



Connection with Ginger Johnson

Leading Learning Podcast Transcript for Episode 417

Ginger Johnson: [00:00:00] Are you, dear listener, are you really feeling strongly connected? Is there a purpose? Purpose is the mitochondria of the connection cell.

Celisa Steele: [00:00:12] I'm Celisa Steele.

Jeff Cobb: [00:00:14] I'm Jeff Cobb, and this is the Leading Learning Podcast.

Jeff Cobb: [00:00:22] It's gotten incredibly easy to produce and consume content. That means the market value of content is approaching zero. And that means that learning businesses need to provide more than just content. Learning businesses that can provide connection are going to attract and retain passionate and engaged learners. Ginger Johnson believes that connection is everything, and we talk to her in this episode, number 417. Ginger does the work of connection through keynotes, workshops, and other connection experiences. She's the author of *Connectivity Canon: Why and How to Connect on Purpose with a Service Mindset*, she's an inveterate dinner party host, and, as you'll hear in her conversation with Celisa, she's passionate and enthusiastic about her work. Celisa and Ginger spoke in June 2024.

Celisa Steele: [00:01:24] You focus on connection. Why did you choose to focus on connection, and what does connection mean to you?

Ginger Johnson: [00:01:32] We only have what, three hours? Okay. Why did I choose to focus on connection? Several years ago, I was in a reinvention stage. I like change, Celisa, so I am good with it. Change is growth, and I was at a juncture where I wasn't fired up about what I was doing with my previous businesses. I was waking up frustrated. I wasn't enjoying it. There was more running into walls than there was running out in the fields. And so I said, "Okay, that's my tell. I need to shift." Then I went through a phase where I thought, "Okay, if it's not that, then what could it be?" I gave myself the permission slip to discover, to explore, and I would be like a prairie dog. If you can imagine a prairie dog, they come up out of the ground like, "Ooh, wee!" They make those fun little sounds. They're communicating. And then they retreat back

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inside, where they're not quite sure. I did that a number of times—maybe it's going to be this; maybe it's going to be that. And then, when I finally popped out—of course, the last time is always the time—it was human connection. The second I said it to myself, I knew what it was. The next instant, I said, "Okay, what is it to the world? How am I going to teach this feeling, this ecosystem, this idea that really clearly lit me up instantaneously?"

Ginger Johnson: [00:02:56] That's how I chose a human connection. It is attached with everything we are and everything we do as humans, and so I like the broadness of it. I also love the depth of it. Previous to being here to record this fantastic podcast, which is a highlight of my day, I delivered a keynote about the "Joy of Belonging," and, if you put those letters together, it spells "job." So, if we're thinking about our job as the joy of belonging, belonging is the ultimate outcome of connection—that's one thing I teach. I've been teaching it way longer than it's been trendy. But that sense that we feel—I got to believe you know how this feels too, Celisa—that when you're somewhere, and you just know you're in the right place, that's code for belonging. It feels good. It is good. You want to linger. You want to stay. You want to revel in that moment. Those are memories you're building. When we're in places where we don't feel like we belong, we feel very disconnected. There are some different elements going on. That's equally important to learn how to acknowledge, so you can keep moving where there is connection.

Celisa Steele: [00:03:55] You talked about the fact that connection is such a broad but also deep area to focus on. I'm thinking that there are at least three angles that Leading Learning Podcast listeners would be thinking about when they're thinking about connection. One of them is around their role as leaders, as they're trying to connect with the folks on their team, as they're leading that part of their organization focused on that learning portfolio, connection is going to be part of that. I would love to have you talk a little bit about how you see effective leaders leaning into connection or creating that connection.

