Curiosity, Clarity, and Courage with Lowell Aplebaum

Leading Learning Podcast Transcript for Episode 458

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] If you're a leader navigating change, shifting expectations, or questions about your organization's identity and future, this episode is for you. Whether you work in an association or another kind of learning business, chances are you've felt the weight of uncertainty and are looking for a way forward that's both grounded and strategic.

Jeff Cobb: [00:00:37] Our guest for this episode, number 458, is Lowell Aplebaum, CEO of Vista Cova, and a previous guest on the Leading Learning Podcast. Lowell works with association leaders and boards on visioning, governance, and strategy—and he brings a thoughtful, deeply human approach to the challenges facing organizations today.

Celisa Steele: [00:00:58] Absolutely. Lowell talks about how identity has to come before strategy—how you can't lead effectively if you're unclear on who you are as an organization. He also talks about bravery and stability—about showing up with conviction even in volatile times.

Jeff Cobb: [00:01:15] And it's not all high-level philosophy—Lowell also shares practical advice. He talks about how to structure board agendas, how to equip volunteer leaders, and how to rethink learning design so it's not just rigorous in content but meaningful in experience.

Celisa Steele: [00:01:33] We also get into empathy, curiosity, and AI, and we wrap up with Lowell's perspective on lifelong learning, both professionally and personally.

Jeff Cobb: [00:01:42] There's a lot in here, so let's get to it. Here's the conversation with Lowell Aplebaum.

Celisa Steele: [00:01:52] When I think about the world right now, it seems like we're continuing to be served up a lot of uncertainty. We've got political uncertainty. We've got economic uncertainty. We've got a lot happening in the tech realm with AI. I'm curious to know, Lowell, what do you see as some of the most pressing implications of this moment when you think about the work that associations and other learning businesses do, from that strategic standpoint of what it means to do their work and exist in this world of uncertainty?

Lowell Aplebaum: [00:02:24] I'm going to parse uncertainty into two frames. In the early 2020s, with the onset of COVID and what that did to our rate of change, that unto itself caused an uncertainty. There was forced innovation that had to happen if you were going to adapt to survive through a terrible time of challenge. But also that time of challenge, the forced adaptation, gave us some base level of skill sets from an organizational standpoint of how to be more adaptive. And so, at least when I'm working with organizations, whether it's through the idea of a changing generation and learning context or an overall organizational direction, that rate of change is not new—we're five years into that. And, even before, that was moving quickly. There's an uncertainty that comes with we need to be able to quickly adapt, perhaps not who we are but how we are living, who we need to be, that we've had a handful of years to come up to speed, whether or not organizations have embraced being quicker in that adaptation in the face of uncertain times.

Lowell Aplebaum: [00:03:36] What I'd point out here—by the time we're having this conversation—is this year's been interesting because the uncertainty of an ever-increasing rate of change has now intersected with volatility. What I mean is that, even as things developed and changed—new technology—some of those bedrock places of foundation and stability that were the basis upon which organizations and their leadership could base their conversation and their projection have really been shaken. Whether you look at that through the lens of threats to nonprofit tax status and potentially having corporate tax rates on membership and learning and everything, whether you look at grant-funded organizations and what that's done, whether you look at so many of my beloved scientific organizations, pick the things that were tried, true, tested.

Lowell Aplebaum: [00:04:35] If you could live in D.C., how many people thought they were safe in their jobs for the rest of their lives? How many of your colleagues, friends, and family are now experiencing job upheaval? Uncertainty—I think we're at the intersect of these two contexts, Celisa. We're at the intersect of a society that now is experiencing rapid evolution, shift, and change, and we're doing so now in this time and age that has not slowed, but the pieces, the bedrock of stability that perhaps gave us a place to stand to navigate that, are teetering. And, if you know any change management theory, you know the slope that change is hard because, when you experience change, you experience loss—the loss of stability of what you once knew was true, the abandonment of the processes that brought you success—and you have to come out the other side of seeing wins and returns, that the change was worth it, until you build a new platform of stability that, whatever you change to now, is better and is working.

Lowell Aplebaum: [00:05:38] That's the long way around to get to the answer to your question, which is the opportunity I see in this moment for our organizations is to try to find those places to create (even if it's short-term) stability, short-term bedrocks of knowledge, of convening, of community. Together there's a greater whole that, through volatility and uncertainty, there is still stability in who our profession is, who our community is. And perhaps the work we have to do has to change—the problems we have to address, our priorities still need to be navigated.

