



Flexible Leadership with Kevin Eikenberry

Leading Learning Podcast
Transcript for Episode 450

Celisa Steele: [00:00:03] If you want to grow the reach, revenue, and impact of your learning business, you're in the right place. I'm Celisa Steele.

Jeff Cobb: [00:00:10] I'm Jeff Cobb, and this is the Leading Learning Podcast.

Celisa Steele: [00:00:16] This episode, number 450, features a conversation with Kevin Eikenberry, a recognized expert in leadership development and in learning and the chief potential officer of the Kevin Eikenberry Group. Kevin is a leader, a learner, a podcaster, a speaker, and an author, most recently of *Flexible Leadership: Navigate Uncertainty and Lead with Confidence*. Jeff, you had the pleasure of speaking with Kevin Eikenberry again—I say “again” because he's been on the Leading Learning Podcast before, way back in episode 80. What did you and Kevin talk about this time?

Jeff Cobb: [00:00:52] As you might guess, we talk about the concept of flexible leadership and the growing relevance of flexible leadership in a world that feels more complex and uncertain and that seems to necessitate flexibility.

Celisa Steele: [00:01:05] Kevin also talks about three pillars of flexible leadership in your conversation.

Jeff Cobb: [00:01:11] He does. He talks about the importance of mindset, skillset, and habitset. Arguably, those same three things are not just keys to leadership but to learning—we need mindset, skillset, and habitset to effectively learn and apply ideas and concepts.

Celisa Steele: [00:01:29] I'll also say, dear listener, that if Jeff and Kevin's conversation piques your interest in flexible leadership and you want to work on improving your own leadership (your confidence, your flexibility, your leadership in general), listen at the end for ways to access some of Kevin's resources. With that, on with the conversation.

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Jeff Cobb: [00:01:54] You have got a new book out—we were talking a little bit before the show—and, between being the lead author and the coauthor and all of those sorts of things, you're past 20 books at this point, so you've got quite a track record here. This one is called *Flexible Leadership: Navigate Uncertainty and Lead with Confidence*. There's probably a lot of appetite out there for learning how to navigate uncertainty these days and do that with confidence. You say, in the book, leadership is complicated—arguably, it's more complicated than ever now—but you also say that the core of leadership hasn't changed. What prompted you to write *Flexible Leadership* now, and what does flexibility really mean in our current context?

Kevin Eikenberry: [00:02:39] As you said earlier, the world is complex, and there is as much or more uncertainty than ever. I don't know if we can actually say that because this is the only time we've lived, but we can safely say that there's as much or more uncertainty across a wide variety of areas than most of us can remember in our lifetimes. And so all of that adds to the complexity of leading. The need for us to have tools to help us deal with uncertainty is greater now than ever, and so I believe the book is coming out at the right time. I'm excited because I think that it has something to say that hasn't really been said. I'm like you—I read lots of books. I read lots of books about leadership, and I don't say that lightly because there's a tremendous amount of stuff that I've read that's phenomenal. Certainly, I'm standing on the shoulders of all of that, and yet I do think I'm saying some things here that haven't been said.

Jeff Cobb: [00:03:36] Are you hearing right now—or in leading up to writing this book—from leaders who are feeling overwhelmed in our current world? And what are you hearing from them if that's the case?

Kevin Eikenberry: [00:03:47] I certainly hear some of that. I know this won't be out in the world for a while, and people could be listening to this anytime in the future, but, as you and I are having this conversation, it's been almost exactly five years since COVID changed a whole lot of stuff for most all of us. From that time on, the level of overwhelm, the amount and speed of change, the amount of uncertainty have become a bigger issue than ever before. I don't think it's always come out as "I'm overwhelmed with uncertainty," and yet that's a big part of what it's been. And, to your point, I think we're hearing that word more now, even though I'm not sure what people are feeling is any different than it's been for three, four, five, six years, but I think that people are starting to hold on to that word or want to let go of that word, but that word is more in our language than it had been previously.

