



Awakening Organizational Culture with Catherine Bell

Leading Learning Podcast Transcript for Episode 385

Catherine Bell: [00:00:00] Healthy corporate culture is not built in a day. It's all those micro actions that we do every day that creates a healthy corporate culture.

Celisa Steele: [00:00:13] I'm Celisa Steele.

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

Celisa Steele: [00:00:23] You've heard it said that culture eats strategy for lunch, and getting culture right is arguably even more important for learning businesses than for other types of organizations because the creation of a culture that truly embraces learning is so integrally tied to both what a learning business does internally and what it offers externally. This means learning business leaders need to give time and energy to fostering an awakened culture.

Celisa Steele: [00:00:51] This episode, number 385, features a conversation with Catherine Bell. Catherine is the founder and author of *The Awakened Company*, and she's passionate about being of service to humanity and the planet. Catherine believes that, if we're going to solve the problems that we face, we have to organize differently, and healthy culture will allow us to do that. Catherine and Jeff talk about organizational culture, thriving relationships, viewing everyone as a leader, hiring and retention, the impact of events like the rise of generative AI and COVID on culture, the four I's of transformational leadership, and more. Jeff and Catherine spoke in October 2023.

Jeff Cobb: [00:01:44] We're here to talk mainly about how to build thriving and healthy organizational cultures in challenging times, and I think most people would agree that we are in challenging times right now. But, before we get to that part of it, I'd love to talk about the concept of culture a little bit because that often seems challenging in and of itself. You go out and look at the business literature and that sort of thing, and there are so many articles and books that have been published about culture: how to have a great culture, how to fix your culture. There's training and speaking. There's just a whole industry around it, it seems like. So

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we'd love to hear how you define culture. And then what is it that makes culture seemingly so challenging?

Catherine Bell: [00:02:29] Great questions. Culture is really the secret ingredient. It's actually the power of our relationships: who we are and how we work together. And what the business research says is, when we focus two-thirds on corporate culture and one-third on financial success, that's where alchemy happens. Yet most leaders are solely focused on the financial part of it. So I'll meet with a company, and they'll say, "You know, Cath, can you take me from \$0 to \$1 billion in five years like you did that other company?" I'm like, "That's the wrong focus. That's the wrong focus." The emphasis needs to be on what are the problems that we are solving in our organizations and how to do that in a humane way.

Catherine Bell: [00:03:21] The awakened organization, or awakening organization, or creating a thriving organization, if you could just picture a drop of water, and the first drop is awakening ourselves. Most people are disengaged at work. Most people are unhappy at work. How do we activate that droplet of water in ourselves? I believe everybody's a leader. So how do we bring our own personal leadership potential to the table? Then the next ring is our relationships, and that is how do we actually work together? And we know that, for the most part, how somebody works, how they perform, how they are at work is directly correlated to their relationship to the person they report to. So how are we cultivating healthy relationships in our organizations? And I looked at a study of a thousand leaders, and this, I think, is a really big key to unlocking corporate culture. There's not enough time spent on one-on-one relationships from a heartfelt, mindful perspective. The next ring—again, the droplet of water—is organizations. And most organizations don't survive past nine years, so we need to clearly be doing things differently. What I've seen and emerging business research is, if we focus on energizing, sustaining, and regenerating—almost following the healthy life cycle of a forest—that's where we can create really, really, really healthy cultures.

Jeff Cobb: [00:05:00] I think a lot of people would probably say that, right now, for a number of reasons, that it seems difficult to do because so much has changed about the nature of work, the nature of society. What are some of the aspects of our current times that you find most challenging when it comes to culture, to having that thriving culture, to having the types of relationships that you were just talking about?