But, if we have clarity on our identity, then I have a deep-seated belief that the nonprofit organizations that we serve are the beacons of hope and light in a time of universal uncertainty that can gather people, gather industries, gather professions together to navigate that uncertainty through the strength of unity and community.

Celisa Steele: [00:06:35] Part of what you're saying there does make me think about the fact that, when you were on the podcast last—not too long after COVID had hit—one of the points you were making was around the need to shift from the crisis mindset in dealing with the immediate upheaval and uncertainty to a strategic mindset. Which still feels very relevant in this moment. Do you agree that, in this moment, there is still a need to shift from crisis to strategy? And, if so, then what does that look like practically? What are some of the ways to get to some of that bedrock that you were talking about in your answer to that last question?

Lowell Aplebaum: [00:07:18] There is still a continual need for a strategic mindset. What that means for this moment in time has a different lens, at least from my point of view. A strategic mindset for where we are in the mid-2020s heading towards the late 2020s means two or three critical pieces. Number one is a clear, crisp understanding of identity before you get to strategy. From an identity perspective, if you take a group of leaders and say in a sentence or two, what makes this organization unique in what it brings to community and society, either because of what it can do that no one else can or what it does better than anyone else that makes a positive impact for its community and for society? But you make them do that in the context of what would that have been ten, twenty, thirty years ago? What is that today? What does that need to be in five to ten years?

Lowell Aplebaum: [00:08:17] The articulation of identity—especially present to future—gives a core basis upon which you can build strategy. A volatile and uncertain world should not change your identity. It should change how you utilize that identity and the impact that you make and what you advance. But I have found a muddying of the waters, and, in the face of so much uncertainty, identity is based off of past instead of future-focused context. I use that as one lens of strategy, of a strategic mindset. The other is this balance of a place of, as I referred to earlier, being able to put in places of stability. What can you depend on us for? No matter what happens, what will we be here for? As well as a place of bravery. If truly you are driven by mission—and money drives mission; organizations need to have political relationships to advance mission—there are many factors of what you need. But the ostrich philosophy of "Let's hide our head in the sand, and hopefully these things pass by" is simply going to lead to you drowning in the sand.

Lowell Aplebaum: [00:09:34] Where do organizations—if they are clear on their identity—choose bravery to be the voice and the standpoint, to be the champion of their mission, of their purpose? To do so in a way that hopefully is a place of unification, recognizing there are many diverse parts of their community, and they have to be the platform, the bedrock for all of those? But those places of unity should be places that they are loud, proud, and the leading voice of. And I think a strategic mindset for the place we are in the mid-2020s has a clarity of identity, has recognition of where we bring stability to our community, has the bravery to be the

strongest voice, the champion, purpose and mission, and the ability to convene and bring together, build bonds between the community that is going to rally around that purpose and that mission in a way that, in the world where we're all too divided, our organizations are places of strength together.

Celisa Steele: [00:10:41] Looking back and then looking at the current moment and then looking forward, I really like that because it helps, I think, a group of leaders or those involved to see the evolution and how that does shift slightly over time and then gives you the permission or the ability then to think about the future and imagine where we might go from the present moment. Part of what's on my mind is, if this is a group of people and this idea of coming to a shared identity, it seems like that can be somewhat messy. What does that look like to get to agreement around "This is our identity; this is what people can count on us for, so that then we can speak with this loud, proud voice about the work that we do and how we're going to serve"? Talk a little bit about how multiple voices come to coalesce around an identity and what that looks like in practice.

Lowell Aplebaum: [00:11:32] The opposite of messy, if you're talking about neat, has to it a finality. If everything is neat, ordered, and structured in its box, then you have a hard time moving things to a new structure. And so I think you need a little bit of messiness. But the messiness I would think of is the mindset of the identity of an organization has clarity but malleability for a continual evolution. And that means that inherently leadership has to be emboldened, strengthened, recognize the obligation, and be trained to be champions, so that the identity of the organization and how it embodies its community is not something done to the community but with the community.