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Jeff Cobb: [00:04:44] Now, you structure the book around three pillars, and we're talking about uncertainty—it's nice to have some structure to how to think about that. But those three pillars in your book are mindset, skillset, and habitset. Maybe you can talk a little bit about why you structured it that way, and then I'd also like to know which of those do you see most often overlooked by leaders?

Kevin Eikenberry: [00:05:10] I am so glad that you brought that up. If there's any audience, any of the podcasts that I'm going to do in the promotion of this book, this is the audience that I think will resonate with this particular point. Like all of us in the learning business, we know that we're in the business of giving people skills, and that's true. People go to training, build skill, watch an e-learning course, watch a YouTube video, listen to this podcast, hoping to get some skills. Skillset is super important, but, without the other two, the skillsets don't matter. Let's just walk through it all the way. I would say of the three, we, Jeff, as an industry, are best at the skillset. We know what we're supposed to do—put new skills in people's toolkits. But, if the mindset doesn't match it, if people don't believe that those skills apply, if they don't believe those skills are relevant, if they don't think they're needed, if they don't think they're important, it doesn't matter how good we are at giving them the skills. If the mindset doesn't match it, they're not going to use it.

Kevin Eikenberry: [00:06:15] Intellectually, they might get it—whether it's in a workshop or a virtual workshop or whatever, whatever the learning experience is, synchronous or asynchronous—they might nod, but nothing's going to change. And then the gap between the skillset and the habitset, I think, is the one that all of us have tried to figure out for a long time, or we try to be really good at skillset and then hope. Hope is not a very good strategy in this particular case. When I talk about habitset, I'm talking about skills in my toolkit that I pull out and use because, if not, we give people a learning experience, and those tools become dusty or rusty, and, if they're dusty or rusty and aren't being used, what was the point? Habitset is applying the stuff. It's crossing the chasm from knowing to doing. It's the question, Jeff, that I ask on my podcast every episode: "Now what? What will you do with this?" So I framed the book around mindset, skillset, habitset. We've been talking about that. We've been trying to help clients apply that for a long time, and it made total sense to me to make that the overarching framework of the book.

Jeff Cobb: [00:07:28] I really love habitset, and it's something I've been trying to become more conscious of myself because, as you said, you have these skills, but, until you do start to habituate them into what you're doing, they just don't have the power that they could, and I've tried to be more conscious in noticing that. I find it's easier when I'm doing something like, say,

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learning a musical instrument. I finally realized, “Oh, I’ve got those scales under my hands in a way that I can use them meaningfully now.” I find it a little harder when I’m thinking about leadership to figure out that I’ve embodied and incorporated the habits that I need. Do you have any tips for leaders who want to develop their habitset portion of this?

Kevin Eikenberry: [00:08:13] I was mindful as you were talking about your fingers feeling the scales. In days long ago, I played the saxophone, and there was a time when I had that skillset. But, if you don’t keep that, if you don’t keep doing it, that’s going away. The last time I put my hands on a saxophone, I could still play a scale, but not the way I once could. We’re mostly talking now about bringing in new things to bear—a brand-new thing that I’m going to try to apply. We’re very fortunate now, in this time, that there’s been a tremendous amount of study, research, and practical writing about how do we build habits? And probably the most famous application of all that is *Atomic Habits* by James Clear. I certainly mentioned some of his work in the back part of this book. It’s not the only book around habits that’s very good; it happens to be the one that continues to outsell everything else, and most everyone who’s listening probably has at least heard of it. If you’ve heard of it, you should read it. If you own it and haven’t read it, you should read it. If you read it but haven’t done anything, read it again. Fundamentally, there’s a lot in there.

Kevin Eikenberry: [00:09:22] For us, as individual leaders, the main thing is we need to try something. We need to find a time when we can try it. I know this may sound old school—it’s not the only way we learn anymore, I realize—but think about the time you left a workshop, and you left with a lot of excitement, anticipation, you were ready to go try stuff, and then you got back to the office, and the world hits you. All of that intention went by the wayside while you were trying to bury your head into the work and get caught up right from being gone. The thing to do, I suggest, is pick something small and get started. And, while there’s a lot of stuff in this book, Jeff, every individual piece is like, “Try this. Try this here.” If we want to start to build up our muscle memory around being flexible, it requires us to just get started.