Catherine Bell: [00:05:27] So, from on-the-street experience, from who I'm working with right now, there's a lot of challenges around hiring, a lot of challenges around retention, keeping really important people, and the cost. If we have a \$100,000 employee, the cost, if they turn over

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within a year, is about \$1 million to the organization. So retention is very, very, very, very important. And how we work together, I think, also needs to be reexamined. The invitation for leaders is to consider who do we have to be to get to where we want to go? I don't think enough consideration has been given to that. And to view everybody as a leader is also a philosophically different perspective because often people will see somebody as a follower. And, actually, the moment we think of somebody as a follower, their behavior denigrates. This is, again, business research. Their behavior denigrates. They won't take risks. They won't try. They won't experiment. And I'm really big into Carol Dweck's research—having a growth mindset versus a closed mindset in all of this, for our organizations to be like organisms that are learning and growing and using also social context to create healthy ways of being. Unless we capture people's hearts, hands, and minds with meaningful, interesting, challenging work, it will fall apart. Organizations will continue to crumble.

Catherine Bell: [00:06:59] So the invitation is, for everybody listening to this, do you have cultural metrics, and do you weigh those cultural metrics as more important than the financial metrics, so that the discretionary energy of everybody is applied to solving a problem, is applied to being of service to our world and to humanity, not simply for the bottom line? I do think, really believe we have to think about how much is enough, and I don't think enough consideration has been given to that. I think having leaders who are making hundreds and hundreds of times more than the average employee, that's a challenge too. Now, I do believe in risk return, but it's what makes sense. And again how much is enough? And really for leaders to go within at this time and to think about how do we want to show up? How do we want to be of service to humanity? And this is more than the why. I think the other thing that's very important to talk about, a lot of CEOs say, "Oh, what's your vision?" The majority of them still cannot answer it. The majority still cannot answer it. However, what's more important than that? If we peel back the levels of the why, it's the who.

Catherine Bell: [00:08:19] If we know that we're to focus on the why and we're not doing it, then to drill down on that. It's who do we have to be to recognize and create a vision together? I have a bit of a disaster story of my own, Jeff. I'm a serial entrepreneur. So I've founded a Profit 10, Profit 200 company, and one of my biggest mistakes in that company was I said to our team, "Oh, here's our vision. Blah blah, blah, blah, blah, blah, blah," and I kept on talking to them about it in our boardroom, and I was really excited. And we brought in a consultant from Denmark because there was nobody in North America doing what we were doing, so we wanted a different perspective. And so you can imagine this. We're all at the boardroom, and he asks, "What's your vision?" And I'm like, "Oh!" I felt so proud, like I just felt myself bursting. And I was like, "Oh, the team's got this. They totally have this." And nobody raised their hands.

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And you know why? The reason why is because I didn't get them involved in the process of creating the vision. One of Margaret Wheatley's principles is people support what they create, and I didn't engage them in that process.

Catherine Bell: [00:09:29] I was command and control, like, "Here's everything. Here's what we're going to do," and pummeled it in. And no. So what did we do for that strategy session? We spent time together as a team defining our vision, and then nobody ever forgot it. And the other thing, as a leader is once that vision was rippled out, it was really important that I repeat it so that people remembered it. And then I knew it was working when everybody started to repeat it. We found very creative ways to reflect our vision, our values, and it became almost immersed in everybody's blood. They knew our why. They knew our values. And the key thing, though, for me was how am I going to show up? I learned because I did it so poorly the first time. So underneath the why is the who. So for everybody to think about, "Today, what's the tiniest micro thing I can do around organizational intention, around how we live, around how we work together, around how we play together?" And it's those little micro actions that make all the difference in the world.

Celisa Steele: [00:10:43] At Tagoras, we're experts in the global business of lifelong learning, and we use our expertise to help clients better understand their markets, connect with new customers, make the right investment decisions, and grow their learning businesses. We achieve these goals through expert market assessment, strategy formulation, and platform selection services. If you are looking for a partner to help your learning business achieve greater reach, revenue, and impact, learn more at tagoras.com/services.

Jeff Cobb: [00:11:17] In the aftermath of COVID in particular, we've moved to remote work being so common, so people not being face-to-face as much, and that seems like a permanent aspect of the work landscape. Obviously, people are coming back into the office, but we're going to continue to have this remote work culture. We now have AI coming along as the latest big disruptor in the world of work, and I think a lot of people rightly feel threatened by what AI might do to their jobs, to their careers. How do you address some of those issues, help people make peace with what might be disrupting work, be able to work effectively, and have those relationships that you're talking about when they're remote, they're not face to face as often? Just some of those concrete challenges that people seem to be facing right now. How do you advise them to take those into account when they're thinking about culture and trying to ensure that they have the culture that they want in their organization?

