



## Not Calling the Shots with Kemi Jona

### Leading Learning Podcast Transcript for Episode 420

Kemi Jona: [00:00:00] We are used to dealing with learners where we call all the shots.

Celisa Steele: [00:00:10] I'm Celisa Steele.

Jeff Cobb: [00:00:11] I'm Jeff Cobb, and this is the Leading Learning Podcast.

Celisa Steele: [00:00:20] Learning businesses are part of the third sector of education—the sector that serves the adult learner after they work through the K-12 sector and, then for some, the degree-granting higher education sector. Higher education institutions are increasingly playing a role in serving lifelong and continuing learners. Kemi Jona is the vice provost for online education and digital innovation at the University of Virginia, and he's our guest for this episode, number 420. Jeff talks with Kemi about the increasing role technology is playing in lifelong learning and the challenges colleges and universities face as they look beyond their traditional audiences to serve lifelong learners. Some of those challenges will sound familiar to learning business professionals. Kemi and Jeff also talk about the growth of microcredentials and stackable credentials, the role of credit and non-credit offerings, and collaborations between higher education and associations to support lifelong learners effectively. Jeff and Kemi spoke in June 2024.

Jeff Cobb: [00:01:34] I would like to talk a little bit more about what's meant by digital innovation, in the context of universities in general but certainly at the University of Virginia. Maybe you can say a little bit more about what your specific focus areas or initiatives are, both in online education but then more broadly in that digital innovation space.

Kemi Jona: [00:01:56] Absolutely. The strategic plan for the university—we call it the 2030 Plan—calls on the university to make UVA, as we're called, more accessible to learners beyond campus, or what we call grounds, across the Commonwealth and across the country and the world. And so we're really embarking on, I think, that poor understanding that, especially as a public university, core to our mission is to reach and serve the public first and foremost,

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obviously, within the state of which we're a part of the public system there, and then beyond that, to support our country and learners around the world, who, in this day and age, coming to campus in a beautiful but hard-to-access Charlottesville, Virginia, is tricky. And I think many of your audience members have the same issue, where place-based is extremely difficult, especially post-COVID, where people have really rethought that we need to do better. We need to reach more audiences, and online is clearly the way to do that.

Kemi Jona: [00:03:05] The digital innovation part, in contrast, Jeff, I would say, is focusing on bringing innovative, new tools and platforms to all of our learners, whether they are on-grounds, as we call them—on-campus learners—whether they're faculty members or even staff in the career center, for example, which many of us would not think of as a core formal learning activity but certainly is a critical function, and to create better, higher-quality, more accessible, and more engaging and enriching learning experiences using the digital medium to serve all learners. So some of it, yes, they'll absolutely show up in our online classes, but a lot of it may show up in a face-to-face, regular on-campus course as well, and we can talk more about some of those ideas further if you're interested.

Jeff Cobb: [00:04:00] I'd love to. If there are specific examples you can offer of initiatives you're particularly proud of or that you feel were particularly successful in terms of digital innovation in teaching and learning at the university.

Kemi Jona: [00:04:12] Sure. One effort that I've launched and that we'll be piloting starting this fall is a virtual internship platform, or you might call it virtual work-based learning platform, that allows learners, again whether they're traditional-age undergrads who are on campus or graduate students on campus or in fact online learners, to participate in projects that are sponsored by employers, real-world projects that can fit in a course, as a final project for a course, as a capstone, as a co-curricular activity that you might opt into yourself because you're interested, let's say, in brushing up on your data analytics skill set, and there's a project out there to do that. So that I would call pretty squarely in a digital innovation space because it's not really a core, formal online learning in terms of credit/non-credit, whatever you want to call it, and it can fit in lots of different places across our portfolio of offerings and really enhance those and give us new ways to engage our learners.

Kemi Jona: [00:05:22] I'll give you one obvious example. We have a number of our sports teams. Our student athletes are playing in regional or national championships, and, as the ACC, our conference expands to include California institutions. In a couple of years, they're going to be having to travel to California for games. How do we ensure through digital tools that they're

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still able to, say, participate in an internship if they're practicing or playing, when clearly in person, it may be very, very difficult, if not impossible.