Jeff Cobb: [00:10:22] I’m going to do something surprising here and switch to Welsh really quick—use a Welsh word.

Kevin Eikenberry: [00:10:27] It’s not surprising to me.

Jeff Cobb: [00:10:29] It’s not surprising to you. It might be surprising to readers to hear me say “Cynefin” (ku-nev-in), which I hope I’m pronouncing correctly. I only have a shot at it because your book said how to pronounce it correctly. I’ve seen the word in print for years and years,

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and I'm familiar with Dave Snowden's work, but I think this is the first time I've had to say it out loud.

Kevin Eikenberry: [00:10:47] You get an A.

Jeff Cobb: [00:10:48] Fantastic. I mentioned it because you draw on the Cynefin Framework to help leaders respond based on context. In the learning business—and we're probably not alone in this—we often face multiple contexts at once. How do leaders get better at diagnosing context, which seems essential, when we're talking about uncertainty as we have been—diagnosing context and responding appropriately?

Kevin Eikenberry: [00:11:16] Let me tie it to uncertainty for a second in Dave Snowden's work—really great work—around this thing called the Cynefin Framework. Everybody, if you're not familiar with it, he says that the situations we find ourselves in fall into—generally speaking, for the purposes of this conversation—one of four contexts, and that's in this framework. One of those contexts is called the “clear context,” and this is the context that a lot of us grew up in at work. There's a clear cause and effect. People know what things are best. Practices are really fantastic. We should find a best practice. We should follow a process. The person who has expertise has the answers. We could go there and get the answers. And that's awesome. You in the learning business, this is the way it once was—let's find our subject matter expert. We've got some processes. We'll put this together, whatever the media might be, and we're going to rock and roll. But the world is more complicated, Snowden would say, or more complex, and he would say those two things are different—two of the other four parts of the framework.

Kevin Eikenberry: [00:12:22] Fundamentally, there are more things that we don't know than there used to be, and that would be complicated. There are things we know we don't know, and so we have to try to find those things. Yet it's still an ordered world such that there is probably a way to find all those things out. It might take time. Sometimes we may have to make decisions without all that information, but all that information probably exists. And you're saying, “But, Kevin, not all the things I deal with now are like that.” Some of them are like, “We don't even know what we don't know.” It's fuzzier even than that, and that's what Snowden and the framework would call “complex.” I believe that more and more of our work is here. There are competing priorities. There are different situations. There's no such thing as single, right answers. There are shades of gray in every direction you want to look. Oftentimes we'll make some decision. We'll look back at it six months later and say, “Well, it makes sense now. Now we know why all these unintended consequences happen. If I'd known all that then, I'd have made different choices.” But, in a complex setting, we might not be able to know all those things

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then, and so we have to approach those kinds of things quite differently than if the context is clear.

Kevin Eikenberry: [00:13:37] The fourth one of his contexts is “chaotic.” And here’s what I find happening: Leaders either want to assume everything’s a clear context, which it’s not, or they say, “Well, if it’s not totally clear, then it’s just chaotic,” and they want to throw everything in the world of chaos. I would suggest that, in the world of work—as Snowden would define it, which is a helpful way to think about it—there are very few things that are truly chaotic, that most of the things that we might call chaotic are actually complex or complicated. I know that we haven’t given this, Jeff, the treatment that people need. I encourage them—whether they get *Flexible Leadership*, or they read up on Dave’s work—I highly recommend you doing it. What I’m trying to do is help you think through a map of what to do in your situation. If you always do the same thing, you always get the same result, obviously. But, in a world that’s continuing to change, and there are varying degrees of uncertainty, those things we’ve always done, our natural responses, our best practices, what we think it is, our style are likely not going to help us. I’d like to say one more thing about style if you don’t mind.

