



Empowering Learning Business Leaders

Leading Learning Podcast Transcript for Episode 421

Jeff Cobb: [00:00:00] Self-reflection is an important tool for learners and an important activity for learning business leaders.

Celisa Steele: [00:00:11] I'm Celisa Steele.

Jeff Cobb: [00:00:12] I'm Jeff Cobb, and this is the Leading Learning Podcast.

Jeff Cobb: [00:00:21] We used to start the Leading Learning Podcast by saying, "If you're a leader or an aspiring leader in the business of lifelong learning, you're in the right place."

Celisa Steele: [00:00:30] And there was some nice, snazzy drum music to go along with it.

Jeff Cobb: [00:00:33] That's right. We did have some different music back then.

Celisa Steele: [00:00:35] Now we no longer say that at the start of each episode, but it's still true—we created and continue to create this podcast for current learning business leaders and emerging learning business leaders.

Jeff Cobb: [00:00:47] Thanks to a recent book, we got to thinking about what it means to be a learning business leader, and that's what we want to focus on in this episode.

Celisa Steele: [00:00:56] Now, the book that got us thinking about that is the most recent publication from Dr. Will Thalheimer. It was published earlier this year, 2024, and it's called *The CEO's Guide to Training, eLearning & Work: Empowering Learning for a Competitive Advantage*.

Jeff Cobb: [00:01:16] And we are, of course, big fans of Dr. Will Thalheimer's work, as listeners. long-time listeners here will recognize. He's been on the podcast multiple times. He has spoken at some of our events in the past, most recently the 2024 Learning Business Summit, which we'll be holding again in 2025. His focus is on corporate learning and development, workplace

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learning, but many of the nuggets from his work absolutely apply to learning businesses as well.

Celisa Steele: [00:01:47] And this most recent publication, *The CEO's Guide*, is fifty chapters.

Jeff Cobb: [00:01:52] Fifty.

Celisa Steele: [00:01:53] Fifty, but they're very short—each one is usually just a couple of pages or maybe up to four or five pages. But, again, very focused, very targeted chapters.

Jeff Cobb: [00:02:05] Practically Zen koans, I think, for the L&D world. It's written, as the title suggests, for CEOs, but Chapter 43 is actually entitled "Your Learning Leader."

Celisa Steele: [00:02:19] There are 11 bullet points near the beginning that are introduced with this text: "Here's what a great organizational learning leader should be" and then it follows with those points. But we thought, "Wow, okay, let's see what Will has to say." And then we thought what we can do is go through those points, gloss them with that learning business lens on them, putting that focus on them.

Jeff Cobb: [00:02:42] That sounds like a great structure for a podcast episode, so that's exactly what we're going to do here. I will name the first, or articulate the first, of those 11 bullets. And that one says this learning leader is "tasked with creating learning that leads to benefits for the organization aligned with 'business' needs."

Celisa Steele: [00:03:03] I think that's very true for learning business leaders as well. The learning business is going to be really focused on how the learning products and services in its portfolio feed into the mission of the learning business. Now, if the learning business is embedded within a larger organization, as is the case with trade and professional associations often, then you are going to want to make sure that there is that alignment between that learning function and that learning portfolio with the larger organizational strategy. And then, of course, if the learning business is freestanding, then it absolutely still has to make sure that what you're providing aligns with the business needs, the business realities of the overall organization.

Jeff Cobb: [00:03:50] Right. Of course, we encapsulate those business goals and needs under those banners of reach, revenue, and impact. We won't go into detail about those here because we've talked about them so many times, but that is the business focus of a learning business.

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Celisa Steele: [00:04:04] The second bullet in Dr. Will Thalheimer's text is that great organizational learning leaders should be "tasked with creating learning that benefits employees and other key stakeholders, including the beneficiaries of those learning programs, employees, coworkers, customers, investors, families, communities, society, and the environs."

Jeff Cobb: [00:04:29] That's a tall order. You can tell these are leaders who are creating this learning because they're thinking at that level about what they're creating, and, of course, the same should be true in a learning business. In the case of a learning business, we're not employee-focused like learning and development departments are, or at least not directly. We may be reaching the employees of the companies that are in the field or industry that our learning business serves. It's just not about the employees within our own organization. And, of course, most of those other stakeholders are going to apply in some way.

