



Five Practice Levers for Navigating Uncertainty

Leading Learning Podcast
Transcript for Episode 454

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: [00:00:17] How to navigate uncertainty successfully is top of mind for many leaders now, and this episode is a second installment in a two-part look at ways to help your learning business survive and thrive in uncertain times.

Jeff Cobb: [00:00:32] Our look at uncertainty in this episode and our last episode draws on a keynote I gave recently, and we wanted to share what I covered more broadly to help more learning businesses as they seek to navigate uncertainty.

Celisa Steele: [00:00:45] In our last episode, we looked at four habitsets that can help learning business leaders, and in this episode, number 454, we want to turn to five practice levers that can help you put those habits into action. These are levers you can pull, actions you can take that support those habitsets, that help you navigate uncertainty effectively. Because the practice levers connect to the habitsets, it's good for us to recap the four habitsets that we talked about in episode 453, and those four are informed agility, strategic foresight, stakeholder intimacy, and portfolio thinking.

Jeff Cobb: [00:01:24] Just a quick run-through of what we meant by each of those. Informed agility is about moving quickly but with insight. You want to pilot, test, adjust in real time—this is the domain of the minimum viable product. The next one, strategic foresight, means regularly scanning for weak signals that are emerging in your market and exploring the possible futures that those signals could lead you to. The third one, stakeholder intimacy, means staying close to your learners, to your members, to your customers—making sure you know them deeply. And then the fourth one is portfolio thinking—designing an integrated suite of offerings that spread the risk and reinforce value that aren't too concentrated on a single offering (for example, your annual conference).

Celisa Steele: [00:02:19] These four habitsets can help your learning business become more antifragile, meaning your learning business doesn't just survive any difficult time, but it becomes stronger because of that difficulty. Antifragility is something that we talked more about in episode 453, along with more about each of those habitsets.

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Jeff Cobb: [00:02:42] But habitsets have to be put into use to become habits, and that's where the five practice levers we want to talk about today come into play.

Celisa Steele: [00:02:52] These are tools, approaches, and disciplines that help make those habits actionable. These are practical, flexible, and scalable. These are the kinds of things that any learning business can apply.

Jeff Cobb: [00:03:06] And you don't need to implement all five at once. You can pick one, start small, and then build from there. But these levers are designed to strengthen your organization's ability to navigate uncertainty, respond to change, and act with purpose.

Celisa Steele: [00:03:22] So let's start with the first lever: pulse monitoring, which ties to the stakeholder intimacy habitset.

Jeff Cobb: [00:03:30] Pulse monitoring is about regularly gathering insights from your market and your stakeholders—not once a year, not when something goes wrong, but on an ongoing, consistent basis. It's a system of listening.

Celisa Steele: [00:03:46] And not just listening passively, like reviewing some analytics from your Web site. You should also be actively and directly engaging.

Jeff Cobb: [00:03:55] We've developed something at Tagoras called the Market Insight Matrix. It breaks insight-gathering into three stages—idea generation, idea verification, and idea testing—and, within each stage, you can listen passively, you can listen actively, or you can be much more direct.

Celisa Steele: [00:04:16] Passive might be the Web analytics that I mentioned, or maybe you're monitoring social media. If you want to take a more active approach, that could be polling some of your learners or members, or it could be looking at usage patterns in your learning management system. And then a direct way might be having interviews with some of your learners or conducting focus groups.

Jeff Cobb: [00:04:37] The goal is to make that activity structured and repeatable, not something you do only when you're launching a new product. It should be part of your rhythm as an organization. It should be done systematically. You should have a system for how you're going to do this, and there's responsibility and accountability that should be lying behind it. And what's being heard and learned should be reported back in a way that allows you to use and leverage that information and insight.

Celisa Steele: [00:05:07] In that keynote that you gave, Jeff, you noted that organizations that probably responded best to COVID were the ones that were already doing this kind of monitoring. They weren't scrambling to figure out what learners needed; they already knew that.

Jeff Cobb: [00:05:20] That's right. If you've built a habit of listening, you can move faster and more confidently when disruption hits, and you're more likely to uncover emerging needs and opportunities before your competitors do.

