



## The Messy Middle with Geoff Stead

### Leading Learning Podcast Transcript for Episode 411

Geoff Stead: [00:00:00] Where do I see learning? It's meet-ups. It's podcasts. It's people asking Google or asking AI the answer to things. It's all these roots growing out the side of the plant.

Celisa Steele: [00:00:16] I'm Celisa Steele.

Jeff Cobb: [00:00:17] I'm Jeff Cobb, and this is the Leading Learning Podcast.

Jeff Cobb: [00:00:26] We've reached a point in history where learning and technology are very often a package deal. It's essentially a given that learning products and services will make use of tools and technology to deliver, support, or deepen learning.

Jeff Cobb: [00:00:40] Geoff Stead has dedicated his career to building learning tools that sit in what he calls the messy middle between the power of new technologies and real human learning needs. He's currently chief product officer at a learn-tech business in the UK called MyTutor, and he's co-author of *Engines of Engagement: A Curious Book About Generative AI*.

Jeff Cobb: [00:01:03] In this episode, number 411, Celisa and Geoff talk about the changes he's seen over the course of his long career in how technology supports learning. The discussion encompasses mobile learning, the seismic shift that is generative AI, just-in-time learning, his optimistic view of the future of learning, the potency of low ego and high curiosity in collaborations, how he thinks about innovation, and common barriers to and accelerators of innovation. Geoff is both thoughtful and experienced, as you'll hear in his conversation with Celisa, which took place in late April 2024.

Celisa Steele: [00:01:53] Could you say a little bit more for listeners about the types of work that you tend to do?

Geoff Stead: [00:01:58] I invent and build learning products. It's probably the simplest, cleanest way to say that. But, actually, my role as a CPO is more senior. In reality, what I tend to do is

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build the teams and set up the culture and inspire them and set the direction, and it's actually the people who are way more up to date with tools and tech in my team who do the building and the making. I've dived into language learning. I was leading a language app called Babel in Berlin for a while. I've done a lot of inside-company, L&D-type tech-build training. I've worked in language assessment. Online tutoring at the moment. I've mostly moved between larger start-ups (sometimes called scale-ups) and big organizations and moved between those trying to understand different aspects of learning and tech in human behavior, trying to find smarter ways to use emerging tech to deliver better learning impact.

Geoff Stead: [00:02:52] Along the way, hopping between those two different types of organizations, I've built a bit of a specialism in helping businesses recapture their innovation spirit or help them pivot in times of difficulty. Start-ups tend to go through this difficulty as they scale up, and it doesn't scale anymore. Or large organizations who've got successful at one thing struggle with waves of change and how you adapt to that. And, along this journey, always with the lens of learning and technology, I've quite often ended up running innovation labs, coaching leaders on how to bring in innovation into a team or reset the culture a bit. So I've accidentally built a specialism in that innovation area, but probably learning tech is where my heart is.

Celisa Steele: [00:03:35] I definitely want to talk more about innovation, so I'm going to bookmark that to come back to. You do bring deep experience as a technologist, and so I'm curious to know, in your time using and studying and developing technology, what key changes have you seen and what trends are you seeing in how technology is supporting or might support learning?

Geoff Stead: [00:04:01] Lovely question. The thing with the tech is, quite often, there's a hype about the new, like what's coming next—AI or whether it's VR or goggles or whatever's coming. Sometimes the things that...the real lessons I learned have been true through my whole career. It's not always the tech that's the real lesson. I was, in hindsight, quite lucky where I started. I started very early in the learning technology era, pre-Web, very beginnings of Web, and I focused with adult learners who had low skill, learners in the UK. Literacy, numeracy, help finding a job, people who the mainstream had let down. They weren't at university. They weren't at college. They were sometimes not employed. They might have dropped out of school.

Geoff Stead: [00:04:50] This, in hindsight, was the perfect place for me because I got inspired about using tech for impact, using the learning moments to make a change. I was left obsessing

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about not what you delivered but what happened to the users who used the thing that you made. So it's not about the content; it's about the new skills that you're helping them develop or what they do next with that skill. Did they get a job? Did their confidence improve? Were they able to read at an appropriate level? And so the idea that technology is used in conversation with learning, that they're both equal partners, and they jostle for a space rather than it just being a broadcast mechanism.