Ginger Johnson: [00:04:35] Yes, it's very simple. Here's the great thing—connecting is simple. It is not complicated. Sometimes there are some multilayers, like a great croissant. It's really very simple. The ingredients are simple. One visual, one tool I teach too, if you will, is imagine ripples, like the target symbol: self, team, community. Self is at that nucleus point, the very center. Are we connected with ourselves as a leader, as a follower, as whatever our position? I know you specifically asked for leaders. Is the leader...are you, dear listener, are you really feeling strongly connected? Is there a purpose? Purpose is the mitochondria of the connection cell. If you know anything about science, you know that mitochondria power our cells. I learned this in biology, and I will never forget it.

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Ginger Johnson: [00:05:19] When we have that connection with purpose, with ourselves, that's the very first. Then it goes to our team. Ourselves and then our team. We must be connected to ourselves first. The people who are kicking around or pinballing around life, Celisa, they're good people. If you are one of them, and you're listening today, you're a good person. Get clear on your purpose. Often when there's disconnect, there is a purpose disconnection. So purpose with self and then purpose for the team. Does the team know why they're assembled? Do they buy into the vision? Are they all in? Are they excited? Are they a bunch of kids on the playground like, "Yes, this is the thing," or are they running for the fences? That purpose starts with yourself, then it goes to your team, and then it goes to your community.

Ginger Johnson: [00:06:00] For the learning and education world, we want to look at that as the teacher isn't the almighty. The teacher isn't the end-all. The leader/teacher is not the only one who can teach, which I'm going to make that generous assumption that everybody listening here knows that. Tapping into that self/team/community, how do we make that a continuum, like a slide guitar? How do we help ourselves say, "I'm open"? I teach a lot of different concepts. We'll keep this really simple. "I'm open. I'm willing. I'm positive. I'm objective. I'm suspending judgment." "That's interesting. Ginger just shared that thing. How could we use that?" The self/team/community, yes, it ripples out. It also ripples back in, just like a reflective ripple on a pond. Eventually, it hits the shore and bounces back. Especially with something like professional development, learning, and education, in this realm, oh, that's so important because, if the ripples only go out, we don't know what the impact is. The leader can't measure that. You can't wrap your head around it because it's like, "I have no idea where that thing went." But, if we focus on a ripple that's going to reflect, then we are connected, and it synergistically gets better and stronger. So self/team/community is one of the first places I would start.

Celisa Steele: [00:07:13] You've already jumped to the next place I was thinking about where connection would come into play, which is with that broader audience. It is with the learners that the leader is trying to serve through their offerings. When you're a leader, and you have these daily interactions with coworkers or team, that seems to lend itself to connection happening one way. When you have that broader community, when you have that audience of learners who you might not even really ever see—if you think about something like an asynchronous e-learning course—it seems like, then, how connection happens or is fostered is probably a little bit different in that broader community. So (a) do you agree? And then (b) tease out what you see as some of the skills to potentially tap into connection when it's a little bit broader and less direct that you have that interaction.

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Ginger Johnson: [00:08:10] I was a middle school teacher in my 20s (a few years ago), and one lesson that is directly applicable to what you're asking me right now is that the student and the teacher—in this case, the leader—need the best environment for learning. It's going to be when the student and the teacher are in sync—and not in sync of knowing the same things. They're in sync, realizing that this is a partnership. Education is not a lecture. Education is growth. Education is transformation. When we only say that education is a checkbox, a quota, or a requirement, don't expect that to go very far, my friends, because you're checking a box. The means to the end is the box check. I'm not saying that's terrible, but I am saying that there's a different way to approach it.

Ginger Johnson: [00:09:03] If you really want true growth as opposed to check-in-the-box—like the \$8 billion America spends on inclusion training, which has, by research, shown that it's largely ineffective, well, a lot of that is box-checking. We're doing the thing because we think we have to. We're jumping through the hoop because we were told to do it. But, when we do this by choice—I think that's one of the biggest nuggets here, Celisa—when we are really choosing to be the learner, when we are really choosing to be the leader, we realize that there's a synergy, that there is an alignment of purpose, so that the connection can happen. Look, I've done Webinars too. Webinars can be hard because you don't get the live—you can't see; there's no chat. I find that platform of delivery, I'll say, to be very challenging. Can you do it? Yes. Can it be effective? Yes. And that is different than using a different platform where there is interaction capability. That is huge.