Lowell Aplebaum: [00:12:18] And that means, as we think about the duties we look to our leadership to fulfill, a primary one that has emerged is that we don't do the job that we should in terms of training our volunteer leaders to be this. When we think about them being champions of the organization, there needs to be a continual place of effort and proactive outreach for dialogue and input with the many components and pieces of a community—not that the loudest voice changes direction because you always get the bell curve of the loudest voices on one end and the loudest voices on the other but that there is a continual dialogue and a place of input, a place of "What are the trends, the themes, the perspectives that we're hearing? How do we, as an organization, steer—not from our place of purpose and mission and turn 90 degrees but navigate what makes our unique identity true, through the waters of what we're hearing, as the challenges that are being experienced?" That's where you get the messiness—the continual evolution of the solution, design, and application to ever-shifting challenges without losing the identity.

Celisa Steele: [00:13:31] We've often talked about strategy—and a lot of people talk about strategy—as a framework to help make decisions. How do you wrestle with collective decision-making around what is the right decision based on the strategy?

Lowell Aplebaum: [00:13:45] A strategic framework is a good reference point if you want to point to it in terms of decision-making, but it's meaningless if you haven't incorporated it into practical ways of how you're living it. There's a multi-tier incorporation that has to infuse the organization if it's something that's actually going to guide the organization. If I'm designing ideal board agendas, 10 to 15 percent of the time is consent agenda with all the committee…. No one got on the board because they want committee reports read at them. So get all that stuff done there. And then 40 to 50 percent is about the business of the organization—the idea is those things are directly correlated back to connect to what we set as our strategic focus and priorities and the things we're trying to achieve. There are things that are the business of the organization that don't correlate to those things. They become glaringly obvious if that's part of your routine. That direct correlation unto itself creates a fluency of leadership that where we invest our resources is designed to connect to what we said are the critical places we need to focus, and so there's an answer to the responsibility therefore.

Lowell Aplebaum: [00:15:08] By the way, there's a 25- to 30-percent piece of that agenda left for generative and futurist conversation. From all these conversations, what's coming that may need to shift some of that? But that's just one piece of it, Celisa. If you really want to see strategy guide an organization, besides a direct integration with how leaders spend their time and agendas, how is every committee of an organization's charge refreshed? I have a phoenix philosophy that every committee should be sunset every strategy cycle, and then you rebirth the ones that you need, demanded by operational strategic priority, with charges that directly align to those strategic or operational priorities. With what they're trying to achieve, correlate it to that, with clear, mini-strategic plans. "What are we going to achieve this year? What's our scope of work there?" So their work can be celebrated for the achievements. But the story of strategic advancement from this framework is not just at the central organization; it's every arm of the organization.

Lowell Aplebaum: [00:16:09] The committees, the same thing with the components, the chapters, the task. So what you see is a hub-and-spoke model of strategy. The strategy itself guides the organization as an absolute of identity but as a malleable place that many hands contribute to how it advances. From there, the singular framework of "We make decisions based on our strategy" If we started from a place of uncertainty, you have to recognize that, if you are any organization that experiences efforts in the advocacy realm, in the learning realm, in grant-making realm, the world right now does not look like the world nine months ago. I don't, however, think that that means frameworks that design what we're trying to accomplish are necessarily moot. It may have shifted how we accomplish it. It may shift what groups we need to accomplish it. It may shift how we communicate it. It may shift who we convene and how we convene.

Celisa Steele: [00:17:13] Part of what you're talking about with who we convene, how we convene, how we do the work—to me, that feels related to an importance you place on things like empathy, listening, and curiosity. Because that's part of how we're going to diagnose, in the moment, what needs to happen and how we can serve the community we've set out to serve.

Talk a little bit about things like empathy and listening, their role in an organization strategy, and potentially even how one might operationalize something like empathy—if that doesn't already sound like a contradiction to operationalize empathy.

Lowell Aplebaum: [00:17:52] Of the three books I'm writing right now, my favorite is titled *Curiosity Driving Mission*. Play with me in the sandbox if you will for a moment, in the space of an organizational mindset and framework that was driven by curiosity and how that would have to change how we function. Curiosity inherently means that all of us need humility—what we know today is insufficient. We are continually looking to expand perspective and horizon because curiosity means exploration. What does that mean for leadership? When you get elected or selected for a critical role in the organization, much less an officer role, it's not because your wisdom is sufficient; it's not because your experience and the length of your CV are all that's needed. A curiosity-driven organization is going to select leaders that all the more so are seeking the many voices that will continue to enhance.