Geoff Stead: [00:05:32] I think that's probably true still of how I think about tech today—the latest wave, obviously generative AI—but I'm still thinking of how it's a conversation and how you build a bridge between your needs as a human and the power of the tech. Obviously, these are not my original ideas. I'm standing on the shoulders of giants like Seymour Papert or Paolo Ferrari—all these great thinkers who were doing this even before I started. But these ideas probably stay quite true.

Geoff Stead: [00:05:59] And then, if you fast forward, I've been on several amazing tech wild rides. The Web, we take it for granted now. It was phenomenal when it first came out—that you could publish something, and everybody in the world could read it, and there was an openness of platforms. You could use open-source content. The content was open sourcing, like Wikipedia, and availability of information was quite an amazing moment. And media streaming—how cheap it is for us right now to create a podcast, to record it, to distribute it, to be heard around the world. The standardization that allows that. It was inconceivable 20 years ago, and it's all part of the wave around us. All of these things that have been...they're huge, in hindsight, even though you maybe didn't appreciate it as they were coming along.

Geoff Stead: [00:06:46] Mobile was big for me. I was a very early adopter in apps for learning—pre-smartphone, pre-iPhone—where there were handheld devices that used Wi-Fi only, and we were building very, very early apps for that. Again, that was learning outside the mainstream, adult learning. Our first app was driving theory tests, but we did quite a few apps that were around performance support for companies. I rolled out multiple apps in the UK and across Europe around performance support type of things in the very, very early stage. That got me to the U.S.

Geoff Stead: [00:07:21] Myself and some of my team were headhunted by a big Californian tech firm called Qualcomm and brought over to do the same thing internally, inside their organization, to try and think about cutting edge of mobile and learning or performance improvement apps and what those might look like. And so we ended up building an entire employee app store filled with apps that we'd made, that other people that we could convince

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to make them in the company made. If we could bully suppliers to create mobile versions of the Web sites that we were licensing from them, that would go into the app store. It was great fun because it was a total break with the idea that L&D is about courses, structures, and predefined things. It was the opposite.

Geoff Stead: [00:08:03] It was saying just-in-time information can be a wide range of use cases, but you need it on your phone immediately. Even if there are security concerns, we'll find ways of bridging those. We'll find ways of understanding the security concerns and putting in place ways that were allowed. So we had 40 apps or so available for any employees in the company, and they were a wide range. Some were quite serious, like literally look up information about current projects across the organization that were quite difficult to find on the internal Web sites because they were very siloed, but we'd gotten the data approved.

Geoff Stead: [00:08:39] Some were kind of nice karma. Qualcomm was making quite early augmented reality features on their chips, which weren't really in mainstream phones yet, and we were building playful augmented reality apps, just that employees felt cool about themselves. We made cheesy photo booths that you could get a picture of yourself taken together with one of the founders or one of the C-levels in the company. Even though you were in Asia somewhere and the Qualcomm officers and founders were based in California, you could have a picture standing next to them. Silly things like this. Celebratory things. We, together with a bunch of artists, made an augmented reality artwork that was a Guinness World Record, the largest one, right the way down the side of an enormous building, done in secret over the weekend. We had it pre-made and secretly went on Sunday and revealed it. When people arrived at work on Monday, there was this enormous artwork that you could walk down with your phone, and bits would pop out. It was telling bits of the history of the company and how they'd got there and pieces of the company history. Sorry, I'm getting a bit excited.

Geoff Stead: [00:09:40] The main thing is we were thinking about learning as an ecosystem of sources of information, which was great fun. That was my mobile era, I guess. And then, after that, I got quite intrigued by the consumerization of learning. The fact that we were creating stuff that was useless unless somebody wanted to install it on their phone. It was optional. They didn't have to. And, if they did install it, it was partly useless unless they came back more often. And so we got quite interested in how people like Duolingo—some of the consumer businesses—work at helping you come back and return and stick with learning and what those levers feel like. We did quite a bit of work on that at Qualcomm. But then I ended up joining a big language app business called Babbel in Berlin, Germany. They are exactly like that, similar

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to Duolingo. They have an app, which, if you want to learn a language, you pay a monthly amount. It's mass-consumerizing learning.