Celisa Steele: [00:05:32] That was a look at one of the practice levers, pulse monitoring. Let's move to the second lever, scenario planning. This one ties closely to that habitset of strategic foresight.

Jeff Cobb: [00:05:44] Yes, scenario planning is about exploring possible futures, especially around key decisions or initiatives that you're considering, and then thinking through what might happen under different conditions.

Celisa Steele: [00:05:56] Instead of committing to a single projection of the future, you consider multiple outcomes. You're going to look at a best-case scenario, a more moderate scenario, and a worst-case scenario.

Jeff Cobb: [00:06:08] Exactly. For each scenario, you're going to ask, "What works well here? What struggles? What would we want to preserve regardless of how things unfold?"

Celisa Steele: [00:06:17] And then you identify a keystone change, something that has a high impact across multiple futures—maybe across all three of those best-case, worst-case, more middle-of-the-road scenarios. That term "keystone change," that's something that you borrow from Greg Satell, right?

Jeff Cobb: [00:06:35] That's right. Greg is one of our favorite thinkers about change and being strategic in the face of change. We've had him on the podcast before. A keystone change, as he defines it, is a relatively small or focused decision that triggers broader transformation. For example, during the pandemic, some organizations didn't just move their conferences online. A lot of organizations did that because they had to, but some used that moment to reimagine their entire events strategy, and that one decision led to new pricing models, year-round engagement, other offerings, and, in general, a more resilient business.

Celisa Steele: [00:07:14] It's about using uncertainty as a forcing function. It's using uncertainty to help you clarify priorities and to make decisions that can catalyze your learning business.

Jeff Cobb: [00:07:25] Right. Disruption obviously can feel disorienting. But it also sharpens your focus. Scenario planning helps you get the most from that clarity—by turning it into strategy.

Celisa Steele: [00:07:37] We've talked about two practice levers so far: pulse monitoring and scenario planning. The third lever we want to talk about is revenue model innovation. That one tends to perk up ears.

Jeff Cobb: [00:07:51] And with good reason. Many learning businesses are still overly dependent on what we would characterize as transactional revenue—selling individual courses, events, or credentials. That's a model that's vulnerable in volatile times.

Celisa Steele: [00:08:06] And so this lever encourages us to explore models that are more predictable, more scalable, more learner-centric, and it ties pretty directly to the portfolio thinking habitset.

Jeff Cobb: [00:08:19] Things like subscription models, membership access, learning passes, learning paths, microcredentials—these are all ways to create ongoing value and potentially recurring revenue.

Celisa Steele: [00:08:32] I'll mention here our Value Ramp. This is a simple tool that helps you look at the products that you offer along two axes. One axis is price; the other is value. The driving principle behind the Value Ramp is that, as products become more valuable, their price ought to go up, and, as their price goes up, they ought to be more valuable. And so, then, any individual product, as it's more valuable, more expensive, is going to move up the curve or ramp. And you have to build some momentum with your offerings to help people move up that ramp or up that curve.

Jeff Cobb: [00:09:10] Yes, it's a fact of life, at this point, that most prospective learners out there expect to get something free from us, at least early in their relationship with us. They want to be able to test the waters before they dive in and buy that bigger-ticket seminar or conference registration or buy services from us. The Value Ramp is a tool for thinking more intentionally and consciously about our portfolios and how the offerings fit together.

Celisa Steele: [00:09:38] As one example, the American Speech-Language-Hearing Association (ASHA) has a subscription model, which I would place fairly high up on their Value Ramp because the Learning Pass—that's what they call the subscription—includes most of their self-paced online offerings, which learners can also buy as one-offs. I'd put those one-offs lower down on the Value Ramp. ASHA launched that subscription model in February 2020, just before COVID rocked the world.

Jeff Cobb: [00:10:07] In what I see as an antifragile move, ASHA didn't just wring its hands—I'm sure there was some handwringing and bemoaning the horrible timing of the launch—but then they decided to make the Learning Pass free to members for three months to help those members during a tough time. But they were also smart about positioning that as a short-term freebie, and, over time, they returned to the original intention of this being a paid subscription. Now the Learning Pass generates significantly more revenue than their previous model of one-off sales did. In fact, more than double what they used to produce from those one-off-type sales.