Lowell Aplebaum: [00:18:53] Staff-driven—if we think about that as lens and context, what is the difference? If you think about customer service and experience of what we're trying to provide for our community, from a curiosity-driving mindset, "Password reset?," "Okay, here's your answer. And what else are you curious about? What else should we know so we could serve you better?" Are we proactively reaching out so we can understand the experience you're having? A curiosity mindset shifts that. And, in our communities—you talked about empathy—if we were more interested in hearing others' voices than hearing our own, how would that shift the sessions we put on, the learning we design, the meetings we convene, the communities that we create, and the opportunities we provide for every single member to have deeper-set relationships with one another?

Lowell Aplebaum: [00:19:45] Because what we're trying to introduce to them is that, yes, we need your shared wisdom, your individual lived experiences contributed, but the opportunity you have is not in those contributions; it's what you hear from one another and the relationships that are going to inform the stronger community we're going to have. A curiosity mindset that becomes part of the cultural foundation of an organization demands empathy because you're in the service of another and hearing what they bring to you, and there's a care for someone who is bringing you insight and willing to share of themselves with you. If we think about powerful organizations that are able to rally many voices behind causes, it's because there's a driving need, but there's also a community that sees in one another connection and a greater coherence that comes from an empathetic "We're going through something together, and we will get through this together if we are together."

Celisa Steele: [00:20:48] I like the emphasis on curiosity, and I think there's also the benefit for the individual. Personally, if I'm curious about my work, then that tends to mean I'm more interested; I'm more engaged. It's not just checking things off the to-do list; it's me really enjoying the work that goes into doing whatever task is at hand.

Celisa Steele: [00:21:14] We're talking to association CEOs, and we're talking about the role of learning broadly and education more specifically in their organization's value proposition. You're not an association CEO yourself, but I know you work with many and work with boards, and so I would love to get your perspective on how often you hear learning and education come up as an aspect of that overall association value proposition—what role you see it play.

Lowell Aplebaum: [00:21:45] Nine times out of ten, it's one of the strategic pieces of identified priority and identity of an organization. There's a real universality there in terms of what organizations and nonprofit associations bring to the table, that, once someone has finished with their formal education but needs to continue to learn to get better in their career, the role that associations have played and have the potential to continue to play in terms of supporting a workforce. What I unfortunately see that goes in tandem with that, though, is that the learning approach and methodology and even many times the platforms that are being presented are based off of what learning has been in terms instead of more modern and current not just theory but application of how adults learn. If what we are looking for in any sort of upholding of certification is credit units, then I can sign in for a Webinar, have it playing on my third screen, answer five true-and-false questions at the end that these organizations let me answer as many times as possible until I get it right, we have to assume best intent and hope that they're learning. But let's be honest.

Celisa Steele: [00:23:02] You're right. Not a lot of rigor there and not necessarily a lot of learning.

Lowell Aplebaum: [00:23:07] And there could be great rigor in the quality of the content, and that is where organizations traditionally used to shine—if we bring rigor to the content we are providing, we have fulfilled our obligation of bringing best-in-class learning. I would posit that is insufficient for what is needed for workforce development in the world today. You do not need less rigor in the quality of your content. I'm not saying diminish that. But, in terms of the experience of the content in terms of the acknowledgement of the multimodal learning that different learners need, the idea, in this time-strapped time, that people are able to dedicate a full hour versus, can things be broken down to smaller bites and segments so they can do sprint learning?

Lowell Aplebaum: [00:23:56] I was talking with one organization whose members often go back and take MBAs, and they were talking about some of the programs emerging, that you can do literally all the learning for your MBA on your phone—listening to lectures, answering the things on your phone. You don't need a computer. The idea of not just a certification or a certificate but a degree. That concept of meeting the learner where they are at is a gap that I don't see as many organizations as I would like adapting to. In part because you have many of those in leadership that went through tried-and-true traditional methods of learning, and so that's the context they have for what learning looks like. The tolerance for a subpar learning experience, regardless of the quality and rigor of the content, there's less tolerance for that. So organizations that have chief learning officers that think not only about the rigor but about the design and the experience are heads and tails ahead of those that only think about the rigor.

Celisa Steele: [00:25:09] You've begun to talk about it some, with things like the MBA that you can do completely on your phone or the need to evolve and look at the different modes and ways that we can engage learners. When you think about learning that's happening now and what associations can do to serve those learners, are there particular changes that maybe you haven't talked about that come to mind? Or issues that you see that are hampering individuals' ability to learn? Which, of course, then opens up the opportunity for organizations to help address some of those issues that might be hampering learning.