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Catherine Bell: [00:12:24] Your question is very current. I just met with a CEO, and their biggest challenge was retaining staff because they don't have a hybrid workplace. And there are other CEOs who I've worked with, and they actually kept their office open all through COVID. I've seen so many different perspectives on it. The key thing is to listen to the team and what the team wants. And the other thing I'd say is a best practice—I do think there is something so powerful about us coming together, having days where we're designated to be together. For example, at Awakened Company, we have days where we come together and days that you can work as you want. So I think to really listen to what our teams are asking for and wanting and also to pay attention to productivity. Because, for some organizations, productivity is actually higher when it's remote. For other organizations, it's lower. What that also points to is corporate culture is not one-size-fits-all. It needs to be curated. That's why I don't believe in corporate culture in a box. I think corporate culture is something that we need to be very deliberate about and is very custom to the organization. For example, some organizations hire based on vision and values, which is incredibly poignant. And then they have their job performance based on vision and values. However, they're rare. Remember I said at the beginning most people don't even know their why.

Catherine Bell: [00:14:08] So to start to integrate all of this into a coherent system or organism, it becomes very interesting and very fun to create. What kind of forest does every leader want to create and in a very deliberate way, and to listen to what everybody is wanting, I think, is incredibly powerful. For example, if you have high turnover and, on your exit interviews, it's because the style of work or how they're working together, then you might want to look at changing how you actually work together. And, when we ask people for their input and get them involved in the solutions for how we can work better together, the engagement goes up. And engagement is super, super important because you know the more engaged everybody is, the higher performing the organism. Organism—I'm calling it an organism. Organization. Well, it really does. When it's healthy, organizations are like an organism. In other words, we need to give people a sense of control over their lives, a sense of meaning, a sense of belonging, and cultivate a system, a culture that works around that. Now, this sounds very simple when we're talking about it on this podcast. And it's not. It's very mercurial. So I invite everybody to just be patient. Healthy corporate culture is not built in a day. It's all those micro actions that we do every day that creates a healthy corporate culture or organization culture.

Jeff Cobb: [00:15:45] You've referenced leaders a number of times and made the point that really everybody is a leader, at least some level. And it seems to me that's probably essential to this in some way because I think of a leader, well, probably fundamentally, as somebody who takes responsibility for their actions and feels responsibility for the others who they have the privilege

to be a leader for. Can you talk a little bit about the role of leadership in this and also that concept of everybody has to be a leader?

Catherine Bell: [00:16:18] For sure. I think good leadership applies the same whether it's in person or remote. We host all of these Webinars, and all the people on our Webinars I consider leaders. They are part of the co-emergent process of our learning system. And that's not like the old style of teaching was: "I'm going to embark my wisdom on you." And, no, that's no longer the case. The invitation—great teachers get people to think for themselves. I'd love to share the transformational leadership model with your audience because leadership can be learned, and anybody can apply these tricks. First of all, there's laissez-faire leadership, which is, "I don't really care." There's that style of leadership. Then there's the contingent reward, which is, "I'm going to give you a carrot for asking great questions, Jeff. Here's a carrot." Pavlovian. By the way, this is based on the research of Bass and Avolio. This is the most-researched leadership model in the world. Then there are the four I's, which is transformational leadership. Number one is "inspirational motivation." Are we providing an inspirational vision for the people we work with? Next is "idealized influence," and that is are our values clear, and do we live by those values? Next is "individualized consideration."

Catherine Bell: [00:17:53] Am I considering the people who are around me as individuals? Then the fourth is "intellectual stimulation," that I'm here to really get people thinking for themselves, which is why the whole goal of the Webinars is to get people to think for themselves. The four I's all begin with I. Yet transformational leadership has nothing to do with I. It has everything to do with bringing something out in the other person. So just for everybody to know those four I's, and you can live with them every day and think about how are you working with this teammate as an individual? How are you inspiring whoever it may be? And it applies to everybody, anywhere. And anybody can learn to be a leader. And we often overemphasize that whole inspirational piece. However, some of the most powerful teachers in my life have actually been the quietest, and they've brought something out in me that I couldn't have done myself. And that's that whole intellectual stimulation—I'm going to ask you really good questions to pull the ideas out of you that you have.

