Lean Startup, Design Thinking, and Culture with Elizabeth Engel and Jamie Notter

Leading Learning Podcast Transcript for Episode 470

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.

Jeff Cobb: [00:00:17] Many learning businesses know they need to innovate, but moving faster and experimenting can run headlong into culture and the fear of being wrong. This episode looks at why that happens and what to do about it.

Celisa Steele: [00:00:29] The episode features my conversation with Elizabeth Engel and Jamie Notter, co-authors of the white paper "Lean at Ten: Culture Eats Methodology for Lunch." Elizabeth is chief strategist at Spark Consulting, where she provides membership consulting and also helps associations with new product development using lean startup methodology. Jamie is a consultant, speaker, author, and self-proclaimed culture scientist.

Jeff Cobb: [00:00:55] Elizabeth explains the core elements of lean startup and why this approach is especially well suited to resource-constrained organizations like associations.

Celisa Steele: [00:01:04] And Jamie speaks to the cultural patterns that can get in the way of effectively adopting the methodology.

Jeff Cobb: [00:01:10] Elizabeth and Jamie also talk about pairing lean startup with design thinking, building empathy with learners, and taking practical steps to make organizations more agile and more willing to learn.

Celisa Steele: [00:01:22] If you're trying to move faster or innovate without burning out your team, the conversation with Jamie and Elizabeth offers not just food but a feast for thought.

Celisa Steele: [00:01:38] I want to talk to you guys about "Lean at Ten: Culture Eats Methodology for Lunch," the white paper that the two of you put out. That title refers to the lean startup methodology. I'm thinking that it would be great to have you explain briefly what that methodology is and why you think it can be helpful to associations. Elizabeth, I'm going to ask that of you.

Elizabeth Engel: [00:02:01] The methodology was developed by a guy named Eric Ries, and he had a background in Lean Six Sigma and also in startups. He had an epiphany that there was no point in working efficiently if you're going the wrong way. Lean Six Sigma is all about process

improvement, being efficient, and all that good stuff. But, if you're going the wrong way, you just end up at the wrong destination faster. He wanted to stop this from happening as early in the process as possible. In any product development situation, he realized that you are making assumptions about certain things when you are thinking about developing something innovative, something new, for your audiences. You're making an assumption about the audience, you're making assumptions about whatever the problem is that you think that they have, and you're making assumptions about what your solution might be for them, and any of those things could be off. What he did is he constructed a methodology to help you figure out if one of those things is off and course correct as quickly as you possibly can.

Elizabeth Engel: [00:03:05] There are a couple of key elements to the methodology, and they are called Lean Canvas. Basically, it's a series of questions that helps you develop a one-page business plan that helps you surface your assumptions about audience problem and solution so that you can actually test them. How do you test them? That's the core of the methodology. It's the build-measure-learn cycle. The idea is you build something, then you measure what's happening, and you learn from it. And the additional elements that help you do that—the thing that you're building is an MVP. It's a minimum viable product, which is a fancy way of saying a prototype. You're basically trying to build something that approximates what your solution is with the absolute minimal investment of resources, broadly defined, that you can possibly do. Truly, it's a beta. You are making a prototype. Then you are getting it in the hands of your audiences as quickly as possible—that's the measure piece. And so, when you're measuring what's happening with your prototype, you're not just asking people what they think; you're giving them a call to action and asking them to do something and then seeing what happens. That requires you identify appropriate, useful, good metrics. That could be a whole podcast in and of itself—what are those things?

Elizabeth Engel: [00:04:39] There are tons of resources out there that can help you figure out what are metrics that actually matter to determine whether you're going in the right direction on your audience problem and solution. And so the idea is you've got all this data, and you're supposed to learn from it—that's the third part of the cycle. And then what you're doing with that data that you have, that learning that you gain from going through this cycle, is you're making a decision to persevere ("We're headed in the right direction; let's keep going."), to pivot ("We were not quite going the right way with regards to audience problem or solution, so we need to make some changes here."), or kill it ("This whole idea is not going to work, and so let's stop this, again, with a small investment of resources and move on."). That whole small investment of resources thing that I keep mentioning is why I have felt, for the past 10 years or more, that lean startup methodology is so helpful for associations because people look at it, association execs might look at it and say, "Startup? I'm not a startup. Why are you pushing this on us?" And the answer is we have some things in common with startups, one of the most important being we have highly limited resources.