Lowell Aplebaum: [00:25:47] One that's not new but still not done well is to help learners right-size the level of the content to the level of their knowledge, experience, and career. Someone who is five years into their career versus 15 versus 25 versus 35 has a different inherent potential learning place, depending on what the nature of the content is. The need to set a baseline of introduction is needed. And so organizations, I have seen more of them try to be like, "This is introductory or advanced." There's been some effort to it, but what I do not see is the follow-through that holds the instructor accountable to what they say the level of their content is. That's one place that I think there is an opportunity.

Lowell Aplebaum: [00:26:40] The second, if I'm being very blunt—I apologize to my many meeting professional friends out there—is stadium seating in learning settings is terrible. The rows of sitting cramped in. You have Socrates at the front giving you their wisdom that you are going to absorb through osmosis. I'm not saying there's never a place for it—I understand in a keynote. But that, as default, puts so many barriers in the way of having the space to be creative. The only person you'd be in dialogue with is who's at my shoulders. The only place to capture, create, write, or draw is whatever I can balance on my lap. There's no space to be an active learner when you're in those sessions.

Lowell Aplebaum: [00:27:37] Third is that there is a difference between a subject matter expert and someone who is a learning expert that understands the many modes of designs of learning, and there's a difference between someone who's a learning expert in a virtual environment—it is rare to find one person that does all that. And none of them are negatives. You don't have the other pieces. But the truth is you want all the pieces if you're really thinking about the holistic learner experience. Organizations are trying to explore in their learning design the recognition of the strengths of who they're bringing to the table and to supplement those who don't have those strengths.

Lowell Aplebaum: [00:28:16] If we care more about this being a workshop so it's really about the learning design and experience, we need the content to be rigorous, but can we have someone who's an expert in learning design and supplement them with someone who can provide them with the data, the facts, the knowledge, the research they can design off of? This is more of an intensive learning about content. We still want some good activity and thought. Can we give the subject matter expert a learning consultant to help frame and how to shape the actual class and maybe even facilitate some pieces of it? There's a real opportunity for organizations to think about the holistic learning experience and these different competencies of what you want designed to supplement the sessions you create, not assuming that one person

has everything that you need, but that the organization takes on the responsibility of giving them the structure they need to design the best learning experience possible.

Celisa Steele: [00:29:15] What are you seeing or thinking about in terms of AI?

Lowell Aplebaum: [00:29:19] My answer today will be different three months later, nine months later, two years later. What I'd say right now is that, when I am running sessions, the frame that I try to give to those in my sessions—and, I'll be clear, for me, every session is a learning session. Strategic planning is a classroom, and all you are constructing is a place for the learners to also be teachers so they can learn from one another. And, if you use the mindset that every session you do is an opportunity for learning, as a classroom—whether or not you state it that way—then AI is both a tool that can help enhance the learning experience as well as potentially another learning contributor. The frame is where do you incorporate AI capacity and capability to supplement the learning experience so that someone who wants to express something but doesn't have the right words can say, "All right, give me three or four ways to express this idea"?

Lowell Aplebaum: [00:30:24] If you're thinking about a collaborative learning moment, the group can come up with, "What do you think? What do you think? What do you think?" AI: What does the collective of this look like together? There's not a deferment of the responsibility of ideation or of conclusion-making to AI, but it's at the table with you for a place of input, refinement, and possibility. So it expands what you could potentially think about. Where AI comes in is from a place of expanding perspective, refining possibility for directions, but there's not the abandonment of the human ideation nor the human assessment, refinement, and conclusion. It's in that middle piece that, when it comes to learning, at least from my perspective right now, AI is at its strongest in an active learning setting.

Lowell Aplebaum: [00:31:23] In a separate learning setting, if you look at ChatGPT today and use its Deep Research button function, there's a whole lot of possibility in terms of clicking that on and saying, "Here's the topic I'm about to do a session on. Deep Research, give me a whole bunch of background sources." You need to check them. But you want 20 different citations about the curiosity mindset and how it's impacting nonprofit organizations? You can't tell me that it doing that in five minutes and coming back, that I can't scan those articles and be like, "These three would be good pre-reads," and that's not going to enhance my session. So there are possibilities in preparation as well. There are possibilities in refinement at the end. "We have 20 different vision/missions. What would be the different places?" At current capacity, I do find that AI is better in an analytical than an aspirational space.