Geoff Stead: [00:10:37] You want to do it; that's why you start. But people drop off quite fast, and we really wanted to understand how you use the levers of mobile engagement, nudging, to help people come back and study a bit longer or stick with it for longer so that they do learn the language. It's not just a dream that died out; they stick with it till it really works. Yes, those sorts of behavioral nudges, gamification levers. What was very cool there was we had a massive user base, millions of people logging in, learning different languages, and so we also got very good at understanding the data that underpins what's going on and trying to get a sense of learning patterns, what works. At that stage there I was very excited about the whole user behavioral economics. What helps you stick with learning? What are those levers? I'm still surprised that this isn't more mainstream in learning, in people working on training and learning tools because they're really powerful levers—the different nudging behaviors, setting healthy habits, levers. You really can help people achieve their learning aim more easily if you give them these little nudges.

Geoff Stead: [00:11:39] While I was there, we also got very big on thinking about learning as an ecosystem. So I joined Babel; they had a single app and were selling a single app. By the time I left, we had podcasts, games; you had live lessons, and we were selling to enterprise as well as direct-to-consumer. And we managed to change the way we thought about what we did as a business so that it was about lots of channels and helping people achieve their aim via lots of channels rather than it being about selling an app. I think that was a really nice holistic framing.

Geoff Stead: [00:12:12] And then one more chapter. I'm telling you all my life history here. And now MyTutor, which is an online tutoring platform. Until this point, I've mostly been creating the digital parts of the learning. It's a standalone digital learning experience, mostly one person, but we know that tutors really help, or having a mentor can really help. Having a human in the loop really helps. What I'm doing at the moment is trying to understand that intersection between human and tech and a live-taught class with tech around the side and what that might look like, which leads me to the gen AI (generative AI) wave of hype that's current at the moment.

Geoff Stead: [00:12:54] Without a doubt, I think that's the most seismic thing I've seen in quite a long time. I think we don't quite understand what it's going to do yet, but, all the touch points I'm seeing, it's doing massive things. It's got the potential to do massive things. It's a significant performance enhancer in the workplace. There are some great studies, if you're unaware of it.

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Ethan Mollick has one around the jagged frontier, where he gave a whole lot of BCG consultants AI to support their work and other ones not AI and tried to understand the differences. Very strong correlation with the ones who are using AI doing better work and faster, like 25 percent faster, 40 percent better quality. But also interesting, a leveler—the people who were the lower performers got a more of a boost—they were 43 percent of a boost, whereas the more senior ones got a smaller boost, 17 percent of a boost. It's interesting. It's a fascinating tool in helping people perform better at work and trying to think that through. So that was a rather meandering wander, but I just thought it would be quite a nice way to look at some of the changes in tech and tie that up with stuff that I learned as I went through.

Celisa Steele: [00:14:09] Thank you very much. It's very interesting to hear about those different chapters in your own experience—which technologies were top of mind in each of those chapters and how they fit together. I hear in all that you were sharing a real focus on what I might put under the umbrella of impact. Are you actually helping the learners to do something? Are you providing those nudges that are going to get them to come back and continue to engage? And technology is a potential partner in doing that and supporting that. So that real focus on the impact rather than the technology in and of itself or the “course” in and of itself and really thinking more broadly about how do you support humans in learning and in applying what they're learning?

Jeff Cobb: [00:15:00] At Tagoras, we partner with professional and trade associations, continuing education units, training firms, and other learning businesses to help them understand market realities and potential, to connect better with existing customers and find new ones, and to make smart investment decisions around product development and portfolio management. Drawing on our expertise in lifelong learning, market assessment, and strategy formulation, we can help you achieve greater reach, revenue, and impact. Learn more at [tagoras.com/more](http://tagoras.com/more).

Celisa Steele: [00:15:37] When you think about the future of learning, what's your view? What's your perspective on the future of learning?

Geoff Stead: [00:15:41] You might guess it from my general enthusiastic nature, but I'm a real optimist about learning, the power of learning, our needs as humans to keep learning and to keep discovering. What's the future of learning? It will find a way. We have to adapt—you find a way of adapting. You have to learn new things—you find a way of learning new things. The question is, is it with or without official endorsement? Is it in traditional channels? Or is it not in those traditional channels at all? I think that's the more interesting area.

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Geoff Stead: [00:16:12] If you think about the world we're in at the moment, what's happening in people's regular lives, environment, in your organizations, companies struggling revenue-wise or trying to adapt at the moment, there are so many challenges around us, and lots of them have learning as a possible solution. Help your team improve better. Help your business pivot and go in a different direction. Help me succeed as a professional by dealing with some gaps in my skills. So learning is a fairly key demand. And, at the same time, there's amazing tooling available right now—globally, the tech, AI stuff. I can access a human trainer, a mentor. They can be sitting in India; if they're an expert in my area, and I can connect; they can coach me.