Ginger Johnson: [00:10:01] Don't shut off those avenues if those are part of the tools because that's the water cooler talk. That's the hello in the hallway. That's where you and I whisper together because there's something that somebody just said that really resonates. That's the connection that we're fostering there. And, as the teacher, as the leader, we want to foster that. I'm not talking about interruptions or people being rude. I'm talking about realizing and knowing your students so that you're responsive and not reactive. The student's role, then, is to say, "How can I best respond?" I know that a lot of the people listening and a lot of people you serve, Celisa, are in that zone. How do we make this offering effective, knowing that you can't control the student, but you can be in command of some of the other elements? There's a lot to it; I know that. But, if we start with the idea that the leader and the student—the teacher and the student—you want to be aligned with what is the purpose of this and how can we best go forward? That's a really good jumping-in point.

Celisa Steele: [00:11:06] A lot of what you said resonates with how I tend to think of things. You think about the average adult learner; they come with a lot of prior experience, a lot of

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expertise, and so I think acknowledging that and leveraging that can help with that sense of connection.

Ginger Johnson: [00:11:22] Absolutely. Ask your students, “What do you want to learn? What do you want to know?” Because I remember, as that middle school teacher, watching my students—the fifth- through eighth-graders. What a time! Nobody sticks their hand up and says, “I want to go back there.” The great thing is that it’s a laboratory. It’s a laboratory. So think of your growth, your education, your programs, your professional development, think of it as a laboratory. It’s a big experiment. Release the pressure from yourself. Give yourself a permission slip, like I write in my *Connectivity Canon* book. Give yourself a permission slip to say, “I know what this is, and I know a little bit about this, and I know enough about this that I can provide help for people. Then I’ll keep learning.” Give yourself that grace and space, as I like to teach, and get excited about it.

Ginger Johnson: [00:12:08] Students can tell when a teacher is bored. Nobody I know wants to go back to those classes. Oh, yes, that’s when the box-checking comes in. “Well, okay, I’ll just finish the thing because I bought it, because I filled in that blank.” When a teacher, when a leader, is really focused on how their students are showing up, and, to your exact point, we all keep bringing more forward because we’ve lived more life, what can we use? What can we leverage? To use your word. I love that you used that word. What can we acknowledge and leverage so that the learning, the growth is all more powerful for everybody? It’s richer. It’s deeper. It’s more exciting. It’s more energetic. It’s more promptive (if that’s a word). “Oh, I want more. Yes, what else do we got? This is great. What else is there?” Then you know it’s really working. Then you know you’ve connected with yourself, with your team, your students, and the connection is multi-way. It’s never a two-way street. It’s always a roundabout.

Jeff Cobb: [00:13:12] 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.

Celisa Steele: [00:13:49] Part of what we’re talking about is making me think about the concept of engagement, which is really big in the learning world. How do you get learners to be engaged, stay engaged? I’m wondering if you have thoughts on what the relationship is

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between connection and engagement. It feels like there's maybe some overlap, but, yes, what do you think about them?

Ginger Johnson: [00:14:12] Oh, my gosh, I'm really glad you asked this. It's also a hot topic in the professional speaking world, which is part of the world I occupy, and event planners are like, "Engage the audience!" But they don't tell us more. Teachers want their students to be engaged, but they leave that hanging on a cliff. There is an enormous, super highway between connection and engagement. First of all, you can't make somebody be engaged. You can't. I can't make you do anything more than you can make me do something. So the "gotta wanna" is going to come in. How do I want to get into that zone of "Oh, I really want to do this. I got to do this"? It's very self-actualizing. It's self-inspirational. The connection between connection and engagement definitely is that leader cognizant of who their learner is, and how are they tapping into different ways methodologies, practices, ideas, graphics, exercises? How are they really helping the students fully participate? It's the tail wagging the dog to a certain extent. The student is the dog. The teacher—the leader—can be the tail. We want it to be more of a different equation.