Elizabeth Engel: [00:05:54] Now, with startups, it's all about your VC money and your runway, and that's not our world. But associations tend to be resource-limited, and that's not just money. It's staff time and attention. It's volunteer time and attention. It's member time and attention. Because of that, we want to make sure that we are using those limited resources responsibly

and in an efficient and effective way to try to help our members solve their biggest problems and achieve their most important goals. And that's what lean startup methodology can do.

Celisa Steele: [00:06:30] Thank you for that explanation of the methodology and then for why you think it can help associations. Jamie, I have a question for you because it's about culture, which I know is your area in particular. Part of what you argue in the white paper is that it's culture that's holding back many associations from being able to make use of lean startup methodology. First, will you define culture for us and how you think about that? Second, what are the cultural patterns in associations that tend to derail or undermine lean startup efforts?

Jamie Notter: [00:07:07] My definition of culture is pretty short. Culture is the collection of words, actions, thoughts, and stuff (sorry for the technical term) that clarify and reinforce what is truly valued in an organization. The culture in your organization is all about what's valued because what's valued drives behaviors. Whether you've paid attention to culture or had an all-on project to develop it or anywhere in between, you've got one. People know what's valued, whether you told them or not. And sometimes you tell them what's valued and then they say, "Yes, I know that's what you're saying, but that's not really what's valued." People know what's valued, and they know that through the words you use, how you describe your culture, what you talk about, through the behaviors, the actions, and, if the actions are different than the words, the actions win on that one. The behaviors are more important. Thoughts are about underlying assumptions, mental models, beliefs. Sometimes that stuff ends up driving behaviors in ways that are different than what you thought you would in your culture. And then stuff is just tangible aspects of work—the equipment you use, the way your office is designed, dress code, anything that's not human. Those things also tell people what's valued. That collection is a little complex, but it's out there. That makes it clear what's valued, and what's valued drives behavior.

Jamie Notter: [00:08:25] For the second question, what we say is valued is not always what is valued, and what I have found around culture patterns is there are a lot of things inside organizations that everyone consistently says they want, like collaboration and transparency, and two that are relevant to lean startup, agility and innovation. We all want that, we say we want that, and we do value those things. Turns out there's a competing commitment inside your culture that negates that value, or at least part of it. Innovation is the biggest one for lean startup. Elizabeth's description of the lean startup methodology...this is not our first rodeo, by the way. We've done a bunch of podcasts. And that was the best, most succinct description so far, Elizabeth. I'll give you an A+ on that one. It's really clear—build, measure, learn. And prototyping requires engaging in what I call the practices of innovation, which is experimenting and sometimes being wrong and being okay to fail. Because, if all your experiments are right and they all succeed, you're doing them wrong. You're doing stuff you already know how to do. You're not going to get innovation by doing stuff you already know. You need to be able to fail.

Jamie Notter: [00:09:39] There's a commitment we have inside organizations, most cultures that says, "Look, I value innovation. I want to unlock new value. This is cool. Let's do it—as long as nobody is ever wrong, as long as I don't have to say I failed at something." We value being

right. We value being the smartest people in the room. We value providing right answers to our colleagues and helping move the ball forward. That's a good thing to value, but, if you push too hard on that, it generates behaviors where people say, "Well, we can run an experiment, but I'm not going to tell anybody." Or "We can run an experiment, but I'm only going to test a little tiny thing because I don't want to have to go to the board and say 'I did something, and it didn't work.'" We've got this pattern where we value the concept but not the practice of innovation, which means we say we will be behind lean startup, and we will try it, and then no one does any experiments that are worth it, where you get the real learning. You do some experiments, but I probably could have told you that outcome without running that experiment. We make it small, and it doesn't work.

