



## What Learning Business Leaders Need to Stop Doing

Leading Learning Podcast  
Transcript for Episode 477

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: [00:00:16] If you're leading or working in a learning business today, chances are you're making decisions in an environment that feels more demanding and less forgiving than it used to be—more pressure, more noise, and fewer clear signals about what actually makes a difference.

Celisa Steele: [00:00:31] In those conditions, it's natural to rely on familiar instincts—work harder, add new offerings, gather more data, keep things moving.

Jeff Cobb: [00:00:39] We ourselves are very much a part of this world. We offer events, programs, and courses, so this isn't about pointing fingers. It's about instincts we've had to question in our own work at Leading Learning and Tagoras and what we see across many learning businesses we work with through consulting and other avenues.

Celisa Steele: [00:01:00] The challenge is that some of our instincts, while well-intentioned, can quietly work against the outcomes we care most about—clarity, resilience, and meaningful impact, for example.

Jeff Cobb: [00:01:13] In this episode, we want to focus not on what learning business leaders should do more of, but on what they may need to stop doing.

Celisa Steele: [00:01:21] We'll talk about a set of common habits that tend to show up when things feel uncertain—why they're so tempting, how they can create unintended consequences, and what becomes possible when leaders step back and let go of a few things that no longer serve them.

Jeff Cobb: [00:01:37] Because sometimes the most valuable leadership move isn't adding something new—it's deciding what to stop doing.

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Celisa Steele: [00:01:43] We want to talk about some things to stop doing because we are seeing this pattern in our own work and in where we bump up against the work of other learning businesses. The fact that well-intentioned responses—responses that maybe even worked very well in the past—are increasing fragility, increasing anxiety, and adding to the noise now.

Jeff Cobb: [00:02:10] In the past, we've talked about VUCA: volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous. We thought this would be a good time to introduce a newer (but by no means new) framing that goes to this question of fragility, anxiety, noise: BANI. Brittle, anxious, nonlinear, and incomprehensible.

Celisa Steele: [00:02:35] We're not going to do a deep dive on BANI, but it's a useful backdrop for *why* some of the things that used to serve no longer serve learning businesses as well. It can also offer some helpful language for a lot of what we're seeing and experiencing. And, as you said, Jeff, it's not a new framing. It was introduced around 2018 by a futurist, Jamais Cascio, and it gained even wider attention during the pandemic. But it does seem to me that it's still (here we are in 2026) very relevant and valuable to use as a backdrop and a framing for what we'll talk about.

Jeff Cobb: [00:03:15] Yes, definitely plenty of anxiety still going around. BANI is often described as an evolution of VUCA. It doesn't replace it so much as it sharpens what VUCA doesn't fully capture anymore, especially the emotional and structural fragility of our systems.

Celisa Steele: [00:03:33] We'll unpack each of those letters a little bit more. B, as you said, Jeff, stands for brittle. One of the takeaways here is that systems that look strong and very efficient can break readily under stress. That brittleness isn't necessarily obvious, but it becomes dramatically obvious the moment that something snaps, something stops working.

Jeff Cobb: [00:03:58] In organizations, brittleness often shows up as a dependence on a few key people, say, some subject matter experts, or over-reliance on a particular vendor or system (your LMS, for example), or a lack of slack in the system or redundancy.

Celisa Steele: [00:04:15] VUCA talks about volatility. BANI highlights the fragility that happens in the world today. A stands for anxious. This isn't our own individual personal anxiety, although that often exists.

Jeff Cobb: [00:04:31] It shows up there, though.

Celisa Steele: [00:04:33] But this is about anxiety as a systemic condition.

Jeff Cobb: [00:04:37] When people don't understand what's happening or what comes next, anxiety drives reactive decisions and encourages doing something over making what can be hard choices.

Celisa Steele: [00:04:49] A lot of leaders are experiencing anxiety at that personal level, and then they're often unintentionally transmitting it to other folks in their learning business, those around them. A lot of organizational behavior begins to make more sense when you see it through this lens of anxiety that's driving a lot of the decisions and activity.

Jeff Cobb: [00:05:12] Yes, the whole organization can start to feel anxious—and, if it's a brittle organization, then you've got B and A going together. Then we get to N, nonlinear. The root of that is that cause and effect don't scale predictably. You can be in situations where small actions can have an outsized impact—and, conversely, big investments go nowhere.