Ginger Johnson: [00:15:32] That engagement is necessary. It has to come from ourselves first. We have to want to do it. And we can't force anybody. I remember that very clearly. You know this too. We can put things up; we can make things available; we can put courses together; we can offer events, so forth, and so on. If people either don't know how to engage—meaning they don't have a model; they haven't been nurtured; they haven't been mentored. "Hey, Ginger, we're going to this thing. Here's how I would recommend you pay attention, that you participate." Participation might be a better word than engagement—before we get to engagement—because, if you ask people to participate, they know more of what that is. Engagement can be listening. Engagement can be a little more static. Doesn't mean that people aren't engaged, but "participation," "contribution," some different words would probably help tee up engagement more. This is what engagement looks like. It means you are contributing in the chat. It means you speak up in the group and give people examples, so then they know what their behavior is that will help them get more out of the learning and put more of themselves in the learning.

Celisa Steele: [00:16:37] There's a definition of engagement that we like to use. Part of the reason I like it is because I feel like it speaks to this idea of there being three aspects to engagement: the cognitive, the emotional, and the behavioral. I think what you're just saying there is it's easiest to see the behavioral engagement. It's easiest to see when someone types in the chat, raises their hand, or speaks up. Sometimes it may not be the most important; it may be arguably the

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emotional or the cognitive is more important, but that's harder to see. It's harder for a learning business to go, "Yes, we have them engaged emotionally." That's a little harder to say, "Okay, what's the metric for that?"

Ginger Johnson: [00:17:17] Right. That's also why surveys are both a bugaboo and brilliant. If done well, they can really be a crystal ball into efficacy, into participation, into what else are people telling me they need. If they are poorly done, they are a complete and total waste of everybody's time. In fact, they can be negative because it really erodes faith of somebody listening, paying attention, communicating. "Ginger didn't respond last time, so I'm not going to bother. I don't know where that thing went. I didn't hear anything. Nothing happened." You can insert the platitude there. So you're 100-percent right. Behavior is easier to see or sense. Emotion is harder. At the same time, that's a good challenge for a leader or teacher. How are you going to find out? What are you going to do? Are you going to talk? What are you going to do? There are lots of choices. Picking your choices to match how the audience can respond best—you probably know this better than I do—that is truly essential for finding out if what we're doing is, to simplify it, working.

Celisa Steele: [00:18:41] You mentioned that you're a speaker. You do a lot of speaking. And I know that a lot of our listeners are on the hiring end. They're looking for facilitators. They're looking for speakers that are going to be part of delivering their educational offerings. I would love to get your thoughts on what it is that someone hiring a speaker or facilitator—what sort of information can they give that speaker to help set them up for success or to help lay that groundwork for connection?

Ginger Johnson: [00:19:14] Oh, I love that you asked this question. There's a big difference between professional speaking and speaking as part of your profession. I'm a professional speaker. I put energy in investing in my craft. I love it. It is my profession. It's my career. So your question. How can you tee up the speaker to deliver the materials effectively? Is that basically what you're asking me?

Celisa Steele: [00:19:36] Yes.

Ginger Johnson: [00:19:37] Okay. I could give you 50, but I'll give you three. I'll start with three. If people want more, they can reach out to me. Number one, my favorite question to ask is, "What transformation do you want?" To transform is simply to change. So, if I ask people, "What transformation do you want?," another way to ask that, Celisa, is to say, "How do you want people to feel when we're done with this, when this is complete?" That is vital. It's

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absolutely vital because people can get a great score, so to speak, but not give a damn. Ineffective. It's not going to last. It's not going to stick. They're not going to be excited. They're not going to share it. However, if we ask people, "How do you want to feel?" "Oh, I want to feel energized." That's a very common response I get. "I want people to feel excited." Now those are also really big, nebulous ideas. So then we go farther. "What does excitement look like?" "Oh, it means people are high-fiving each other in the hall, or that they're calling each other and telling each other about..."