Celisa Steele: [00:10:47] Using the same resources, those exact same courses—double the revenue.

Jeff Cobb: [00:10:50] Yes, they didn't create anything new that they weren't going to create anyway. They packaged it differently. They positioned it differently and applied attractive pricing to it.

Celisa Steele: [00:10:59] That shows the power of recurring models. They can create sustained engagement; they can create smoother, more predictable revenue cycles for the learning

business; and they help align with the reality of learning, that learning is a process and not an event. I've heard Jack Coursen of ASHA talk about that. Philosophically, the Learning Pass aligns well with what we know about how learning happens.

Jeff Cobb: [00:11:24] Definitely. Whether it's a subscription model or some other recurring model, they often make life easier operationally. You reduce the need for constant remarketing. You deepen your relationship with learners because they're typically there for the long term. They're going to renew year over year. And, because that's happening, you can gather much more meaningful data about usage and outcomes.

Celisa Steele: [00:11:48] We've talked about pulse monitoring, scenario planning, and revenue model innovation. Now let's turn to our fourth lever, ecosystem partnerships. This one seems especially important in the current climate, where speed, scale, and reach are all really important and come at a premium.

Jeff Cobb: [00:12:10] Ecosystem partnerships are about recognizing that you don't have to build or deliver everything on your own. In fact, trying to do it all internally can slow you down and limit your impact. If you're trying to do things like build that portfolio out, if you're trying to find good ways to get that insight into your market, those partnerships can really help.

Celisa Steele: [00:12:32] You might partner with an academic institution; you might partner with a technology vendor; you might partner with employers; you might partner with a peer organization—those people who might potentially be competitors, but you could also choose to cooperate with them. No matter who you're looking at a potential partnership with, the key is to make sure that you really do have shared value and that you're aligning around that shared value.

Jeff Cobb: [00:12:58] An example I gave in the keynote was an association that partnered with a university to offer a joint certificate. The association brought audience reach and subject matter expertise. The university brought brand credibility and credentialing infrastructure. Together, they created something stronger than either could have alone.

Celisa Steele: [00:13:18] Partnerships aren't necessarily only about content. They can also be about distribution, co-marketing, research, or even platform integration.

Jeff Cobb: [00:13:29] I suggested using the frame of content, people, and technology—which we've talked about before—as the big areas around which you might form a partnership. If you look at each of those areas, there are going to be sub-areas within each one. Within your content, you've got online courses; you've got place-based courses; you've got community interactions. There may be good ideas for partnership in there. If you look at people, you've got your volunteers; you've got your speakers; you've got employers, just to name a few. Plenty of opportunities for partnership there. Look under technology. You've got all the various vendors you work with around various platforms. If you break it down and look at what your ecosystem looks like in terms of content, people, and technology, there are a ton of partnership opportunities. The key, of course, is to start with listening. Understand what your partner needs

and how you complement each other. And then be intentional about how the collaboration supports your learners.

Celisa Steele: [00:14:24] That was the fourth lever, ecosystem partnerships. The fifth practice lever, the final one that we'll talk about, is tech awareness. This is about being tech-aware but not necessarily tech-led. This one feels particularly urgent with all the buzz around AI and other emerging technologies.

Jeff Cobb: [00:14:43] Yes, there's a lot of pressure to adopt the latest thing right now. There always is, but I feel like that's particularly strong right now, especially when competitors are making headlines with whatever it is. But being tech-led can lead you astray if the technology isn't really aligned with your strategy.

Celisa Steele: [00:15:01] To be tech-aware means you need to stay informed. You need to know about what these emerging technologies are. You need to experiment with them, but you need to be doing that thoughtfully. And you need to make sure that, ultimately, any choices you make about your technology really serve your mission and your learners.

Jeff Cobb: [00:15:19] You want to ask, "Does this tool enhance accessibility?" for example. "Does it simplify the learning experience?" "Does it help us deliver value more effectively?"

Celisa Steele: [00:15:29] You shared an example of a group that's been using AI to help accelerate content development by helping subject matter experts draft outlines. They've used AI to bring in initial drafts of content. Then the subject matter experts can review that. That group wasn't trying to replace those human subject matter experts, but they were trying to better support them through the thoughtful use of AI.

