22:53] Thanks for those specific titles. It is always fun to know which books people recommend and, as it sounds like in your case, don't just recommend but go back to and continually refer to and mine again and again. And we were lucky enough to have Dorie Clark on the podcast in the past so we can make sure to link to that in the show notes.

Celisa Steele: [00:23:15] We've covered a lot of ground between what SNA is doing and the pandemic and your personal move into coaching, a little bit about your own lifelong learning habits. Is there something else that we haven't yet had a chance to talk about that comes to mind?

Jen Lewi: [00:23:30] I think that one thing that we could talk more about is what our learners are looking for right now, post-pandemic. We rebranded the Professional Development department to be Career Development, and we did that because we're conscious of the fact that our members are coming to us for growth in their careers and for training that will really help them on the job. Where we're going next is really digging into our target audiences and looking at career-pathing. The other piece that we're noticing, at least in school nutrition, is lots more new people coming into the profession. So we are doing more introductory and basic training, which is interesting and exciting to have new people come in. And then I don't know if this is true for your listeners, but certainly for our members a focus on mental health is such a priority both for themselves and when they're leading teams. With staffing challenges going on right now and all the uncertainty in the world, we're seeing that mental health needs to be a focus at most conferences that we offer and even doing some dedicated series on this topic.

Celisa Steele: [00:24:46] Those are all really interesting points. I'm glad that you brought them up. The shift, the rebrand from professional development to career development, how did that bubble up to the surface? Was there a particular piece of data or an exchange that happened

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that made you and others at SNA realize and go, “Huh, you know, really this should be career development, that’s what we’re about.”

Jen Lewi: [00:25:10] It really came about during our strategic planning process and thinking about the way forward for school nutrition. I also think when we’re talking about careers, career paths these days are definitely not linear. You have people coming into careers at different points in their journeys. So helping people understand what they need at a specific level is really important. So I think that’s really how we got to that decision.

Celisa Steele: [00:25:41] Well, that’s great. I think that’s a win from a strategic planning process. You were able to have that level of insight and that shift and that acknowledgment because it sounds like it’s had impact already on what you’re offering and doing. And it sounds like it will continue to have impact on how you think about serving your learners going forward.

Jen Lewi: [00:26:00] Most definitely. And I think a big part of that is some new research we’re embarking on, really trying to understand our members better. Like I mentioned earlier, we have such a diverse membership, not only in terms of roles but even where they are. So we’ll have rural districts, urban districts, small districts, large districts, and those types are almost like completely different entities. So trying to figure out who we’re serving and how best to serve them is really important.

Jeff Cobb: [00:26:35] Jen Lewi is vice president of career development and conferences at the School Nutrition Association and an executive and career development coach. You can find links to the SNA Web site and Jen’s LinkedIn profile in the show notes for this episode at leadinglearning.com/episode340.

Celisa Steele: [00:26:55] At leadinglearning.com/episode340, you’ll also find a link to the article Jen wrote on ways a learning business might incorporate coaching. Read it, and take time to reflect on whether adding coaching to your portfolio might provide value for your learners and your learning business.

Jeff Cobb: [00:27:14] And we’d be grateful if you would rate the Leading Learning Podcast on Apple Podcasts or wherever you listen, especially if you find the show valuable. Celisa and I would personally appreciate it, and those ratings help us show up when people search for content on leading a learning business. Go to leadinglearning.com/apple to leave a rating.

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Celisa Steele: [00:27:33] And please spread the word about Leading Learning. You can do that in a one-on-one conversation with a colleague or a personal note, or you can do it through social media. In the show notes at leadinglearning.com/episode340, you'll find links to connect with us on Twitter, LinkedIn, and Facebook.

Jeff Cobb: [00:27:51] Thanks for listening, and see you next time on the Leading Learning Podcast.

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

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