Jamie Notter: [00:10:43] There are several patterns that impact that. Agility is one of them. We don't fix things. We don't stop things. That's a challenge, I think, for doing this work. My original background is in the field of conflict resolution, so this is a bias of mine, but our inability to have difficult conversations makes doing lean startup really hard. And a lot of organizations have that. The number one correlation between the 64 things I measure in culture is managing change and managing conflict. If you can't do your conflict, you're going to have a tough time doing this change. It's going to come out in the learning process, I think. You build, measure, and learn. What we learned was my original idea was right, but the customers were stupid, and we need to keep going forward. No one's going to say, "No, we were wrong. This product is going to fail." If you can't have those real conversations, you dumb down the learning, and you end up doing the process but making not as good decisions and not getting as good results.

Celisa Steele: [00:11:47] I heard you mention innovation practices. You mentioned difficult conversations. In the white paper, you mentioned four culture areas. Those are two of them. You also mentioned effective action and organizational clarity. Maybe I already know the answer based on what you've shared, but do you see that one of those tends to be the hardest for associations? Again, you already mentioned specifically innovation practices right at the outset. Maybe that's the answer. Maybe you have another answer.

Jamie Notter: [00:12:11] Which is the hardest? All of them. These are ones where most organizations, not just associations, struggle. And the organizational clarity one contains the silo issue. Everybody is bad at silos. And silos are fine. You can have silos. What I don't want are silos where I can't see what's going on across those lines, where I can't step over the line and engage with someone. It's like you should have fences between your silos, but they should be a foot and a half high. I know where the lanes are, but I can get across if I need it, and I can see what you're working on. That piece, again, is across the board, but, from working on culture in associations, that is almost always something that they actively work on when they start a culture design initiative—the silo question. So that piece is big. The innovation piece is big. But I will say they are not unique to associations. They cut across. I work mostly in associations, but I have also worked in government and corporate, and we've got a lot of data from those other industries, and the data looks the same.

Celisa Steele: [00:13:18] Elizabeth, that one other thing that you all mentioned in the white paper is design thinking and how you feel like it can pair well with the lean startup methodology. Tell me a little bit about how those two approaches reinforce each other and why you're seeing a place for both in associations.

Elizabeth Engel: [00:13:38] Design thinking is creative problem-solving that relies on human-centered approaches to innovation, and the concepts of design thinking parallel lean startup concepts really well. The two methodologies really complement each other. If you read the white paper that we'll give you the information about a little bit later on and that Celisa mentioned at the top of the podcast, you'll see that it was our National Council of Architectural Registration Board's case study, they were the ones who really built design thinking heavily into their particular—and this will be important to think about later—iteration of how lean startup works. What they realized, in putting together their lean startup practice, is that empathy with your audiences, your members, your learners, your customers, etc., is the key. That's the secret sauce to making this thing go. You want to develop a member-centric, customer-centric perspective so you can learn what their real and significant problems are, what their most important goals are. That allows you to focus on providing solutions for those things. To Jamie's point that he raised earlier, this whole idea of "Oh, the customers were just dumb. My idea is great." No, the customer is not wrong. You might be wrong, but that's okay as long as you learn something from being wrong. And that development of empathy and an empathetic practice of learning about your audiences is what's going to make this thing go.

Celisa Steele: [00:15:16] That emphasis on empathy and the member perspective, the learner perspective, the user perspective, whoever that is, is really important. *And* I feel like it can be hard to get the time and attention of members, learners, those users whose perspective is ultimately so important and that you really want. I would love any practical suggestions you have for how an organization can get the input it needs. Jamie, I'm going to throw this softball to you.

Jamie Notter: [00:15:48] We say we don't have the time to get the information from the users, the learners, whatever it is. In fact, we have all the time in the world to do that. We just choose to spend our time doing other stuff that's not as valuable. One of my mantras in this conversation—and I've said this outside of lean startup stuff—is organizations run too lean. I don't mean lean startup. I mean, we are doing more with less times 100 years, and we've created a system where we have no slack. We have no ability to do what we need to do. And it doesn't have to be that way. One of the case studies that Maddie and I wrote about in *When Millennials Take Over* is a software company in Ann Arbor, Michigan. I'm going to get this wrong, but they had a position in the organization—I think it rotated, so it wasn't a permanent job description—but, on every project, someone was the customer anthropologist, and they went out and lived with them. It was like participant observation. If they were designing a wedding-planning Web site, someone went out there and planned a wedding with people who were planning weddings, talked to them about it, hung out with them, and went to the dress shops and did the stuff, and—this is the empathy stuff—learned their perspective deeply. And they managed to do that and be profitable.