Geoff Stead: [00:17:01] There's incredible tooling around, which brings a level of global accessibility to learning too. Actually, it's a positive story. There's demand. There are lots of ways of creating reach. What are the things? What are the kinds of things that I think are coming or are the most powerful? Mentoring, generally—AI-human hybrid, some sort of use of ways of connecting me to somebody who cares about me and wants my skills to get better. Simulations. Again, gen AI does this well, but there's other tooling that does it quite well as well—360 video, or there are tools that help you simulate work or experiences, practice some skills, and build some stronger skills in a context. I think really powerful, broadly, performance support, being able to, on my phone at a moment, talk, write, take a picture, get some feedback on that thing, that task I'm trying to do right now. Again, you mentioned it before, you called it out, but a focus on the outcomes or the impact that you're trying at that moment.

Geoff Stead: [00:18:05] A lot of the innovation happens around the edges, so, when you asked that, I was reflecting on my own career. And where do I see learning? It's meet-ups. It's podcasts. It's people asking Google or asking AI the answer to things. It's all these roots growing out the side of the plant. It's innovation around the edges. I think that's often where you see the new tools or the new approaches. You see them approaching from the side.

Geoff Stead: [00:18:34] I have to talk a bit more about generative AI if you're thinking about the future because it really is something quite unique and quite special. And I think one of the opportunities is, weirdly...the smartest people who are building it, the real language experts or AI experts, they don't know why it's doing exactly what it's doing, and they're not experts at how you apply it. They're experts at the language model, but not at how it's used. And so there's this gap between the inventors and possible users. It's evolving very fast, and that space in the middle is potentially a super exciting place for anybody in the learning/training area to have a look because there's a gap there. There's a lot of uncertainty, and people aren't quite sure how to use it. And nervousness.

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Geoff Stead: [00:19:24] So few people are stepping into the gap that even just spending a couple of days immersing yourself in it will probably make you an expert in your area. It feels to me that gap in the middle is an amazing space to try and get involved and understand the power that's coming and your particular use case or subject specialist area and try to understand what that looks like. Conversely, if you don't do that, any of your competitors anywhere in the world can because most of these tools are globally available. So it's there at the moment, and there's not enough people stepping in, but I don't think that it will stay as an open space forever. I'm intrigued by the fact that it's unusual in being a super powerful technology that people don't really know why and how it does the things it does and how best to apply it. There are a lot of bad examples of people trying to apply it; it didn't quite work. And there are some really powerful examples, but it's a very emerging area. So that gap in the middle feels like an exciting place to try and learn a bit more and understand.

Celisa Steele: [00:20:22] Yes, I really appreciate that you call out that gap. I personally hadn't really thought of generative AI as.... It makes sense, though, when I reflect. It's this very powerful tool, but we're not exactly sure what it's a tool for or how to best use that tool. And so digging into that, yes, does seem like an area of a lot of opportunity and excitement, potentially.

Celisa Steele: [00:20:45] You are a co-author along with Sae Schatz and Julian Stodd, and we've been lucky enough to have both of them on the podcast in the past. But the three of you co-wrote *Engines of Engagement: A Curious Book About Generative AI*, and the most recent episode where we had Julian on, we focused on that book and some of the key concepts. To go in a little bit of a different direction with you, I would be curious to know what was it like to write a book with two other people? What did you learn from that experience in that collaboration process?

Geoff Stead: [00:21:21] Reflecting back, I loved it. It was a really interesting experience, helping me frame my own thinking. I'm not a writer. It's the first book I've written. I begrudgingly have written a couple of papers under great duress at various stages in my life, but I mostly try to avoid it. I'm more comfortable speaking, drawing, and enthusing. Writing was a new experience for me, and co-writing with some other people was a new experience for me, and I really loved it. I think we all had fairly low egos and high curiosity, and we all had different strengths and specialisms, and that worked well because we were accountability partners to each other.