Jeff Cobb: [00:05:59] How did something like that internship program come about? Was that you reaching out to employers? Was it employers reaching out to you? Obviously, you had to get a certain number of employers on board to be able to do something like this. What were the mechanics of that all coming together?

Kemi Jona: [00:06:16] What you just touched on, Jeff, is really one of the reasons why doing this kind of thing is so hard. Because if you're just teaching a regular course or if your listeners are teeing up an offering, where you control the whole thing—a course instructor or whatever, that's basically one person you've got to coordinate with. But, as you mentioned, if you're trying to coordinate with employers, students, and faculty, you've got a lot of moving pieces now, and they all have to work together and come together. And so figuring that out and using a digital tool/digital platform to really facilitate that, lower the friction, create economies of scale and network effects. For example, by having a centralized marketplace of projects, any student at the university could go on there and find it, even if the career services office in our data science school was the one that found it. It allows us to broadly share those resources and then match them to students interests or to faculty course objectives. There's a lot of power in a system like that.

Kemi Jona: [00:07:27] This particular platform, which is called Riipen (R-I-I-P-E-N), was particularly attractive to me because they help go and find the employers and the employer projects, which is something that an individual faculty can maybe do a little bit of from his or her network. But after, you could fill 50, 100, 300 project slots, then that gets to be overwhelming and basically the rational thing to do is to throw in the towel and say, "I can't do this. This is just too much." And so this is a way to unlock that potential and allow the students to do that. Now, the question about why do it? I think it's a consensus view, which is employers want students/graduates who are job-ready. The students themselves certainly want to be marketable and competitive with relevant experience. They want to see how what they're learning applies in specific contexts. We talked about analytics before. Well, analytics looks different in finance than it does in healthcare. And so practicing/applying the same tools and techniques but in a particular work context makes a world of difference and makes it a lot easier to be ready to hit the ground running.

Celisa Steele: [00:08:53] At Tagoras, we partner with professional and trade associations, continuing education units, training firms, and other learning businesses to help them to

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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).

Jeff Cobb: [00:09:32] You've been involved with technology and learning, as well as with lifelong learning, for many years now. I know you were at Northeastern before and had initiatives in this area. What's your perspective on the connection between the two—between technology and lifelong learning? And have you seen the focus on lifelong learning shift in higher education in recent years as technology has created new possibilities and opportunities? I'm going to assume the answer to that is probably yes, but I'd like to hear how you've seen that happen.

Kemi Jona: [00:10:03] Well, yes, the end of your question really is the answer, which is technology has created new possibilities. I've been, as you said, interested in how technology and technology-mediated learning can create greater access to high-quality learning for learners of all ages. For my whole career, that's been the through line for me, whether it be K-12, higher ed (as I'm working on now), or lifelong, as you suggested. And so, yes, the short answer is absolutely. Let's go back and think what was lifelong learning before the Internet? It was go to the library and check out some books. I remember my mom was a big fan of the Osher Lifelong Learning Institute that has chapters at various universities, and she'd go, and they'd have the all-star faculty lectures. She'd go in and meet her friends for lunch, and then they'd go listen to the great lecture. That's quintessential lifelong learning and still is a terrific resource.

Kemi Jona: [00:11:09] But you're going to have to live within whatever 15-, 20-minute drive of campus to really make it worthwhile to get there, and that's obviously very limiting. So, yes, technology's been a game changer. The Internet's been a game changer for lifelong learning, including just being able to find stuff that you're interested in, regardless of where you are. I think the second part to your question was about universities and lifelong learning, which I think is a really interesting and topical question, Jeff. I'm really glad that you asked it because, for many, many years, universities, especially public universities, there's been a lot of lip service to the idea of lifelong learning, and, yes, we should support the needs of our state. Wisconsin, where I did my undergraduate—another great public institution—the Wisconsin idea is that the boundaries of the campus are the boundaries of the state, which is a compelling way to describe it. So there's been a lot of talk about that.