Kevin Eikenberry: [00:14:47] This particular audience, I know that a lot of you really care about helping your leaders. I’m asking you now, as you’re listening to me, to put on your helping-other-leaders-learn, not just for yourself but for everybody else too. In your organization, it is your goal, it is your passion that you want to help leaders get better. I love that; we are on exactly the same page. And yet one of the things that we often do is use assessments and use tools and use styles, assessments, and all sorts of things. We use strengths and styles and Myers-Briggs, DISC, and we can go on and on. All of those tools are marvelous until they’re not. Often they’re not. Here’s why. It’s because we have now turned them into our identity. “Well, I lead like this because this is who I am. These are my strengths.” “I’m a facilitative leader.” “I’m a directive leader.” “I’m a servant leader.” “I’m an iS.” “I’m an ENTJ.” I can talk all the different languages. The point is, once it becomes our identity, we are mentally locked in, and our ability to flex gets even harder. Knowing our style to know our tendencies, super helpful. But, if we oversimplify it and, as professionals, if we keep trying to teach it so they get it, what we might be doing is cementing in the inability for them to flex, and that’s not what we want at the end of the day.

Jeff Cobb: [00:16:19] Yes, locking people into an identity that they then don’t know how to navigate their way out of. That does prompt a follow-on question for me that is related to what we were just talking about with Dave Snowden’s work. People want consistency. They want consistency in themselves and their own behavior. They want some consistency in what they

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are providing as an organization because, arguably, that's the basis of trust, and it's a basis of security. There is a legitimate need for consistency. You don't want that "foolish consistency" that, as Emerson said, "is the hobgoblin of little minds." You've got to know when to have the consistency and when to be flexible as you advocate and be able to innovate in the context that you're in. How do you strike that balance?

Kevin Eikenberry: [00:17:02] First of all, you framed it the right way. It's a balance. Too often people say, "I can be consistent," or "I can be flexible." And, as you've hinted, the most helpful way to think about this is "How can I be consistent and still be flexible?" Or "How can I be flexible and still have a level of consistency?" Think of a tree, a mature tree. A mature tree is stable and consistent and known and not moving, and it's locked in. It's rooted. And, as leaders, we should be rooted. We should be rooted in our values and our principles, in the principles of human behavior, group dynamics, change management, and all that sort of stuff. There are principles that are known. There are values that we hold. There's a mission that we have. There are purposes that we serve. That doesn't change. But how we work to get to those things, like the leaves on the tree, should absolutely be flexible. It really is a matter of how do I do both? Not pick one. So thinking about this is what I talk about in the book as a flexor, that we need to be both consistent and flexible, and I believe that, once people see us as consistent on the why, they're going to be very comfortable with us being flexible on the how.

Jeff Cobb: [00:18:29] You referenced just a bit ago in our conversation this idea of cultivating yourself as a leader but also helping to cultivate other leaders. You even devote a chapter in the book to "Creating an Organization of Flexible Leaders," which I know, in their hearts, the people who are leading learning businesses, of course, want to do that, to be able to cultivate the people who are working for them and with them as leaders, even their learners as leaders. But I also find that, in many of the learning businesses we deal with, especially in trade and professional associations, staff development isn't always at the top of the list. It's often a cobbler's children thing in terms of developing people. What are the first steps leaders can take to begin a cultural shift that does lead to that organization of flexible leaders?

Kevin Eikenberry: [00:19:20] Let's say you're a trade association, and you are trying to provide services to your members around learning services; if you want to have the most possible impact and influence on helping them to do that, you better be doing it yourselves. It can't be that the emperor has no clothes because your vision. People watch our feet more than our lips, and so we need to put that at the forefront because, if we don't, everything that we're doing out into the world, even if our intention is completely honorable, it's ringing hollow if people aren't seeing it in what we're doing. How does that play out with your staff? You've got your staff out

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there talking about the importance of learning with your members and all that sort of stuff, and then they're thinking, "Well, I'm not getting any of that. It's a fool's errand to do that." So I would be pretty blunt, hopefully kind but straightforward, Jeff, and say, "If that's what's happening, you need to reassess the priorities because your ability to be influential with your members and with your external customers will go up when it's consistent with what you're doing internally." Do you agree? What have you thought about that?