Ginger Johnson: [00:20:39] We need to put some quantitative on the qualitative. I had a company that I did qualitative research for a dozen years. It's absolutely mind-blowingly fascinating. We tend to chase the question, but we don't chase it far enough. So finding out what does that actually look like? How does it manifest? How does it show up? Then what might be the ripples that follow? Do we get an immediate hit now on the next course? Or do we get people who request the next topic? Then you can see. Then it becomes more tangible. I think all of it is tangible. This is what I study, and this is why I'm paying attention differently. Ask your speakers to ask you, "What do you want people to feel? What do you want them to know? What do you want them to be inspired to do? Do you have questions about the material?" Because there are sometimes assumptions that the teacher, the speaker, or the leader have all the "answers." If you're listening to this, I'm holding up my fingers because it's not about answers. It's about responses. It's about engagement. There's that word again. When people engage, then that comes home to roost. Engagement is like a boomerang.

Ginger Johnson: [00:21:49] We want people to engage, so let's go ahead and toss that boomerang. Give it a really nice, robust throw. And do the work, the spinning, and, if it comes back in a way you want it to come back, then you know you have closed the loop. Ask your speakers if they've done anything similar. That does not disqualify if they haven't because some of the best people to deliver are people who have never delivered your material. It's fresh. They have all kinds of questions. They're excited about it. They're slightly nervous about it. They want to do a really good job. That's important. Ask them what fires them up about this material because the people who have a purpose, who can find a personal attachment to what you're asking them to deliver, they'll do better. The people who are tired or just not frothed up in their own way, then it's probably time to examine that or find out what's going on and either release or refresh. So there's a lot, and I gave you more than three, but I'll pause there. There's a lot. Overall, think about speaking as the speaking to connect. That's the way I simplify it, and I help different organizations do that sometimes too. But focus on speaking to connect. Ask your speakers questions that get to that.

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Celisa Steele: [00:23:01] I appreciate the idea of engagement as a boomerang, and I have friends from college who made boomerangs for a time.

Ginger Johnson: [00:23:09] Oh, you're kidding!

Celisa Steele: [00:23:10] And so I spent a lot of time trying to throw boomerangs. It's a challenge to get them to come back. So I like that—that engagement, to do it right, takes some skill, takes some practice, takes some effort. I like that.

Ginger Johnson: [00:23:24] Is it a lot of throwing out there and going and getting them and trying it again?

Celisa Steele: [00:23:31] Yes. And then the interesting thing too is, because they were all handmade, they were slightly different. You maybe perfect this one; it's coming back most of the time. But then you pick up a different one, and you've got to adjust a little bit. So, yes, I like the analogy. I think it works. There are a lot of layers to it. It resonates for me.

Ginger Johnson: [00:23:48] Wonderful.

Celisa Steele: [00:23:50] This is the Leading Learning Podcast, and one thing we like to ask all of our guests, given that, is about your own practices, habits, and sources for your own lifelong learning. Tell me a little bit about how Ginger Johnson likes to learn.

Ginger Johnson: [00:24:08] Wow. I have invested robustly in myself, Celisa. I've learned every single time I've invested in buying a course, in hiring a coach, in going to the event, whatever it is. I enjoy really proactive learning. I enjoy active settings. That is reflected significantly in my own style. I'm a mover around the room. I'm getting people up and going. We know it's proven that, when we move our body, we learn better, we learn differently, we take better care of our brains, so I'm always looking for those kinds of opportunities. What's going on? Who's talking about what? Who do I already respect? Who am I interested in learning more from? Who is somebody I don't know, and they have a topic, a spot, or an event?