Geoff Stead: [00:22:04] We would have a fixed phone call every week, the same time for an hour and a half, and we would talk about what we'd done—the writing that we'd done in the previous week. Sometimes we hadn't, but we had the call anyway, and we would critique each

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other's work and plan for the next week. I think that level of accountability helped me because we were all doing it alongside a day job, and our energy balanced each other out because sometimes I would be burning with a particular message I wanted, and I could go and turn ahead and write a few chapters. Julian was distracted, and then, two weeks later, Julian would go through mine and change it, and, by the end, it was quite hard to distinguish who wrote what, and some of the ideas are quite woven together.

Geoff Stead: [00:22:42] Yes, I guess that the low-ego, high-curiosity, mutual-respect thing worked well. I have a very solid underpinning on the tech side and the practical realities of building tools, gen AI, and practically what you might do. And Sae had a very fiercely academic perspective. She's really a learning scientist with a strong background in evidence research and being able to prove things. And Julian is a very free-ranging thinker about organizational culture and some of the more philosophical aspects of change. We had different specialisms, but we had this sweet spot in the middle trying to figure out how we were thinking about generative AI, how we thought it might impact organizations, how it impacts learning.

Geoff Stead: [00:23:28] And then, as time passed, we developed a shared voice. Starting off, you could initially see who'd written which bit, but then we built a shared voice and also a confidence. One of us would write something a bit wacky or put a bit of a poem in the middle of the text because it felt like it needed a mix. And then, because nobody else took it out, we'd get confidence, and then the next person would do something else a little bit unconventional. That makes me quite proud when I look back at it. It was interesting—this art, some poems, and fairly wide-ranging thoughts. I think we only got there because we encouraged each other and were impressed by each other's quirks.

Geoff Stead: [00:24:06] I read one review, which said something like it felt like they were sitting around a fire with a cold beer talking about AI with a bunch of interesting people who knew different bits about it, and that was what they wanted to help frame their thinking. I really liked that idea that this is a book version of sitting around a fire with some mates, having a cold beer and chatting about the world and trying to make sense of it. That was our journey. I'd, of course, love it if your audience gave us any feedback. We're still slightly tentative and new in this book-writing business, and so I have anxiously watched to see who's posted reviews where. So, if people are interested, we're making a free one available to download, and we'd love to have feedback. Just tell us if you found it helpful.

Celisa Steele: [00:24:50] Hearing what you highlighted—the low ego and the high curiosity and how that made for a successful collaboration—it struck me that the same formula—low ego,

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high curiosity—makes for a really good learning engagement. If you approach any subject with those two things, it seems like you're going to be better off than if you came in with high ego or low curiosity.

Celisa Steele: [00:25:20] Innovation is also a big area of focus and interest for you, particularly how to build an innovation culture, perhaps within a larger, less innovative structure or business. As we begin to talk about innovation, it might be interesting here at the beginning to ask you how do you define or describe innovation?

Geoff Stead: [00:25:43] I probably think about it in terms of stepping outside the perceived constraints of the moment. So maybe finding a new or unexpected way of solving a business challenge or a learning challenge. Or maybe stepping out of the more comfortable, incremental methods of improvement that a business has got and trying to find new ideas, new approaches, or ways of taking bolder steps forward. Sometimes it's about a new product, or sometimes it's about a particular business challenge. I mentor companies sometimes in this area. Quite often they have a fairly clear business need, like, "We're struggling with product-market fit of this thing we've built," or "We work too slow," or "We want to build this new product." So there's a fairly clear problem statement, but with totally unreasonable constraints they expect you will also be able to solve. And everybody's got ten other things they think you'll solve at the same time—how quickly, costs, using these people, using this process.

Geoff Stead: [00:26:46] They've got themselves stuck in a place where they know what they want solving, but they've added all these constraints that make it impossible. When I think about innovation, it's often about trying to help people step away from the constraints that are holding them back to enable them to take a slightly bolder step forward. I end up stripping back a lot of those constraints to try and find a smaller subset of real success criteria. "If we could fix this, is this innovation?" So it tends to evolve a little bit in conversation. But, yes, I think it's about stepping outside the comfortable path for moving slowly forward so that you can move faster forward.

Celisa Steele: [00:27:23] What's your take on the relationship between innovation and culture at an organization or within a group? Is there a certain cultural requirement for innovation to work?