Jamie Notter: [00:17:11] This is part of the agility piece because we're not stopping things. We don't stop things, and we don't fix things, so we don't have the bandwidth to do it. We need to get much more disciplined about what activities are generating value in our organization and stop doing the things that are not generating value. That's a bigger-picture answer. I don't know if it's what you were looking for because you said "practical." There's nothing more practical than freeing up time by not doing things that are not providing value anymore. It is hard to do, though—I get it—because part of it's cultural. Part of it's just "We've always done it that way." And part of it is, by doing certain things, you then generate the demand for those things, even though they're not driving value. So it's a tough conversation, but that's where people should be focusing.

Celisa Steele: [00:18:00] You answered one side of the question—meaning if, in my association, we want to prioritize empathy with the people we serve, we need to put in the time and, like you're saying, maybe stop doing something else so that we do have the time to do it. There's the added layer too of, if you really want that member's or prospective member's input, that takes some time on their side, potentially depending on your instrument. How do you manage to make the case to the people that you want to build this product for? "We want to do it the best possible way, but we need your input." And knowing that most people feel a lot of constraints and requests for their time and attention, how do you get them to engage and allow you, even once you do that work internally, to say, "Okay, this is important"? How do you get that external buy-in to say, "Okay, I'm going to participate and give you feedback," whether that's through a focus group, a survey, or whatever type of instrument you're using?

Jamie Notter: [00:19:01] Elizabeth can probably say this better than me, but, for me, you're not giving them a survey and a focus group and asking them what they want. You are delivering something that meets their need. You're saying, "Hey, I've got something that is going to make your life better. It's just an MVP." (You wouldn't say it like this.) "But it's just an MVP. It's just a prototype. But I want you to use it and have it make your life better." That's the incentive, I think, for someone to be involved. It's like, "Hey, I actually get to get my job done faster because of this. I get to be happier at work because of this." Whatever problem you're solving, you deliver that in a small way, and they're like, "You mean I get to use this, and it's going to make my life better?" "Yes, I just need to have a conversation with you at some point about how it worked and what was great about it or bad about it."

Elizabeth Engel: [00:19:54] And, yes, to add, the other piece of this is, "And, if it doesn't make your life better, I need to know that. Tell me 'This did not make my life better.' If it is making your life better, but it's missing some stuff, I need to know that too." One of the other things that people get freaked out about with this whole idea of giving somebody a prototype is, "My members are going to hate that. They're not going to want to use something that's not completely beautiful and perfect and fully functional and blah, blah, blah," and sort of, yes, with a caveat. *Some* of your members do not want to be faced with a half-baked idea, a product that's still in the process of being fleshed out, etc. Some of them can't deal with that. But not *all* of them. And part of figuring out what your lean startup work is going to look like in your organization is figuring out who are my audience members that I go to them and say, "I've got a prototype. I want you to help me with this. Tell me what you think. What's working? What's

not working? What's missing? What did we put in that doesn't need to be here?" They're going to go, "That's great. That's exactly what I want to do." You have to know who those people are.

Jamie Notter: [00:21:08] If you've got something that you've designed that you think is going to make their life better, and you're testing that out, and nobody—including these people that you've identified that are the types that would dig this—has time to do it, then you've just learned you don't got something here. You got to go back or pivot or whatever you're going to do. So the "They don't have time" thing is not an excuse because you can find people who like it, and, if they really don't have time, it's because they don't like what you're offering.

Elizabeth Engel: [00:21:39] And, in that particular instance, it's very likely that although you may have identified a problem that they face, it is either not a real problem or not a significant problem. It's not high enough up on their priority list. So, therefore, move on to solving something that's a bigger deal for them.

Celisa Steele: [00:22:02] Elizabeth, I know in this white paper—and you've made the argument before that associations, many of them through their education and training and other offerings, while they serve lifelong learners, need to act themselves organizationally as a lifelong learner. Talk a little bit about what that looks like. How does an organization start behaving more like a lifelong learner?