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Kemi Jona: [00:12:08] But what's changed in recent years has been the financial pressure and the demographic cliff, if you will, that higher ed is facing, which is fewer and fewer traditional-age high school graduates—demographically, we know it's going down. And, secondly, a shrinking percentage of those high school graduates are choosing to go to post-secondary, at least right away. So you have fewer numbers in the baseline and then fewer percentages of those choosing to go. And so, all of a sudden, it's like, wait a second, where are all these traditional-age undergrads going? The obvious answer is, well, we should be doing a better job serving learners of all ages, not just 18 to 22 or 18 to 26. And figuring out what that means is really the challenge that a lot of universities have embarked on, and a lot of them have done a great job. And some are still trying to figure out what the answer is, and what does that look like?

Jeff Cobb: [00:13:10] And what do you...? Because I know this has been a significant thing that we now have a much greater percentage of, as you refer to them, non-traditional learners, the ones who...

Kemi Jona: [00:13:19] Post-traditional.

Jeff Cobb: [00:13:20] Post-traditional. Okay, yes.

Kemi Jona: [00:13:21] Because they're the majority now, yes.

Jeff Cobb: [00:13:23] They're the majority now. So what are the main challenges that institutions face in serving those people? I number pop to mind for me right away, but I'd love to hear your perspective.

Kemi Jona: [00:13:35] I think, in many respects, your listeners, Jeff, already deeply understand this audience because that is the core audience, which is a working adult who is juggling multiple responsibilities, perhaps a full-time job, perhaps several jobs, caregiving at home, whether for a parent or children or whoever it might be, community and other activities, and just the full-blown set of responsibilities. And, as shocking as it may sound, universities aren't used to dealing with that population. We are used to dealing with learners where we call all the shots because either they're 18 to 22—they're living on campus or in the dorms. Going to school is basically their number one full-time job. If they have a job, it's on the side. Many do.

Kemi Jona: [00:14:33] Or even a grad student who's coming back for a traditional on-campus, let's say, two-year master's degree or two-year MBA or a law degree, professional degree. We control everything. We control the schedule. You're expected to prioritize that over anything

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else in your life. We just haven't thought that hard about having to meet the learners where they are really, which is, as you suggested, not on campus, living wherever they live, lots of other responsibilities that take precedence over a lifelong learning endeavor, whether it's for credit, not for credit, whatever, and a busy schedule that is not going to be wrapped around the whims of a particular faculty schedule or program schedule. And so the idea of meeting the learner where they are and prioritizing the design of the program, the design of the experience around them rather than around the provider, whoever that is—in this case, the university—that's a big mind shift, and that can be a real struggle for higher ed, the universities and others who have not embarked on that kind of thinking before.

Jeff Cobb: [00:15:44] It seems like it requires a good bit more of an entrepreneurial mindset these days because, in some instances, you have universities or parts of universities almost acting like commercial training firms. They're reaching out to corporate partners and providing customized programming and other options. In other instances, they may be putting their stuff into, say, a Coursera or an edX catalog and getting that out there to the consumer. And then, of course, they're your alumni, too. I remember years ago when I was writing a book that was called *Leading the Learning Revolution*, and I made the comment that it didn't seem like my university, which was the University of Virginia—I'm an alumni there—was actually reaching out to me about lifelong learning opportunities, and, within a year, that had started. I was getting e-mails from the University of Virginia about "Hey, come. Larry Sabato is doing a course for you to tune into." So there're all these new opportunities to go along with those challenges. Do you feel like universities are embracing a more entrepreneurial mindset?

Kemi Jona: [00:16:44] I think you'll find pockets of that happening. One thing to say right off the bat, Jeff, is that we're going to change that come this fall. We're going to launch a new lifelong learning service from the alumni association that is going to try to do a much better job, using AI, to match your profile of interests and career aspirations with the resources that we have available, both in terms of your career goals and your interests. And so we're going to try to walk the talk of lifelong learning starting this fall and try to really lean into that idea. But, yes, I think there's a couple of things going on. Some alumni associations, I think, do a much better job of that. We have an engagement office, which is probably the one sending you the e-mails, that focuses on digital resources.