Celisa Steele: [00:05:01] Right. We've talked about creating a learning culture within a learning business. I think this point from Will speaks to that very directly—this idea that there's a ripple effect, that you can have impact directly on the learners, but then it spreads beyond them. It also spreads to who those learners touch—their families, their coworkers, and then ultimately that spreads out into society and, as he puts it, the environs as well.

Jeff Cobb: [00:05:29] That's right. I think our people are all about the environs because you're really reaching a lot with what you're doing as a learning business leader, what you're creating, and the extent to which you're helping to facilitate learning across a field or industry. Now, let's look at the third of these 11 bullet points, and this one is that a learning leader is "tasked with enabling improved work performance beyond learning interventions, using performance-activation and learning-in-the-workflow approaches."

Celisa Steele: [00:06:00] Again, I think that this is very applicable to learning businesses, even if it might take a bit of a leap to make the connection. When you are providing learning and development for employees within your organization, you have a ton of opportunities for, as he calls it, performance activation and learning in the workflow. It's a little bit harder for learning businesses, but I think this is a very important point for learning businesses to remember—that it isn't always about a course, a conference, or a seminar. There are other things that you can be doing that will support the goals of making sure that the people you serve not only are hearing about important content and ideas but are applying them.

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Jeff Cobb: [00:06:46] To me, this goes straight to the heart of the maxim that we cite so often—that learning is a process, not an event. Yes, we’re all doing courses; we’re doing conferences; we’re doing Webinars—those are part of our portfolio. But our goal isn’t to put people through a course or a Webinar or conference. Our goal is for them to actually change their behavior out in life and out in work, to do things differently and to do things better, and to always keep that in mind. What’s happening beyond that course, beyond that Webinar, beyond that conference? How are we designing to support that?

Celisa Steele: [00:07:18] We can design to support that even within the context of some of those containers, like courses and conferences. We can have job aids. We can have templates that are going to help make that application piece easier and make it possible for the learner to apply that. Again, we agree with Will here around thinking beyond pure or only learning interventions and thinking about performance and learning in the workflow.

Celisa Steele: [00:07:46] Now, the next bullet is that a great learning leader should be “wholly responsible for hiring staff—not subjected to the request, ‘Can you find a place for Joe in training?’”

Jeff Cobb: [00:07:57] I don’t know exactly how much this happens in our world, but I’m sure it does happen somewhere. It’s just like, “We’re going to stick So-and-So over here because there happens to be an open box. And you, director of education or VP of learning, please take this person and put them in the role,” even though they may or may not have the background that you want a high-performing learning business staff to have.

Celisa Steele: [00:08:18] The next one is that a great learning leader should be “a member of your senior team—and specifically NOT housed under your Human Resources unit.”

Jeff Cobb: [00:08:30] This mostly would not be part of our world because we’re not talking about internal employee training, so it wouldn’t really be a human resources function. But I think it is often true that the leader of the learning business—if, for instance, they’re housed within, say, a trade or professional association—is not necessarily a member of the senior team, in spite of the fact that the organization’s mission probably says that education is one of its primary goals, in spite of the fact that members are probably saying that that’s one of the major reasons that they join the organization, and in spite of the fact that education is often generating significant revenue for the organization.

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Celisa Steele: [00:09:10] If you're a learning leader in this position, where you're not considered a member of the senior team, it can be a bit of an uphill battle to advocate for yourself. But, as you were just pointing out there, Jeff, it can be worth making it clear to the organization what a fundamental role learning plays in the mission of the organization and, in the case of associations, that's why members are often coming to you. This can be a place to potentially advocate for yourself and make sure that the learning focus isn't lost and that it is represented on that senior leadership team.

Jeff Cobb: [00:09:49] This will vary from learning business to learning business. If you are a freestanding learning business, that is your sole focus as a business, and this isn't going to be as true—but it will be true in some instances.

Celisa Steele: [00:10:03] At Tagoras, we partner with professional and trade associations, continuing education units, training firms, and other learning businesses to help them to 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.

Jeff Cobb: [00:10:41] The next bullet is that this learning leader is “a person who has spent a serious amount of time working in learning and development—NOT someone just passing through.” I don't know—I feel like this has evolved a lot over the years. Again, I'm thinking primarily of learning businesses that might be housed within associations, as opposed to the more freestanding, say, a commercial training firm or even more of an academic-based learning business. I think it used to be much more the case that people ended up in some of those types of learning businesses accidentally, just like people often end up in associations accidentally. You'll then end up in the education department, and you may or may not have that L&D background. I think that is changing, but it is still an issue out there.