Geoff Stead: [00:27:36] Quick answer—definitely. A slightly longer answer—I don't really like the narrative that you get the creative, crazy people who do the innovation, and then you get everybody else who does the day job. I think that is a narrative that evolves. You get some

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amazing design agencies or agencies who will come embed for a while, spend some time with you, and create some innovation thing, and then leave. And it withers and dies. I don't like that narrative, particularly that you get the innovators and non-innovators. But there is some truth to how an organization needs to think about innovation because, normally, there are loads of cultural barriers that stop innovation happening.

Geoff Stead: [00:28:18] The main barrier is lots of tiny little things. It's how you manage procurement. It's how the budget cycle works. It's which IT team you're allowed to use. It's the legal thing about which new platform you can test out. It's the other guidance about whether you're in the office or not in the office. It's a bunch of tiny things. When you add all those up, you end up sucking the air out of the innovation energy. And it's not a bad thing because, when a business is specializing, you've invented this thing. You're making it. That's your business. You want to specialize. And the act of specializing is taking away some of the rogue elements and getting more and more optimized.

Geoff Stead: [00:28:57] But it's exactly that skill set that gets you more optimized, that gets you there that will stop you doing the innovation. They really are two different things culturally. Can you have a culture that's both of those? With huge difficulty. As an organization, can you grow both of those cultures in different bits? You can. You need to be careful not to upset everybody and make people feel jealous, but it is possible to do that. So I think, culturally, you have to recognize that there are these two zones—the skill set that got you where you are today, and, if you really want to bring innovative energy in, it's the skill set that will take you to that next step. They're quite different, and probably very few of the leaders of this group can do that, and very few of the systems and processes that you've built around this can do that. You have to find a way of separating those two.

Celisa Steele: [00:29:47] That's very interesting because I think now I'm better understanding this idea that you tend to focus on innovation within a larger organizational context because of what I heard in your response there, that the overall organization may be very focused on that specialized skill set that got them where they are. And then for others to be able to forget that and think about other possibilities outside those boundaries, it does almost potentially need to be another group. That's very interesting. I hadn't quite thought of it. Is that a fair assessment of what you're saying?

Geoff Stead: [00:30:25] I think that's very fair. There're also lots of examples of organizations trying that and failing. Sometimes people set up a vanity lab, where it says, "It's a group of crazy people inventing nice things that the CEO likes to show people to, but there's actually no

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path to take what's invented there and move it over into the main business." There are lots of examples even where things look fun and new stuff is coming out of them, but it doesn't really help the business innovate. I think there are some guidelines you can put in place to increase the odds, but some of the innovative ideas will transition into the main business. But you do need to quite fiercely guard and protect that team, allow them to innovate, and, at the same time, try and find paths that help those innovations benefit the bigger business. There are several different ways to approach that, but, yes, it is a challenge.

Celisa Steele: [00:31:11] I have multiple follow-on questions. One is that you began to talk about some barriers; perhaps there are others that you want to highlight. If you do, please do. But then you just talked about there are some ways to hopefully set it up for success so that whichever group is thinking about innovation gets to make some progress. I would love to hear if you have some suggestions or ideas for listeners to consider around how to make innovation efforts within their organization successful.

Geoff Stead: [00:31:42] Gladly. The one thing is you do need to protect the runway or the space for the team to be able to fail, experiment, and try again and have the confidence to keep going. As part of that, you do need to somehow negotiate enough budget or time, elapsed time, runway, or find a way of helping the wider org celebrate some of the lessons learned as you go. What you don't want is that, six months in, suddenly the rules change, and people start coming in and requiring different things. There's a lovely term called being a "chaos pilot," which was a Google term when they were talking about innovation.

Geoff Stead: [00:32:22] They thought, if you really want this to work, if you're leading this team, you need to be a bit of a chaos pilot. You need to embrace chaos inside your innovation team but also be able to translate it into a language that works better in the wider business to maintain that support or the momentum. And part of that, I find, is about being a bit scary. So you do need to remind the business why this is critical, why you do need this innovation to work, why it's a long-term view but also being a bit reassuring, that you help paint a picture of the future and tell a story about the lessons that are being learned so that you're bringing the wider business along with you. You're not just going into this little lab and having fun, and everybody else looks over the wall. Your job, as a leader there, is partly to be this chaos pilot and talk to the wider org. You do need to create some kind of runway, budget, time. There are several models for that.