Kemi Jona: [00:17:36] To your earlier question around what does technology change, we can serve up a bunch of digital resources now, and this obviously exploded during COVID when we had to rethink the whole, "Just come to campus, or go on a trip." Both of those were off the table, so what else can we do? We have Zoom, Webinars from faculty like Larry Sabato, or other

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sorts of digital resources, meet-ups, and stuff like that—those are all online—and obviously more formal courses, whether they be non-credit or other things like that. So there's a lot of opportunity there to do more. And, yes, absolutely, you've got very entrepreneurial units in places like the business school, which has done exactly that for time immemorial. And those are usually the leading providers because that's just core and central to what a business school does. Engineering schools often will do something similar as well. So lots of places where we're trying to reach out and understand what those learners want and how to serve it up or match it to the resources that we have.

Jeff Cobb: [00:18:54] One of the things that seems to have a lot of buzz in higher education these days, and I think even more so than in the association world (where I've tended to do a lot of my work), is microcredentialing, microcredentials, stackable credentials. I feel like I'm continually seeing articles, Webinars about that in higher education. Do you feel like those approaches are getting any real traction at this point? And why or why not?

Kemi Jona: [00:19:20] To me, it's a bit of a mixed bag, Jeff. On the one hand, I absolutely believe that the idea of breaking big chunks of learning down into smaller pieces is absolutely the right thing to do. I think we know that that's what learners want. We know attention spans are getting shorter and shorter. I think, if I remember correctly, the optimum length of a video clip on Coursera is about eight minutes now. That's the magic number that they push for. Regardless of what we call it, whether it's microcredentials or stackable, I think that's the correct direction of travel because it allows users to consume it, learners to consume it, in ways that make sense. On the other side, the flip side is there's been a lot of hype, quite honestly. Just like with any learning technology, just like with AI (now generative AI), there's a lot of hype.

Kemi Jona: [00:20:15] Those of us who have been in this business for a while have seen these hype cycles come and go, over and over, and so we're a little bit more savvy with respect to, well, let's see where the value really is. Let's not get wrapped up in it. I think it's both. I think part of it is definitely correct, and then some of it is a bit hyped up, especially by vendors and others. So where is the sweet spot? I'm absolutely a firm believer in that idea of stackability—you mentioned stackable credentials. And, for the listeners who are new to this concept, the idea is that, when you break up a larger learning experience or a set of experiences into smaller pieces, it would be really nice if the learner had the option at a later time to combine those into something more significant, maybe some kind of larger credential, whether it's a certificate from one of your association members, whether it's an academic certificate, or even a full degree on the academic side, if that's something that someone aspires to. It's like the Lego block idea. It's

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nice to have a bunch of Lego blocks, but it's also cool that the Lego blocks can stack together and fit together, and you can do something with those.

Kemi Jona: [00:21:31] What's especially powerful is the idea that you don't have to decide at the beginning that you want to stack it. It's on the designer side, the provider side to figure out the potential for stacking and enable it, and then allow you, as the learner, to opt into it later if you feel like, hey, that was a really cool course. Maybe I took a project management PMI certificate or something like that, and now I'd really like to go and get a master's in project management. Boy, wouldn't it be cool if that PMI certificate would count for some number of courses? And guess what? It does. It does count in a lot of programs. At Northeastern, for example, we counted that towards a master's in project management. And so a couple of examples for your listeners, Jeff, in terms of ways that stackability can be very powerful across the boundaries between association learners or non-academic providers and higher ed or academic providers.

Kemi Jona: [00:22:35] Back in, I think, 2016, 2017, I did a couple of stackability partnerships. The first was with IBM. This is when I was at Northeastern. We were the first to recognize some of their digital badges, the IBM digital badges, for credit in our graduate programs. IBM, as you know, has been a long-time leader in the digital badging realm. In fact, they've transformed a lot of their business around identifying skills through these digital badges, and so we recognized a number of them into several of our master's degrees. You could cash those in, if you will, for credit if you wanted to continue on with your learning. And then, right after that, I think, in 2017, Northeastern was the first to recognize the Google IT Support Certificate, which was their first professional certificate, for 12 credits into our Bachelor of Science in IT. If you were working in a job, IT, and you got the certificate, the idea was you could continue working and then come in and finish your degree, counting that for 12 credits, which was about \$6,000 or \$7,000 worth of tuition, so it's a pretty substantial amount. And creating those equivalencies, I think, is a really powerful model that I think your listeners could lean into and expand on.