Ginger Johnson: [00:24:56] I've got a good friend right now who's actually trying to get me to go to somebody she really follows. I looked up briefly who this person was. She learns from them too; I should clarify that. I thought, "Ooh, that sounds great." She asked me to a specific event, and that event was not available to me, but I asked her, "See if you can find something else." Because of the company you keep when you're learning. Do you like to learn solo and then

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share? Do you like to learn solo and then keep it? Do you like to learn in a party and share it? How do you use your re-entry, as I call it? What do you do when the thing is complete—whether it's an online course, a five-day event, a retreat, a sales meeting, doesn't matter what it is? What are you going to do to progress that forward? Is the worth in the participation? That does have intrinsic value. Absolutely. Is it "I might take it back to my teammates, and I'm going to share these three things"? I like being around other people who are excited about their learning. How their personality is is not the point, but how they're interested in learning—you can pick that up pretty quick. There's that behavior a little bit again. I'm looking for places, spaces, teachers, ideas that continue to fuel where I'm going. So, if you have any suggestions, I'm open.

Celisa Steele: [00:26:13] I like your emphasis on the peer piece of it because you're right that there's so much that you can get, even energy-wise, from the other learners in the space, not to mention, then, the experience and everything else that they're bringing. But, if they come with that high level of engagement, then that just makes it a more...it seems like a richer, easier-to-learn-type experience.

Ginger Johnson: [00:26:39] Yes, instead of doing that whir, whir, whir, it's like, whoop! Yes, it's going up. You're right, the energy. I'm glad you brought that word into the conversation. That is critical; that is tangible; that is vital. If we're fired up about what we do, then that has enormous value. That stays us when it's tough, that excites us when we need a refresh, keeps us going when we're still super pumped. Yes, the energy's.... I want to get to that point, and I'll wrap this one up. I am really clear about being with people who are in the positive energy space—their headset, their mindset, their purpose. I stay away from people who are not in that space. They're not bad people. They're just absolutely not my people right now.

Celisa Steele: [00:27:21] We've talked about connection. We've talked about connection in the context of learning and as a learning business leader. Anything else that comes to mind that you would like to make sure that we share with listeners before we wrap up?

Ginger Johnson: [00:27:36] I would wrap up with this thought. In professional development—which is also the term I use, I love that you use that as a company and an organization—professional development is never a once-and-done. It doesn't matter if it's a single workshop, and it never happens again. If we're truly promoting growth, if we're truly setting the stage, the environment, providing the space, the grace for growth, then that will continue. So really taking a look at what is the longevity? What are the legs? How will this connect another dot to something else? What's the lily pad from one lily pad to the next? What is that? And how do we

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then enjoy learning about what's working, what people are responding to, and responding to what we need to improve, what we need to change? We could probably talk for hours on this. Let's keep it simple is where I'm going. Keep it simple. Make it simple. Keep it simple. Pay attention to things that matter. Let the rest of the stuff go, and just keep connecting with yourself, your team, and your community.

Jeff Cobb: [00:28:56] A keynote speaker, an author, and a joyful human, Ginger focuses her work on the why and the how of connecting on purpose with purpose. In the show notes at leadinglearning.com/episode417, you'll find a link to Ginger's Web site, where you'll see the kinds of keynotes and connection experiences she can design, and a link to her profile on LinkedIn. She'd love to connect with you on LinkedIn, but be sure to add a note that you heard her on the Leading Learning Podcast so she knows the source of the connection.

Celisa Steele: [00:29:29] At leadinglearning.com/episode417, you'll also find options for subscribing to the podcast, and we'd be grateful if you would subscribe if you haven't yet, because those subscriptions give us some insight into the impact of the podcast.

Jeff Cobb: [00:29:44] 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: [00:29:58] And please help us grow the Leading Learning community. At leadinglearning.com/episode417, there are links to find us on LinkedIn, X, and Facebook.

Jeff Cobb: [00:30:07] Thanks again, and see you next time on the Leading Learning Podcast.

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