Jeff Cobb: [00:15:54] That's a great illustration. In that case, they really worked with the subject matter experts, and they integrated their SMEs, which I've started to talk about more and more, throughout that entire process. They were able to accelerate things but still keep that quality, that human check on it—that was very important to them, and it's important to probably every organization that's putting out learning content. In that case, the technology really helped to amplify what the people were already good at—both the people on the learning team who were doing the design and development and also the subject matter experts. It definitely did not eliminate human input. That's really the sweet spot: where tech supports human intelligence and doesn't displace it.

Celisa Steele: [00:16:36] This lever around tech awareness isn't just for your IT staff.

Jeff Cobb: [00:16:42] Absolutely. In this case, everyone on the team—especially product developers, instructional designers, learning leaders—has to have a baseline of tech literacy. They don't have to code, but they have to be able to ask good questions and participate in smart decisions around technology and in the use of the technology.

Celisa Steele: [00:17:08] We're not quite done yet. Stick around to hear about the concept of strategic slack, our recap of the five practice levers, and some suggested reflection questions.

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Jeff Cobb: [00:17:18] At leadinglearning.com/episode454, you'll find show notes, a transcript, and options for subscribing to the podcast.

Celisa Steele: [00:17:26] If you enjoy the Leading Learning Podcast, please recommend it to one colleague or co-worker you feel would get value from listening.

Jeff Cobb: [00:17:33] To recap, we covered five practice levers. Pulse monitoring, which is building structured ongoing systems to listen and learn from your market. Scenario planning—mapping multiple futures and identifying keystone changes that create strategic leverage. Revenue model innovation—moving beyond one-time sales and exploring recurring, scalable value delivery. Ecosystem partnerships—collaborate across organizations to go faster and further. And then, finally, tech awareness—using technology thoughtfully, aligned with strategy and learner needs.

Celisa Steele: [00:18:12] These five levers help you activate the four habitsets that we talked about in episode 453. These levers can help you turn ideas into action and help you build the capacity to respond and grow through uncertainty.

Jeff Cobb: [00:18:27] Again, you don't need to implement all five at once. But you should be asking, "Which ones are we already using? Which could we strengthen? And what might we try next?" Which practice lever could you commit to activating or strengthening within the next 30 days?

Celisa Steele: [00:18:44] Strategic adaptation is about progress, not perfection. This is that idea of "Just pick one of these." Even a small move in the right direction can compound over time, especially when it's supported by good habits. You don't have to overhaul your entire strategy overnight. But what's one concrete thing you could do to start moving forward? And remember these reflection questions aren't just for you. These can be great things to discuss with your full team.

Jeff Cobb: [00:19:12] If you want help thinking through any of this—how to build in foresight, design stronger portfolios, or rethink your revenue model—we'd love to talk. That's the kind of work that we do at Tagoras.

Celisa Steele: [00:19:23] We've included links in the show notes at leadinglearning.com/episode454 to some of the tools we've mentioned, like the Market Insight Matrix and the Value Ramp. Lastly, Jeff, one thing you mentioned in your keynote that we haven't talked about yet is this concept of strategic slack.

Jeff Cobb: [00:19:42] That's right. Strategic slack is the opposite of over-optimization. When everything is tightly scheduled, tightly budgeted, tightly staffed, there's no room for experimentation. There's no room to respond to emerging ideas or unexpected shifts. There's no room to deal with failure.

Celisa Steele: [00:20:02] Part of becoming antifragile is building in space for adaptation. That might mean having some slack in budget, some slack in staffing flexibility, so you're allowing

room for trial. You're allowing room for curiosity and mid-course corrections. Because, if you're constantly running at 100-percent capacity, you're actually very brittle. One unexpected issue—you lose a key staff member, or a vendor folds—and you're in real trouble.

Jeff Cobb: [00:20:31] Which ties back to something we've talked about before on this podcast—the idea that learning businesses aren't just about delivering education. They're systems that have to learn themselves. Learning isn't just something we offer to others. It's something we have to embody as organizations. And, uncertainty, for all its challenges, is an incredibly rich teacher if we're willing to engage with it.

Celisa Steele: [00:20:55] Thanks again, and see you next time on the Leading Learning Podcast.

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