Jeff Cobb: [00:24:03] You've mentioned credits a number of times as you were making those comments, and I know that's always a big deal in the university setting because the coin of the realm there is the degree, and you have to have the credits that that go towards that degree. But, a lot of times, having to deal with that can slow things down—getting things approved and getting them out the door—on the one hand, for things you may be developing, that you want to put out into the marketplace, but then, on the other hand, for things that might be coming to you, like people have participated in the PMI certification or that sort of thing. Are you seeing, as we evolve, more openness to and maybe even a certain eagerness to offering more non-credit

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opportunities in higher education or to be able to give award credit for higher-learning activities?

Kemi Jona: [00:24:54] Absolutely. Look, just because we were talking about credit doesn't mean that's the end-all, be-all. You're absolutely correct that, if you want an academic credential, then pretty soon you're going to need to get into the credit realm. But that doesn't mean to denigrate the non-credit side, which I think is exploding. Obviously, Coursera has been a real key driver in terms of making that accessible to broad audiences, and edX as well. There's a lot of opportunity that universities are leaning into to put non-credit experiences up there. Some of those non-credit experiences can then translate into for-credit later, as you said, credit for prior learning.

Kemi Jona: [00:25:37] Interestingly, Coursera has recently passed a 50-percent threshold of non-academic content being on the platform. We always think of Coursera—at least I do—as like a university, primary university vehicle or distribution channel. But the reality is that there is now more non-academic, corporate, or association content on there than there is academic content. It's time to reboot our understanding of that, and I think it's a good reflection, Jeff, of your question about the importance and prevalence of non-credit versus credit. If you look at their quarterly or annual reports, it's all the non-credit stuff that's going crazy and growing. And, if you look at it, the degree programs are pretty flat in terms of growth—a very slight growth but flat relative to the other stuff.

Jeff Cobb: [00:26:40] Part of that credit space determines how well different types of institutions and organizations can actually work together, in my mind, to a certain extent. And you know that a lot of the work we do is with trade and professional associations—you've referenced that. I personally think there is a lot of opportunity for more collaboration between higher ed, academia and that trade and professional world. You've referenced a couple of things, like bringing certification into degree programs, giving credit for that. Do you see other opportunities? How do you view that whole potential of collaboration between those two worlds going forward?

Kemi Jona: [00:27:17] Yes, another great question, Jeff. I'm absolutely bullish on the opportunity space for that kind of collaboration. I think it's huge, and it's largely untapped. I think, if there's one takeaway from our conversation today for the listeners, it's to really lean into exploring and understanding the kinds of partnerships that are available. What are the reasons behind that? As we talked about before, universities broadly are in a tough enrollment situation. The traditional market, as we talked about, is shrinking. And so the question is, as a university, how

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do you diversify your revenue streams? That's the key question leading to the non-credit conversation that we had and other things. And so building partnerships with associations or other professional learning organizations is, in my view, a really important way to expand your audiences, create new channels for learners to come in.

Kemi Jona: [00:28:24] One of the biggest line items of expense for universities—probably for any learning provider frankly, right after the cost of human capital, your salaries—is marketing. It's how do you reach the audience, and how much does it cost you per person that you enroll? I'm sure this is a front-of-mind topic for a lot of your listeners as they work with limited budgets to try to expand their audiences or reach the audiences they know about, especially in those fields that are not mandated for continuing ed, where the audience has to come to you. And that's great. I think there's a shared understanding there with your audience, Jeff, and the academic audience, which is how do you reach people without having to pay a ton to Google AdWords or whatever other display ads or other costs?

Kemi Jona: [00:29:19] Creating partnerships with an association, where you've got access to that audience through your normal channels and can promote a new kind of pathway, which is to say, well, if you take our learning, we've got a special offer from University X that will convert that into credit or convert it into a part of a certificate where we can share faculty expertise or industry expertise to enrich our programs on either side, there's just massive opportunity.