Celisa Steele: [00:05:36] Patterns that once felt reliable stop working. Past approaches to pricing or to promotion or ways that you used to drive engagement that used to work are beginning to no longer be something that you can count on. This is where, perhaps, some of those familiar planning instincts can start to mislead us because we think we just need to do more of what we did in the past.

Jeff Cobb: [00:06:04] Finally, I, incomprehensible. Many systems are now too complex and opaque to fully understand. AI is the glaring example of that. Even with data, it can be hard to explain *why* something is happening.

Celisa Steele: [00:06:24] We can spend all this time gathering data points, but we still don't really know what to make of it, and it can feel incomprehensible. In an incomprehensible world, it's not that nothing makes sense—but it's very hard to see how everything fits together and how the whole fits and makes sense in an overarching way.

Jeff Cobb: [00:06:45] Those are the components of BANI. And, if you buy this idea that the world is more brittle, more anxious, more nonlinear, and more incomprehensible, then it stands to reason that some of the things learning business leaders do out of habit may actually make things worse now. So we want to talk about what we might need to stop doing.

Celisa Steele: [00:07:07] Our number one stop doing is to stop optimizing primarily for efficiency. Efficiency can cause or increase brittleness because, if you have a system that's optimized for efficiency, that means it can also often break under stress. To unpack that a little bit, think about staffing. You've gotten really efficient; you've honed it down to just the bare skeleton staff that you need. But then, when you have that thin staffing, there's very little slack. If something comes up, you don't necessarily have a way to react. Again, with efficiency, you

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can have that dependency on somebody who has done a lot for the organization in the past; they're the veteran who's been there, who knows how to do it all, but, again, when they get ready to leave, that leaves the system very susceptible to breaking, to brittleness. Another example: You have efficiency, where you have these processes to get products launched. You're really buttoned up; you have all these steps that you follow / But that can create long timelines. So those are some ways that being efficient, which is often seen as a benefit, can increase the brittleness of the system—the system being your learning business in this case.

Jeff Cobb: [00:08:27] If you feel like you're experiencing any of those things—and most organizations are experiencing at least some of those things—there are some questions that you might want to use for prompting conversation. One of these would be, where is efficiency quietly reducing resilience in our learning business? Look around. Do you have those processes that were once a good thing, once were very efficient, but now we're stretching things out forever, particularly if you've got thin staffing and little slack?

Celisa Steele: [00:08:56] Another question we offer for your consideration is what happens when one of your key assumptions fails? This is going to require you to make sure that you're aware of the key assumptions behind how you operate and then look at where is the breaking point or which of those assumptions might most easily make you susceptible to breaking down, to brittleness.

Jeff Cobb: [00:09:20] That was our first area to consider stopping—stop optimizing primarily for efficiency. Stop number two would be stop adding products to relieve anxiety. Stop defaulting to putting new things into your catalog, into your portfolio of offerings.

Celisa Steele: [00:09:39] That's because adding more offerings may reflect your anxiety rather than learner need. Getting products added to your portfolio can feel like a safe move. It's helping you be more diversified. But what if those additions aren't meaningfully diversified? What if it's more of the same? And what if they aren't being vetted appropriately to assess current learner needs and current learner demand? That can create, then, portfolio sprawl, and, once you have portfolio sprawl, that can also create, or at least contribute to, learner confusion. They're not sure which of your products are going to help them on their journey.

Jeff Cobb: [00:10:22] We all know how this plays out. You get pressure for more offerings from a lot of different sources: board members, organizational members and learners, other areas of the organization, competitors, vendors. We're in a time right now where everybody's saying, "We've got to add something about AI to our catalog. We've got to add AI. We've got to add AI." But that may cause way more anxiety than actual benefit for the organization if you haven't taken the time to slow down and think about what really needs to happen there.

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Celisa Steele: [00:10:53] Again, doing something, taking action often feels like what you should be doing. There's a false comfort, though, in that push to always be adding. Because in this episode we're talking about what to stop doing, this is a chance to see the fact that sometimes not doing something, opting not to create that new product might be the best move.

Jeff Cobb: [00:11:18] Some conversation prompts on this one. How often is product expansion a coping mechanism for our learning business rather than something we're doing strategically?