Elizabeth Engel: [00:22:23] The key underlying attitude change that you need is to, from top to bottom of your organization, develop a constant curiosity about your members and other audiences and their worlds and operating environments. Just task everyone with becoming a sponge for gathering information. You want to develop that deep interest in learning about what drives my members? Once you've got that piece going, everybody's curious; everybody wants to know what's driving your members. They're all collecting information as often and frequently and in as many formats as they can. This gets back to Jamie's thing about fences between your silos—they need to be really low fences. You want to be transparently and openly sharing that information internally, which means you can't sit there and hoard data, like, "This is mine, and I'm not sharing it with anybody else because [reasons]." You've got to be willing to share data across those low fences and also across your hierarchies. Your frontline staff, customer service people, those who are interacting with your members, your learners, and your other audiences on a day-to-day basis get all kinds of insight that often doesn't make its way up the chain. You need to create mechanisms for that to happen.

Elizabeth Engel: [00:23:47] The other thing that is useful—both to becoming a learning organization and your larger lean startup practice—is suspending your need for immediate certainty. You basically want to be extending your process, your time period in which you are asking questions, in which you are developing hypotheses, in which you are testing hypotheses. We don't have to know the answer immediately. We just have to keep asking good questions. Here's a short example of developing a learning practice. When I worked for the Children's Hospital Association—which at the time was called NACRI—one of my areas of responsibility was running our corporate partnerships. We were doing all right with corporate partnerships

when I came in, certainly making some money, but there was definitely potential there to make them happier and to bring in more money as a result.

Elizabeth Engel: [00:24:39] And so back to Jamie's example of that person at that startup in Ann Arbor who was tasked with going out into the field—that's exactly what I did. We had corporate partners all across the country, and, yes, I had to get approval to do this, and there was some investment of money, but the first year or so I was there I visited every single one of our corporate partners in their offices—wherever they were—to talk to them about "What are your goals with our audiences? What are you trying to achieve here? Where are the barriers that you're finding? What opportunities do you see?" Etc. So curiosity—get out there, talk to them, pick up as much information as you possibly can, and then bring it back and share it, not just with our little team running corporate partnerships but with all of our program areas across the association. "Here's what these people are looking for and what they are trying to achieve and what they want to do. How does this potentially fit with your program area?" Some program areas didn't fit at all, but some program areas were like, "Oh, my god, we have a thing over here that we never thought about pitching to a corporate partner that could help them. It would help us." Everybody benefits.

Celisa Steele: [00:25:56] If there's an organization that doesn't feel culturally ready to try out lean startup methodology, or maybe they've even toyed with it some and haven't had a lot of success, what's a small but meaningful step that that organization can take to try to get more culturally ready for something like lean startup?

Jamie Notter: [00:26:17] The first step is conversations with your people about what your culture is—what it really is, not what you want it to be, not what the ideal culture is, not, for the love of all things holy, your core values. You can do all that stuff, but that's later. Because that has to come from where you are. So have a conversation. You could take a culture assessment and get real data and talk about it. That's fine too, but that's not a simple step. The simple step is getting around the table and saying on the key things (innovation, agility, transparency, collaboration), big topics, big concepts that everyone likes, "How do we do on those? How do we do that?" And ask yourself, "Where are we doing it well, and where are we not doing it well?" Nobody wants to have that conversation about where are we not doing it well in our culture. You just need to have it because it is what it is.

Jamie Notter: [00:27:10] And, if you start to have the conversation that says, "You know what? We love to share information, but we also like to control it," to Elizabeth's point a minute ago. "I'd feel so much better if I just have control of this information." Why do we do that? You can talk about why you do it. It's like, "Well, where could we let go of a little control?" Then conversation about what your culture is. And then try some stuff that would fix those parts that you think are holding you back. I use this example all the time: "Hey, how about, after our senior team meetings, we share the notes with everybody?" "Oh, no, I don't know how people would use that. And there's confidential things that happen." "Don't share the confidential stuff then. Just bullet points. Let everyone know." "Okay, we'll try it." And then, when they do, they realize nobody cared. Because you talk about boring stuff in your leadership team meetings.