Celisa Steele: [00:11:26] I think that this again offers an opportunity for potential areas to focus on or to work on. If you are someone who doesn't necessarily come to leading a learning business with a lot of experience in learning science, that's the kind of thing that you can fill in. There are a ton of resources to help you get up to speed there and to become someone who is knowledgeable and isn't just there by happenstance. And so this is an area to make sure that you and your team really do have that grounding in what it means to deliver effective learning and different techniques and approaches for that.

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Jeff Cobb: [00:12:03] The thing that we would add here that isn't as much a part of Dr. Will Thalheimer's world is the business experience and the business acumen as well because these are revenue-driving either standalone businesses, where revenue is the focus of the learning business, or they are a revenue creator within a larger business, and you have to have that sort of business acumen, that business background coming into it. Coming from a pure L&D background, where you haven't had that business experience, can be a deficit for you in that position.

Celisa Steele: [00:12:34] As a side note, I believe Will is both a PhD and has an MBA.

Jeff Cobb: [00:12:39] I believe he is. He is a very accomplished guy.

Celisa Steele: [00:12:43] He does bring both the learning aspect, and he went back and filled in some of the business side of things with his MBA.

Jeff Cobb: [00:12:48] Right.

Celisa Steele: [00:12:50] The seventh point that Will raises is that a learning leader should be "a person with a deep understanding of learning and learning-to-performance practices." As we were discussing the sixth point, we began to get into this, that you really do need to have some knowledge of what goes into effective learning—and not just knowledge but understanding, as he says here, and also this idea of learning to performance. Again, it's not just about presenting content, no matter how elegantly you do that. It really is about how do you make sure that that content has some impact on the performance of the learner?

Jeff Cobb: [00:13:26] This is the type of thing too that the person in this position has to stay on top of because this is evolving, and people like Will are doing a lot of the work that is evolving this and increasing our understanding, and you can't just come into a position with whatever background you do have in learning and performance and expect what you know to remain true. That's true of just about any job or career these days; you have to stay on top of it.

Celisa Steele: [00:13:50] One reason we are big fans of Will is because he does do precisely that work of helping to translate what we know from science and from studies that have been conducted rigorously into then what does that mean for how we design learning? And so taking advantage of people like Will, taking advantage of other people who are doing that

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translation work, is very important in helping you, as a learning leader, really have that deep understanding.

Jeff Cobb: [00:14:18] And this points to the next bullet, which is that this learning leader needs to be “a person with knowledge and affection”—I like that “affection” part of it—“for the learning and performance sciences,” “a person who knows how to balance practical priorities”—those might be business priorities in our world, certainly—“with evidence-based wisdom.”

Celisa Steele: [00:14:41] “Evidence-based” is important. I like that he pairs that with “wisdom.” This is a place where we can make sure that we are taking approaches that are going to help us move the needle in whatever the field or profession with the learners that we’re focused on. But I also appreciate this idea that he’s acknowledging that it’s a balance because I think we all know that some of the best practices for effective learning are a little bit impractical in terms of, if you were going to be quizzing yourself every other day on everything that you’ve learned, which would force some retrieval practice, that might not be practical. You might have to do it a little bit less often or a subset of what you’re learning. But, again, balancing that as much as possible and leveraging those techniques whenever you can.

Jeff Cobb: [00:15:34] The next one is that this learning leader should be “a person responsible for voicing and enabling the ethical and social dimensions of employee learning.” Again here Will is mainly focused on corporate L&D, so that employee focus. We can drop “employee” and just say, I would say, “of learning” for whatever audience you’re serving. I feel like oftentimes this kind of ethical and social dimension doesn’t really get realized. We’re impacting entire fields and industries with the education and training we’re providing, and it is going to have some ethical and social aspects to it almost by default. I don’t think those tend to get forefronted a lot.

Celisa Steele: [00:16:17] And then the tenth point that Will raises is that a learning leader should be “a person responsible for supporting managers and informal learning leaders throughout your organization.” This really does speak to the role of leading and leading a team, and this would apply to learning business leaders as well, to the extent that you are not a team of one. Even if you are a team of one—because he mentions informal learning leaders—it might be that, outside the purview of “education” or “professional development,” there might be others in the organization you want to support in their understanding of effective learning practices, and you want to be a resource to them. You want to help recruit them so that, again, there’s that culture of learning that you’re creating within your learning business and then more broadly in the learners that you serve.