Jeff Cobb: [00:20:39] Absolutely. I feel like we've said similar things in the past that, yes, you absolutely have to be walking the walk. In my mind, that's a big part of leadership in general. If you're not an avatar for your expectations of people, then how can you hold them to those expectations?

Kevin Eikenberry: [00:20:58] I think we all see that when those people are around us. They're on the same Teams channel with us. But, if it's our customers, sometimes that can get disconnected. I don't think anyone's going to disagree with what you or I just said, but, with the customers out there, we can lose that thought. You and I are both saying don't lose that thought. You've got to because, if you don't, it's going to have impacts that you might not even be able to see.

Jeff Cobb: [00:21:23] To go back to our earlier discussion around the habitset, this needs to become habitual as part of you and as part of your organization. It's ingrained in the culture. Part of what flexible leadership does for me is help to elevate the consciousness of that and make it clear that you have to be intentional about doing that. It's not just going to happen.

Kevin Eikenberry: [00:21:42] I'm very clear that, in this book, I'm asking people, like you said it, and I agree, that being a leader is a complex task. It's not simple. It's complex. In this book, I'm urging people to make it harder for a while because I'm suggesting that you don't just do what comes natural, that you don't just do your habit, that you don't just do your style, but rather that you look at the context and say, "Oh, well, it depends." What does it depend on? "Well, based on that, I might need to do this a little bit differently." That's the crux of this book, which means that I'm urging you to say, "I have to get out of my auto-response habit, natural-response style and make that my new habit." Once I can get that as my new starting point, then I'm going to look at the context of the situation, at least for an instant or an hour or a day, before I go forward. Once that becomes your new habit, now you're really on the path of being flexible rather than wanting to be a flexible leader.

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Jeff Cobb: [00:22:46] Yes, I like that—making it harder possibly before it gets easier, which is so often the case with learning in general. You have to get out of your comfort zone. You have to make the effort. You have to do the deliberate practice. Sometimes it doesn't feel all that pleasant, but it gets you to where you ultimately want to go, which does feel great once you get there.

Kevin Eikenberry: [00:23:04] And the fruits of leadership are tremendous. The opportunity that we have to make a difference for our organization, for our clients, for our members, for our customers, for our teams. As we get better at it, the fruit of that labor is pretty amazing.

Jeff Cobb: [00:23:19] Definitely. This isn't going to be the TL;DR version because I want everybody to read this book. This is a great book for everybody to read—*Flexible Leadership*. But this is a podcast, people are listening, and, if they want to begin applying some of the ideas to their business, where would you suggest they start? Is there a particular chapter or a practice that you cover or something that jumps out at you that you really want people to know about this and do this from the book?

Kevin Eikenberry: [00:23:46] The first thing, I think we've done a pretty good job here, Jeff, and I hope that you have the intention and realize that "flexible" is okay and probably even preferable in some cases. Secondly, there are times when you are considering something or someone asks you for your input or your eye or your decision on something, and you say in your head, "It depends." In those moments, when you say it depends, ask yourself, "What does it depend on?" And, based on that, I might do something different. That's the kernel of being a flexible leader. But, when you ask yourself, or when you say, "It depends," you don't even have to know how to say Cynefin to fundamentally.... At some level, you're saying, "I have to make more sense of this situation before I decide what we could or should do." It's intention plus context—this I've described as "It depends." And then, lastly, it's flexors—being willing to flex. Let's take a super simple one for 30 seconds. Sometimes our best response is to answer. Sometimes our best response is to ask.

Kevin Eikenberry: [00:24:47] Most of us lean toward one of those things most of the time, and yet where we need to be in a certain situation or in lots of situations is more the other direction on that. Maybe we need to ask more, or maybe we ask a lot, and sometimes we need to be more definitive for our team. That would be one of the things we would call a "flexor" or the "Answering/ Asking Flexor." That's what I would say. If you're going to buy the book, start with the first chapter because it lays out the groundwork and why this is so important for all of us. And, if you do that, I think you're heading in the right direction. In fact, you can get that

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chapter for free if you go to our Web site and give yourself a taste of the book. If you go to flexibleleadershipbook.com, it'll get you all the ways to order the book, and there's a bunch of bonuses if you buy more books for your organization, but you can get that chapter.