"Okay, that actually makes me a little more relaxed." These little behaviors start to loosen things up. And it's an experiment.

Jamie Notter: [00:28:14] And I just Trojan-horsed a little bit of experimentation into your culture by having you experiment with your culture. But it loosens things up a little, and suddenly you've got people that are willing to say, "You know what, I don't know that I can do a full lean startup on this, but I'm going to start changing the way we ask questions about our new product development in our meetings." And so you can see some changes around the edges right away. Again, the more progress you get with that, then the more bold you're going to get and say, "You know what? We really need to overhaul this piece of our culture around experimentation. Let's get a team together and design a new way of doing things." That's the big culture-change stuff. You can get your way there through smaller changes that, as long as they keep working, will give you momentum.

Celisa Steele: [00:29:10] You guys include some case studies in the white paper, and I really appreciate that because that helps bring these concepts alive. Elizabeth, when you think about those case studies, what's something that one of those associations that you highlighted did that listeners might consider doing or trying out in their own organization?

Elizabeth Engel: [00:29:30] I have a quick one from each of them. The National Registry of Emergency Medical Technicians started by creating a shared definition of innovation, which is really important because we tend to talk about it a lot without always making sure that we all mean the same thing. And they started there. The National Council of Architectural Registration Boards, which I already mentioned, figured out how to adapt the methodology to their own culture and way of working. They were the ones who said, "We've got to bring in this whole design thinking/empathy piece." You don't just go to the store and buy the box of lean startup methodology and open it up and out pops this fully formed practice that you could run with. You have to make it your own. And the American Association of Veterinary State Boards invested time in training their team, including their board of directors, so that everybody understood what was happening. You probably noticed when we first kicked this off, and Celisa asked about what are the key components of the methodology, it's a little jargon-y. If some of your folks develop facility with that, and some don't, it's like you're not part of the secret society. Well, they made sure that it wasn't a secret society. Everybody understood and knew what was going on. If you ever see me in person and want to talk about this, for your listeners, ask me about the minimum viable lemonade stand because it's a fun story.

Celisa Steele: [00:30:53] I love a little Easter egg in a podcast, so people can follow up with that. I really appreciate the fact that you guys put out the white paper, that you've made the time to come on the podcast and talk about it. There's a lot more in the white paper. We will make sure to link to that in the show notes and encourage listeners to go and download that. But, as we're beginning to wrap up, I would love to know from each of you if there's one thing that you hope listeners take away from the conversation today. What is that? What would you have be that highlight for them? Jamie, do you want to go first?

Jamie Notter: [00:31:27] I'm just going to repeat the "understanding what your culture is" piece. Start that conversation. Stop being afraid of culture and thinking it's too big and too hard. Just start having the conversation that says, "We've got a culture, and it's driving behaviors here. What is it, and which behaviors are the ones that are getting in the way?" The sooner you start that conversation, the sooner you get to the other side, where you've got a place where everyone loves working there and where you can do lean startup. So I would start with changing your conversation about what your culture is.

Celisa Steele: [00:31:54] Elizabeth, how about you—what takeaway?

Elizabeth Engel: [00:31:56] I would say pick a project that's completely under your control, experiment with the methodology, and then share the results widely, whether it is persevere, pivot, or kill. When people can see how the methodology works and see it working in their own organizations, they'll want to try it themselves. If you read the AAVSB case study, that is very much what's happened there because they've made this—back to Jamie's part of this—part of their culture. It is now the case that anytime anybody comes up with an idea for something, they go to AAVSB's chief innovation officer, Chrissy Bagby, and they're like, "Hey, Chrissy, can we run this through the methodology?"

Jamie Notter: [00:32:34] I'm going to add on to that, though, because this is such an important point. We've talked about how your existing culture can prevent you from doing lean startup effectively. The converse or inverse—I don't know what it is, but it's one of those "verses"—is true. You can change your culture by running this process. This could be a culture play—in my language—where you say, "You know what? We need to be better at experimentation, so I want to run this process, and we're going to see if it works." It's interesting that, if you consciously make it part of culture change...so many people are like, "Oh, well, it's a culture change thing. Let's try it out," whereas you just went to the boss and said, "You need to do lean startup because it's the best thing ever." Like, "Oh, no, that's too hard." It also can open a window if you frame it as "We're going to use this as a way to try and change our culture."