Jeff Cobb: [00:19:05] It's funny—even as you were talking, getting to the end of your comments there, I was thinking about the concept of quiet inspiration because I think people may get stuck on this idea that the leader is a charismatic figure. But, in so many instances, it's by your actions—what you're modeling, your empathy, you're listening to other people—that provide that inspiration that may not even be obvious but is impacting people all the time. And it goes back to relationships, as you were saying earlier. I think those four I's that are part of

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transformational leadership are very good benchmarks to have in mind, or tools to have in mind, as we're engaged in all of the relationships in our life and work.

Jeff Cobb: [00:19:55] Culture, being part of culture, facilitating culture, all of that seems like it has a lot to do with a level of self-awareness. You'd have to have self-awareness to employ those transformational leadership points that you just indicated. Can you talk about concepts like self-awareness, mindfulness in general, and that journey of personal development that I think is what being a part of an awakened company and being part of a great culture most likely is?

Catherine Bell: [00:20:26] The business research says the most self-aware leaders are actually the higher-performing. So how do we cultivate self-awareness? There's a tool we use called the Enneagram, which is a personality typology that outlines nine different modes of being and doing, which we have found incredibly powerful. A powerful key, a powerful lever for executives and teams that we work with to understand themselves. We also do maps with entire teams of who's on this map and how are they. What I love about the Enneagram is that it also says that everybody has nine types within them. It's just which is the dominant type that you perhaps hold.

Catherine Bell: [00:21:10] When we understand what our gifts are, what our work-ons are as a result of something like the Enneagram, we can balance out who we are so that we are more self-aware. We are more mindful. And, bringing in mindfulness, we haven't talked about this. I don't know if I've ever talked about it on an actual podcast before. When we're mindful, everything around us becomes living and breathing as well. So it's also informing us when we drop into the present moment, when we just relax into the present moment. This moment has everything within it. And so, knowing that, how can we be and act from that place? It's counterintuitive because our society has trained us to be on the relentless treadmill of productivity, productivity. And what the research shows is, when we're more mindful, we're more creative and more productive, and our stress is reduced.

Catherine Bell: [00:22:13] With teams, we often begin our sessions with mindfulness. We have everybody take a few deep breaths, relax their shoulders, feet on the ground, and sensations in the body before we move into the agenda. And, at first, it seems like this is weird. However, I feel great, and it sets a different tone. So there's now a board of directors who are beginning in stillness and mindfulness so that their agendas can be more complete, more full, more creative, more productive. However, it's counterintuitive when you think you should be diving into the agenda and getting stuff done. No, take the pause. We're more productive, and also it's more

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meaningful and more fun. At one of the other companies I founded over a decade ago, we were doing mindfulness breaks right at the beginning. As leaders, it's also the invitation to experiment. I'd invite everybody here, with their course content or whatever it may be that they're hoping to bring to the world, experiment with it. See what works; see what doesn't work from that place of mindfulness and also a lack of attachment to the outcome so that you can be open to receiving feedback on whatever product or service it is that you are offering.

Jeff Cobb: [00:23:40] Lying behind our conversation is this idea of the awakened company, and your own company is called the Awakened Company. You've written a book by that name. Could you just say a little bit about what an awakened company is, or an awakened organization, however you prefer to hear it? For the listeners who are out there listening to the podcast, can you say a bit about what that is and how it connects to culture, how an awakened company and a good culture are interwoven?