Jeff Cobb: [00:25:37] That was definitely one of the things I was going to ask you before we wrapped up here. But one other thing I want to ask you before we tie a bow around this is about your own lifelong learning, and I believe we've talked about this before. Certainly, evidence of it has come up in the podcast, but you obviously have to always be learning yourself to do what you do and to do it well. How would you talk about your own—I'm going to use one of your terms—habitset around lifelong learning? How have you cultivated that habitset, and what does it consist of?

Kevin Eikenberry: [00:26:07] I read a lot. I consume a lot of things in a lot of different ways. I'll say that something I do that not everybody does is I look at the world often through a learning lens. In other words, something will happen, and I'll say, "What can I learn from that?" Or let's take it more specifically from a leadership lens. If I watch a movie, I can enjoy the movie. It's not like I'm some sort of weirdo, but I'm going to look at that movie at some point through the leadership lens. What are the leadership lessons here? What does this confirm for me? Or what does this make me think about that I've not considered before? When I'm reading an autobiography or a biography, that's part of the lens I'm looking at it through. We can become a better learner about anything, in part, by choosing the lens to look at it through. We can watch any news program, and I'm not talking about politics now, although you can watch a show that's about politics, and, if you watch it, instead of thinking about the policy, think about the process that the leaders were using or not using and say, "What can I take from this? What lessons can I draw? What inferences can I make?" That's a really powerful thing.

Kevin Eikenberry: [00:27:21] The other thing that I'd like to think I'm pretty good at is reflection, which is to be consciously willing to stop and look back and say, "How did that go? What worked? What didn't? What do I want to do differently next time?" One of the things that I will do when you and I are done, before I get on to my next thing because I'm going to have a couple of minutes, is I'm going to say, "How did I think I did here? What might I do differently or better next time? Did that analogy work? Did I talk too much?"—which I think I did in this case. Or whatever. But think about what happened and say, "What do I want to keep? What do I want to change, and why?" Doing that is a hugely valuable way to learn.

Jeff Cobb: [00:28:02] We are big fans of reflection here at Leading Learning. I do believe we have at least one episode devoted to it, and we often do after action reviews for our episodes as well.

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And I love consciously applying a learning lens as you go through life, certainly something every listener here should take to heart.

Celisa Steele: [00:28:24] We're not done quite yet—keep listening for our recap.

Jeff Cobb: [00:28:29] At leadinglearning.com/episode450, you'll find show notes, a transcript, options for subscribing to the podcast, and links to the Kevin Eikenberry Group's Web site and to where you can download the first chapter of *Flexible Leadership* for free.

Celisa Steele: [00:28:44] And, if you enjoy the Leading Learning Podcast, we would love for you to share an episode with a colleague or two who you think would benefit from listening.

Jeff Cobb: [00:28:53] Celisa, when you think about the conversation with Kevin, what are you taking away?

Celisa Steele: [00:28:58] You already highlighted mindset, skillset, and habitset at the outset of our conversation, but Kevin does a nice job of explaining how each is essential for leading and, as you already said, learning too. I also like how he uses Dave Snowden's framework, but I'm going to leave the Welsh pronunciation to you.

Jeff Cobb: [00:29:20] That's right. The Cynefin (ku-nev-in) Framework, which puts forth four contexts: clear, complicated, complex, and chaotic. Kevin pointed to the fact that too often leaders assume things are clear or chaotic, but probably a lot of contexts are actually complicated or complex.

Celisa Steele: [00:29:39] I'll mention one other thing I'm taking away, and that's Kevin's distinction that, if leaders are consistent with the why, then they can be flexible in the how.

Jeff Cobb: [00:29:49] That's it for this episode. Kevin has a lot of wisdom to share about leadership. So thanks for listening in to that, and we'll see you next time on the Leading Learning Podcast.

[music for this episode by Moarn]

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