Geoff Stead: [00:33:12] There's the three horizons model or 80-20 or some framing where you think in terms of budget, effort, or time. How much of what we're doing today is stuff that has

to be useful this year? How much stuff has to be useful in five years? How much is just a crazy bet, but it might really pay off in ten years? Having some kind of framing that you use to communicate the work you're doing is really helpful because, if you're talking to a conservative, cautious finance person, they might be saying, "How much do you want to spend on this weird thing? No, we can't give you more than 1 percent of the budget." But, if you talk to them about, "What percent of the budget do you want to place for bets for the next five years? What percent do you want to place for the bets for the next ten years?," all of a sudden the conversation changes a bit. Yes, maybe 1 percent for the crazy bet is actually quite well spent. But, for the nearer one, probably 5 percent of what we're earning is worth investing in. And so having some kind of horizons framing for the types of experiments you're doing and what the odds of success might be is really helpful.

Geoff Stead: [00:34:15] And then really protect the culture. Culture is ridiculously important in these teams. You partly do that by bringing in some new people so that you're not overly constrained by the ideas of the existing org. You partly do that by celebrating culture. Again, Google had these X labs. I'm not sure how much it's doing at the moment, but, if you search online for their Gimbal onboarding guide, Google X Gimbal, they put together this really lovely book, which was a digital 20-page thing that you would get as a new employee, and it would talk to you about "This is what the culture of this team is. This is what matters." It stands well to the test of time. It's probably five, six years old. But, if you read through it, it's a really nice call to action about what matters in culture, what matters in innovation. That's a nice thing to have a look at.

Celisa Steele: [00:35:03] Selfishly, one of the other questions that I had, hearing you talk about innovation, is I'm part of a very small organization, and so when you talk about, oh, it needs to be a separate group, and it's very hard for the same people who got you where you are and are helping you focus on that to also do innovation, when you think about smaller organizations, any different tips or ideas for how innovation works within those contexts?

Geoff Stead: [00:35:29] When I think about it for myself, I try and play sometimes or create opportunities to try out new things without a particularly clear end goal. I do keynotes every now and again, and I might try an entirely different tool set, tools to presenting for no real reason except that I've been using the previous tools for two years. It adds a whole lot of extra stress because I panic, and I'm trying to use these tools that I can't master. But I do that partly because I find that's where I find my innovation—by trying a constant flow of slightly new things. I find that really useful. I'm not sure if it's called play or panic—one or the other. But I'm

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trying to create opportunities to use different tools or to be curious about different approaches. I'm not sure if that directly answers the question, but that's how I approach it for myself.

Celisa Steele: [00:36:34] Given your technology background, given your interest, expertise in innovation, what do you see as the connection between the two, between technology—especially learning technology or could be technology (broader)—and innovation?

Geoff Stead: [00:36:49] I see two different worlds when I think about that, and, when I'm reflecting on your podcast audience, I imagine they probably sit across both of these worlds. In the one world, it's a fairly techno-competent world, where it's learning science, experimentation, and freedom to try different tools. And here there's a strong connection between learning technology and innovation because it's what different startups are building and types of learning that people are experimenting with. It's the simulation tools, performance support, just-in-time information, using gen AI to create things. It's an amazing, fertile moment at the moment. And so here the innovation approach is just have an experimental mindset, what we were just describing. Try some of these tools. You're doing a podcast—try using one of the AI ones that lets you automatically get a transcript and edit the transcript. It reassembles the video based on the transcript. There's cool stuff going on at the moment.

Geoff Stead: [00:37:48] But the negative thing in this world is there's also a lot of hype, and there's a lot of snake oil salesmen telling you that this AI feature is the best thing, and it's going to transform.... And so you do need to follow the science, and you do need to be experimental and curious and look for evidence as you go. But, in this learning science-y world, there's a strong connection between innovation and the learning tech side. The other world is a more platform-constrained view. Here I was putting myself in the shoes of somebody who's creating learning resources for a big organization and their L&D department, and they have got a very established platform and a very established protocol for the methodologies that you upload it in. There I think it's much harder because the platform itself might be clever, but there are so many constraints on the kind of format of what you can provide, that the innovation part is most of it's been pulled away from you, and it may be embedded in the platform, or it's lost in the noise somewhere.

Geoff Stead: [00:38:53] There it's much harder to find the innovation piece. It's still there, and sometimes the way to get to it is to go even lower tech. What you want to do is step outside the constraints. Sometimes simpler tech is actually better. We're doing a podcast now. Podcasts are amazing. It's just an audio file. It's about as simple a tech as you can get, but you can distribute it around tons of channels. People use it in quite creative, different ways. The format changes.