Kemi Jona: [00:29:52] The other one that I'm really excited about too is the idea of co-design and co-creation. That is an idea of recognizing, especially if we talk about lifelong learning, that learning is not limited to a university campus. Learning happens everywhere. That's what lifelong learning means. And that means there are plenty of experts out there, especially curated by industry associations and others, that have decades of experience that could be really valuable as complements to faculty expertise in the business school, marketing, or whatever discipline it is, engineering, supply chain. And so the idea of building those programs with input from both sides, where we can co-design it and even co-brand it, can be really, really powerful. One example of some work that happened in Northeastern when I was there was a joint master's degree between Northeastern and the Mayo Clinic in Digital Transformation of Healthcare. Mayo is a great brand, one of the top brands globally in healthcare, and so to be able to put that brand and the Northeastern brand together, with experts on both sides, was really a tremendous opportunity. There's a lot more room for that kind of joint development in the future.

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Jeff Cobb: [00:31:09] Yes, I think that's very powerful. The co-creation and co-branding component, in particular, has the potential to really address some core issues that the two camps have around maintaining price point, for example, or reaching and getting the attention of learners. Together, those are problems that can be solved in what is an increasingly noisy and competitive marketplace for lifelong learning opportunities.

Kemi Jona: [00:31:35] A hundred percent, yes. It gives you differentiation right out of the gate, especially if you have a strong brand that you can attach to that. We also know that our students are professional learners. Master's programs, they love hearing from industry experts. A lot of times they're hoping to work at firms that are represented by those experts, build their professional network, and hear what it really is like, not just from one faculty member but from a whole host of experts. It absolutely enriches the traditional academic offerings in that way. So I would not shy away if I were leading an association's learning organization from reaching out to any number of relevant university programs and having a discussion like, "What can we do together that neither of us can do separately?" And differentiate, as you said, Jeff.

Jeff Cobb: [00:32:26] Yes. Kemi, this has been a great conversation. Before we wrap up, I want to switch gears a little bit because we always like to ask guests about their own approaches to lifelong learning since that's what we're all about here. What are some of your own habits and practices, maybe some favorite resources for supporting your own lifelong learning?

Kemi Jona: [00:32:48] It's a great question, Jeff. Probably, like most of us, I wish I could devote more time to it. But I think what I've cobbled together to help me stay current is a number of things. One is I really lean into my network for recommendations. I know that I tend to share articles or posts with my friends that I think are relevant because then it goes through one filter of curation, and so, if I send it to somebody, they're going to know, "Oh, well, it's probably above threshold, worth reading." And similarly, when I get something from my colleagues or friends, I really appreciate that. So sharing with your friends and your network. Obviously LinkedIn is a great place for that to happen more at scale.

Kemi Jona: [00:33:32] It can get a little noisy and crowded these days, but every once in a while I'll pick up a real gem of an article or something that I see somebody refer to over there. I tend to subscribe to a good handful of mailing lists, Substacks, or whatever and follow folks like that because, again, it goes through at least one powerful filter of curation of someone who's smart and who I trust. And then some podcasts. I tend to follow a number of podcast thinkers just to stay abreast of it. That's my smorgasbord of different lifelong learning sources. And then I just try to sneak in some reading in a traditional format if I can.

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Jeff Cobb: [00:34:12] Right. That whole curation filters around this is such an important thing.

Celisa Steele: [00:34:26] Kemi Jona is the vice provost for online education and digital innovation at the University of Virginia. In the show notes at [leadinglearning.com/episode420](http://leadinglearning.com/episode420), you'll find links to Kemi's personal Web site, to Online Education @ UVA, and to Kemi's profile on LinkedIn.

Jeff Cobb: [00:34:44] At [leadinglearning.com/episode420](http://leadinglearning.com/episode420), you'll also find options for subscribing to the podcast. We'd be grateful if you would subscribe if you haven't yet, as subscriptions give us some insight into the impact of the podcast.

Celisa Steele: [00:34:57] We'd also be grateful if you would rate us on Apple Podcasts or wherever you listen, especially if you find the show valuable. Those ratings and reviews help us pop up when people search for content on leading a learning business.

Jeff Cobb: [00:35:10] And please help us grow the Leading Learning community. At [leadinglearning.com/episodes420](http://leadinglearning.com/episodes420), there's a link to find us on LinkedIn.

Celisa Steele: [00:35:18] Thanks again, and see you next time on the Leading Learning Podcast.

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