Lowell Aplebaum: [00:32:28] If you're trying to come up with citations and data or you're trying to access the gajillion different references out there, you're trying to take ideas and synthesize and come out with possibilities—"Is there logic to this? Give me different places."—those analytical directions, AI is a great tool for. "This concept is incredibly important, and we want to make sure the next generation coming into our profession not only understands the concept but feels inspired by it because the concept is going to be one that potentially gets them to

decide that this is the profession for them," I find there is less expertise at this moment for the empathy, for the emotional element. AI will still produce that. I just don't see what it's producing to have as much heart as it has brain.

Celisa Steele: [00:33:18] Tell me a little bit about how you approach your own lifelong learning.

Lowell Aplebaum: [00:33:22] The most important thing in my life is my children. By nature, I'm a lifelong learner, but I'm a big believer that the example that we set is at least going to be a memory upon which future generations make decisions. Learning doesn't just feed my brain; it feeds my soul. But, as much as I feel like the work I do is my dedication and investment to building a better world for my children to inherit, I believe the learning I do is the same thing. Finishing a degree, I had friends and family tell me I was not allowed to start another for at least 12 to 18 months, so I'm on my mandatory hiatus period. I have a few different paths. I continue to seek structured learning because I find, whether it's a certificate or a certification, it's not about the letters, but one-off learning, for me, doesn't leave as much of a memory. It could be good for a singular skill set acquisition.

Lowell Aplebaum: [00:34:35] In terms of shaping my mindset, shaping my attempt, structured learning with segments and accomplishment. I look for what certificate, certifications, and programs would align to that. LinkedIn—who's posting what, and who's learning what, and how should I think about that? A degree is always out there, but, being in a doctoral program for three or four years, I'm a voracious reader, as are all the members of my family. But, for three or four years, my reading was pretty much towards the doctoral program, and so, when I got out of the doctoral program, my brain was like, "Feed me." I read probably between seven to nine books a month and listen to two or three. I'm on a flight every week, and I'm a big believer in sacred spaces. Saying good morning to my kids, saying good night every night even if I'm at a board dinner are sacred spaces. I leave the board dinner for 15 to 30 minutes—these are things that will not be touched. For me, takeoffs and landings on flights are sacred spaces for reading. They're not for working. They're not for watching things. They're for reading. And so that influx for me.

Lowell Aplebaum: [00:35:51] I struggle a little bit with audiobook versus podcast because I love both and fluctuate back and forth there. But, for me, it's this balance. I always am between four to eight books at a time. I have a book or two or a podcast or two I'm listening to. Usually if it's gone 30 days without me being in some kind of small, structured learning, I need to find another one. It's like, "I can't sleep. Let me work on this a little bit." And then I'm always playing with the thought of "What's the next degree?" Again not for more letters but because as humans, if we're not growing, we're atrophying. So it's important that my kids see that learning is lifelong. And it's important for my own health as much as exercise is. I think exercise for your wisdom, your intelligence, and your perspective is just as important. Muscles grow because you stretch them, and that's not only true of your physical muscles.

Jeff Cobb: [00:36:56] We're not done quite yet—keep listening for our recap.

Celisa Steele: [00:37:00] You'll find show notes and a transcript at leadinglearning.com/episode458, along with links to connect with Lowell Aplebaum and learn more about Vista Cova.

Jeff Cobb: [00:37:10] If you got value from this episode, we'd appreciate it if you'd share it with a colleague or leave a rating or review. That helps others find the show, and it supports the work we do.

Celisa Steele: [00:37:20] Before we end, let's hit a few of the big takeaways from the conversation with Lowell.

Jeff Cobb: [00:37:25] First, strategy has to start with identity. If you don't know what makes your organization unique—and why that matters—you're going to have a hard time navigating change with purpose.

Celisa Steele: [00:37:36] Speaking of change, Lowell emphasized the role of curiosity and empathy—both in how organizations learn and in how leaders lead. Those qualities help create space for dialogue, evolution, and community.

Jeff Cobb: [00:37:52] He also challenged the idea that rigor in content is enough. As learning businesses, we need to be thinking about design, experience, and engagement too—not just the information we're delivering.

Celisa Steele: [00:38:04] I liked the metaphor that he used—"Muscles grow because you stretch them, and that's not only true of physical muscles." That's a good reminder that learning isn't always easy, but it is essential.

Jeff Cobb: [00:38:17] Thanks again for listening—and see you next time on the Leading Learning Podcast.

[music for this episode by Moarn]