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Whereas, if you were building a SCORM-structured course around the same topic, you'd be forced into a much more restricted way of working. Those are my two worldviews. There's the learning science one, where I think it's very fertile and innovative, and there's the platform-constrained one, which I think a lot of learning professionals do still live in, and there what I'd encourage people to do is to even go simpler with the tech to try and put the innovation and creativity into how you use the format rather than the tooling itself.

Celisa Steele: [00:39:46] Well, thank you for that. I like that idea—simpler tech sometimes can, in some ways, be more innovative in removing some of the constraints of your current thinking. So thank you.

Celisa Steele: [00:39:58] One of the things we always like to ask folks who come on the Leading Learning Podcast is about their own lifelong learning. I would be curious to hear from you, Geoff, around your habits, practices, or sources that you use to continue to grow yourself.

Geoff Stead: [00:40:14] I mentioned play and panic earlier, and I think maybe that's part of it. I love, if things are getting too stressful at work, we try and arrange a hack day so people spend a day trying to solve slightly more open-ended challenges and trying to see how to get our heads around that. I found that really helpful in the early days of generative AI, to just bring a whole bunch of our teams together who weren't experts but require them to use it in some or other way over the next two days and build something. So hack days. In fact, the book I wrote was a bit like this. I committed to writing it because I felt this was really important, and I had a bit of something to say, but I didn't yet feel an expert. In the process of writing it and debating it with Julian and Sae, I built my confidence and my expertise.

Geoff Stead: [00:41:00] I agree to do keynotes every now and again for much the same reason. It forces me to panic or to be a bit playful and think about clarifying what I believe about things. I'm also fairly curious, and I'm a big believer in multidisciplinaryism, or having a lot of different disciplines together, and that's part of how I work. We have embraced design thinking and tech and product marketing and different skill sets, and we haggle away together to understand how to solve problems. I only work four days a week for MyTutor partly because on that fifth day I mentor different people in different kinds of business because it's stimulating. So I try and keep open to different disciplines and listen to them, and I find that I learn from that quite often. I bring the learning sideways into my area.

Geoff Stead: [00:41:47] And then one other. This is a little bit philosophical. I'm from South Africa. It's where I grew up. I did a TED Talk quite some time ago. Part of that was talking

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about this thing called Ubuntu. It's a philosophical approach to life that's the opposite of hierarchy. The idea is I help everybody else around me because the act of helping them helps me or that my life is better by lifting everybody else up a little bit. It's a social good kind of mentality. I think that's woven into how I lead and how I work with colleagues, where you go out of your way to help everybody else perform really well, and, by them performing well, the whole thing works quite well. It's a nice philosophy. I think partly that's why I do learning as a business because learning is about empowering people and helping them all to do better, and it feeds into how I run teams. It's often how I learn things because I learn them from the people around me who feel more open to share what they're learning, and then I learn socially from that. So Ubuntu. If you haven't heard of it before, it's worth looking up the word. It is quite nice and reaffirming. But I think that's a thread that followed me through my life and helped me think about how I learn from others.

Jeff Cobb: [00:43:14] Geoff Stead is co-author of *Engines of Engagement: A Curious Book About Generative AI*, and he would love for you to tell him what you think about the book, which is available for free as a digital download or for purchase in hard copy. In the show notes at [leadinglearning.com/episode411](https://leadinglearning.com/episode411), you'll find a link to get the book and links to Geoff on X and LinkedIn so you can let him know what you think about it.

Celisa Steele: [00:43:41] At [leadinglearning.com/episode411](https://leadinglearning.com/episode411), you'll also find options for subscribing to the podcast. We'd be grateful if you would subscribe if you haven't yet, as those subscriptions give us some insight into the impact of the podcast.

Jeff Cobb: [00:43:54] We'd also be grateful if you would rate us on Apple Podcasts or wherever you listen, especially if you find the Leading Learning Podcast valuable. Those ratings and reviews help us show up when people search for content on leading a learning business.

Celisa Steele: [00:44:08] And please help us grow the Leading Learning community. At [leadinglearning.com/episode411](https://leadinglearning.com/episode411), there are links to find us on LinkedIn, X, and Facebook.

Jeff Cobb: [00:44:18] Thanks again, and see you next time on the Leading Learning Podcast.

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

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