Celisa Steele: [00:33:24] This is the Leading Learning Podcast, so we always like to ask guests who come on about their own learning practices and habits. I would love to hear from each of you about how you continue to grow and improve yourselves. Elizabeth, tell me a little bit about your approaches.

Elizabeth Engel: [00:33:40] That is the point of the whole white paper series. I've been doing these annual-ish white papers ever since I launched Spark 13 years ago, and that's how I pick whatever the topic or focus of that year's or year-ish's white paper is going to be. What's something associations need to be paying more attention to that I want to do a deep dive on and learn more about myself? Pick the topic. Do the research. Find the co-author. Make it so.

Celisa Steele: [00:34:08] Great. Jamie, how do you approach your own learning?

Jamie Notter: [00:34:12] Recently I've switched, as part of my deciding within the last year that I wanted to call myself a culture scientist. If I'm a scientist, I need to do research, and so it's a little bit following Elizabeth's model. But I now try and identify what my research question is.

Once I have a research question, then I need to create a practitioner guide, based on the research, that I put out in the community, and people use it to do things and experiment with things and then report back their learning to me. I've done this before in my career, in different formats, but the key is creating a structure, like Elizabeth was talking about. I need a structure where I'm having questions that I want answered, and I need to go out and do it. I also read a book and think that's interesting. We do this all the time, but, without the structure, it's too slow, in my opinion. So having a structure of question, investigation, and next steps, I'm finding very, very useful.

Celisa Steele: [00:35:11] I like that both of you prioritize very active hands-on learning in your answers—rolling up your sleeves and doing something with whatever it is you want to learn more about. Do either of you have something else that you are hoping to have a chance to say that you haven't yet had a chance to say in the conversation?

Jamie Notter: [00:35:29] Both the culture work and the lean startup work are ultimately about speed. And I can't say enough how much speed is needed in the association world. I've used this on some other stuff that Elizabeth and I have done. Quote from Justin Trudeau, former Canadian Prime Minister: "The pace of change has never been as fast as it is today, and it will never again be this slow." That line is going in one direction. Honestly, with AI and everything else that's going on, it's getting steeper. I still hear associations saying, "Well, I'm going to go ahead and develop my five-year strategic plan." "I'm going to go ahead and wait a while. "The board doesn't meet until next August, so we'll make that decision then." I hear lots of "slow" in associations. It's really imperative that we move to make these kinds of changes, to do these kinds of processes if we're going to keep our heads above water. So I just want to add some urgency to it.

Jeff Cobb: [00:36:37] We're not done quite yet—stick around for our recap.

Celisa Steele: [00:36:40] You will find show notes and a transcript at leadinglearning.com/episode470, along with a link to download (completely free, no sign-up required), the "Lean at Ten: Culture Eats Methodology for Lunch" white paper, plus links to find Jamie and Elizabeth online.

Jeff Cobb: [00:36:57] If you got value from this episode, please share it with a colleague, or leave a rating and a review. Those actions help others find the Leading Learning Podcast and support the work we're doing.

Celisa Steele: [00:37:08] One thing that stayed with me from the conversation was Elizabeth's admonition to suspend the need for immediate clarity. Her invitation to linger with the questions and hypotheses rather than rushing to solutions feels both countercultural and exciting to me.

Jeff Cobb: [00:37:25] Speaking of culture, I appreciated Jamie's comment at the end that there's an urgency to this work. There are real costs associated with *not* doing this work.

Celisa Steele: [00:37:35] It's interesting to think about those two takeaways side by side. There's a kind of surface-level disagreement—Elizabeth encouraging us to linger, and Jamie urging us to action. But at a deeper level their advice is 100-percent compatible.

Jeff Cobb: [00:37:50] Definitely. Taking action should be predicated on the idea of what's the right action or, at least, what's an appropriate action to take, and determining that right or appropriate action usually involves asking good questions and developing and then testing hypotheses.

Celisa Steele: [00:38:08] Thanks again for listening—and see you next time on the Leading Learning Podcast.

[music for this episode by Moarn]