Catherine Bell: [00:24:13] If you could picture this, I was in a dimly lit cafe in New York City, and I was doing an executive search and about to go on a course, a development course, and the name Awakened Company just literally dropped into my being. And I'm like, "Oh, I'm to write a book called *The Awakened Company*." I turned to my colleague. I said, "Carolyn, I'm to write this book." She's like, "Yes, you are." Originally, the book was on how to hire because that's what I did: executive search. And then my partners were like, "This is terrible. This is not a very good book, nor is it very interesting. It's more of a workbook than a book." So I'm like, "What is it that is being asked of me in this book?" At BluEra, we were playing with corporate culture, with unlimited vacation, mindfulness, bring-your-dog-to-work days, really creating a different kind of petri dish. And I'm like, "Oh, it's to be on corporate culture."

Catherine Bell: [00:25:18] And then I wanted Eckhart Tolle—I don't know if you're familiar with Eckhart Tolle—I wanted Eckhart Tolle's publisher to publish it. Well, she said no to me a whole bunch of times and then said yes, that she thought that this book represented the consciousness needed for organizations at this time. This was in 2015 that the book was published, and I was writing it seven years before that, the whole writing started. So why am I telling this story? I'm telling the story because an awakening organization looks to solve a problem. I saw the challenge of our time around creating healthy corporate cultures. And when I say "corporate," I believe it's really "organization" because I don't believe in the whole social, not-for-profit, for-profit. I think every organization has to solve a problem and to do so without hurting humanity or the planet to be of service. So that's what an awakening organization is—one that is solving a needed problem, not creating a problem. Solving a problem and helping humanity and the planet by doing so.

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Jeff Cobb: [00:26:29] I'd like to ask you something that we ask every guest who comes on to the Leading Learning Podcast, and that's about your own approach to lifelong learning. Because we've been talking about self-awareness, about developing personally, I'm going to go out on a limb and assume that you are an avid, lifelong learner, and it would be great to hear about some of your specific habits, practices, sources for continuing to grow, both professionally and personally.

Catherine Bell: [00:26:59] Life is like a petri dish for me. I can't help but learn. And I hope to be open enough to learn something new every day. I love taking business courses. If you look at my background, it's kind of weird. I have an MBA, a sociology degree, certified in the Enneagram, and am a yoga instructor. It's kind of a weird thing. However, I think life has pulled on me as a result of being open to learning. I love business classes. You won't find me without a book every day, and the variety of books that I read are from Eckhart Tolle, *The Power of Now* to *The Wisdom of the Enneagram* to Collins's book. It's just a broad, broad, broad spectrum. I have a deep meditation practice, and I've actually just said yes to being a strategic advisor to a Buddhist organization in Colorado. And that's also a form of learning. I'd invite everybody to get involved in your community and to volunteer because that's also a way to learn. Teaching at Queen's University, I can't help...I was learning so much when I was there by the people I was surrounded by, by other professors, by students, everybody.

Catherine Bell: [00:28:24] Everyone. I can learn from everybody. I think that's my learning thing—what do I need to learn today to be a better human being? I have two kids. When they were growing up, I was reading all about parenting, and what I realized is that our first leaders are our parents. So how do we be great parents? Because that's really the ultimate leadership role. And that's another thing to parse out—what's our role? What's our relatedness? And never to forget our relatedness. Our relatedness is really our common humanity. And the role is, for example, you're interviewing me right now for this podcast. That's our role. But our relatedness is our interest in humanity, our shared humanity. And I think that's too often forgotten.

Celisa Steele: [00:29:13] Catherine Bell is the founder and author of *The Awakened Company*, and she works with organizations to create healthy, flourishing cultures.

Jeff Cobb: [00:29:21] In the show notes for this episode, leadinglearning.com/episode385, you'll find links to connect with Catherine and learn more about her work.

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Celisa Steele: [00:29:29] Jeff and I would be grateful if you would rate the Leading Learning Podcast on whatever platform you use to listen, especially if you find the show valuable, because your ratings help us show up when people search for content on leading a learning business.

Jeff Cobb: [00:29:42] And please spread the word about Leading Learning, whether in a one-on-one conversation with a colleague, a personal e-mail, or on social media. In the show notes at leadinglearning.com/episode385, you'll find links to connect with us on X, LinkedIn, and Facebook.

Celisa Steele: [00:29:58] Thanks for listening, and see you next time on the Leading Learning Podcast.

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