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Jeff Cobb: [00:17:10] Definitely. And then the next one of these, and this is our final one here, number 11, this learning leader is “a person with knowledge of the functional and cultural milieu”—I like that he uses “milieu” there—“in which your organization operates—whether in small or large business, in the nonprofit world, or in government, military, education, etc.”

Celisa Steele: [00:17:34] This speaks to this idea that, yes, you need to be knowledgeable in the field of learning and adult education. We added to that the need to be conversant in business practices. And then, here, I think Will is saying you need a little bit of domain expertise. So whatever the focus is for your learning business, make sure that you understand it. Maybe you’re not an expert coming out of that field or profession per se, but you need to understand it well enough to understand the implications for how you can help learners in those fields or professions actually achieve learning goals.

Jeff Cobb: [00:18:12] Some of this comes down to how and how well you work with your subject matter experts in creating the different types of learning experiences you provide. It also comes down to decisions you make about how much in-house subject matter expertise do you hire for, do you actually have on staff. I increasingly see organizations that do have some substantial subject matter expertise in house that’s helping to inform what they’re doing from a learning standpoint.

Celisa Steele: [00:18:40] Those are the 11 points that Will saw fit to include in his guide for CEOs. Jeff, what else comes to mind? What would you add to this list?

Jeff Cobb: [00:18:52] I’m not sure I would add anything to the list. It’s probably more about how to use a list like this and how to use a source like Dr. Will Thalheimer because we’ve noted a number of times that he’s coming more from that corporate learning and development world. And a couple of things may happen with the audience that we serve. One is that you see some things coming from the corporate L&D world, and you say, “Well, that’s not me,” so you’re not going to take advantage of it. I hope we’ve illustrated here that there is a lot in this list that does apply to the world that we work in, so you have to translate it. And I think that’s the other thing—a lot of people are receptive to these kinds of sources and looking at a list like this but don’t necessarily make as much effort as they should to translate it and figure out, “Okay, yes, here Will is saying ‘employees.’” It’s easy to translate that into a customer or member, but what does that really mean? How does it change that bullet? And then how does it apply within our organization once we do that and make that effort to translate and translate well?

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Celisa Steele: [00:20:00] I agree that there's a lot wrapped up in that idea of translation, and, in my mind, it ties to reflection, which we know is an important tool in learning. We would encourage you to reflect on this list. Maybe do some additional translation work beyond what Jeff and I have offered in the course of this conversation. And think what else would you add? What would you put on this list that might not be reflected in any of these bullets but that you see as being really fundamental to your success as a learning business leader?

Jeff Cobb: [00:20:31] We might just cap this off by noting that Will does make the point that chief learning officers, or whatever that top learning leader position is titled, do need support from the top of the organization, from the CEO and from the other senior leaders who hopefully are peers of that learning leader. And that includes support to spend on their own development and in hiring outside help when needed—consultants, coaches, or whatever the case might be—and support that helps to make sure that learning really is a focus of the organization's overall strategy.

Celisa Steele: [00:21:07] Another place for you, dear listener, to reflect a little is around do you have the support that you need in your organization, and, if not, how can you advocate for that support?

Jeff Cobb: [00:21:28] Self-reflection is an important tool for learners and an important activity for learning business leaders. We're grateful to Will Thalheimer for including a succinct list of what a great learning leader should be in his book *The CEO's Guide to Training, eLearning & Work*, which was the basis for our conversation.

Celisa Steele: [00:21:50] At leadinglearning.com/episode421, you'll find show notes, a transcript, and options for subscribing to the podcast. If you haven't yet, please, please do subscribe.

Jeff Cobb: [00:21:59] And we'd be grateful if you would take a minute to rate us on Apple Podcasts or wherever you listen, especially if you enjoy the show. Celisa and I personally appreciate reviews and ratings, and they help the podcast show up when others search for content on leading a learning business.

Celisa Steele: [00:22:15] And please spread the word about Leading Learning. You can do that in a one-on-one exchange, and you can do it through social media. In the show notes at leadinglearning.com/episode421, you'll find links to connect with us on LinkedIn, X, and Facebook.

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Jeff Cobb: [00:22:31] Thanks again, and see you next time on the Leading Learning Podcast.

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

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