Celisa Steele: [00:11:30] And what does doing something feel like compared to making a hard choice? That question is about feeling—acknowledging the fact that sometimes doing something can feel beneficial, can feel like you're doing the right thing, while making a hard choice can feel hard. But you want to be aware of those emotions and factor them into how you make decisions, which might mean, again, not doing something and instead making that hard choice to stop doing something.

Jeff Cobb: [00:12:02] Those are two areas to stop in so far: Stop optimizing primarily for efficiency, and stop adding products to relieve anxiety. You might be creating more anxiety and not getting a good effect in doing that. The third item would be stop expecting linear relationships.

Celisa Steele: [00:12:21] To unpack that, what we mean is that inputs and outputs are no longer as predictable as they used to. A few generic examples. More marketing, more promotion of a particular product, does not necessarily result in higher enrollments.

Jeff Cobb: [00:12:42] Most organizations recognize that at this point; they've been experiencing it. More content does not necessarily equate to more impact. Higher prices do not necessarily correlate to lower demand—and the reverse may or may not be true as well. Lowering prices doesn't necessarily increase demand/increase sales of your products. There is just no linear relationship.

Celisa Steele: [00:13:05] Once you stop long enough to realize that some of these relationships are no longer as predictable as perhaps they were in the past, that can lead you to some questions that you might want to consider. Where have you seen small moves produce outsized impact? Look back over what you've done over the last 12 months and see where were you able to tinker a little bit but have a profound change, whether that's in enrollment or in the impact you're having on the learners or however you choose to measure that impact.

Jeff Cobb: [00:13:42] I love this question. It's a great one for strategic reflection, both as an individual and very powerfully as a group. Looking back on that, where were those bright spots? Maybe some were unexpected that you want to figure out how you can potentially

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replicate going forward. On the other hand, you want to look at where have your big investments really gone nowhere? They did not produce the kind of results that you were looking for. And then asking, overall, how does linear thinking affect (and limit) your forecasting and goal-setting? That expectation that input is going to create an equal output. Where are you bringing that bias to your planning when you need to be thinking differently at this point?

Celisa Steele: [00:14:24] A key takeaway is that you want to acknowledge that it's hard to forecast with great precision. You're going to need to let go that need to know. What you want to focus on more is learning loops in your own learning business. Based on what you're doing, what you're seeing, what you're trying, what are the results of that? What does that tell you about what you might want to try next month, next quarter? It's a continuous learning cycle and refinement of what you're doing.

Jeff Cobb: [00:14:56] That was number three, to stop expecting linear relationships. Stop number four is to stop chasing certainty before making decisions.

Celisa Steele: [00:15:08] And that's because certainty probably isn't coming, so you might be waiting a long time. And, while you're waiting for that elusive certainty, you're making a choice—because you're defaulting to continuing the status quo.

Jeff Cobb: [00:15:23] This one can be particularly tricky these days because you hear so much about wanting to be a data-driven organization. "We're going to get data. We're going to do everything based on data." And you should do that. We're not saying don't get data, but you're never going to get the perfect data. You're never going to get the clear visibility into the future. And, with AI being a factor right now, the data you get now could change pretty significantly, pretty rapidly, just because of the impact that AI is having.

Celisa Steele: [00:15:49] Data gaps are unavoidable. You're never going to have that perfect data set. Data is almost always a snapshot of the past, so it's already of limited use as you think about the future. What you're doing while you're continuing to collect data or looking to fill any of those gaps or analyzing and then reanalyzing is that you're avoiding. You're putting things off rather than making a decision. What you need to do is begin to do something. Because sometimes leaders treat choices as these big, irreversible, long-term commitments. But, in reality, if you take the view that those choices are uncertain, they're based on incomplete information, and you have to try them to know how they're going to turn out, then that opens up an experiment mindset that can let you test things out. It can make it easier to make a choice and try it rather than waiting for that perfect certainty before you decide what you're going to do, whether that's releasing a new product, sunseting a product, whatever it is.

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Jeff Cobb: [00:16:55] This is a perspective we've advocated forever, long before we came around to this BANI framework that we're talking about. Today, you've got to be willing to, for example, launch without perfect data. You don't want to continually say, "We need more data before launching." You can't know the market response in advance. You can get some signals, but you've got to put something out there to test it—that minimum viable product—and do it with the knowledge that a decision is reversible. You can change pricing; you can change formats; you can set yourself up so that you're going to be testing in ways that aren't putting you all in and are getting you that actual market response to then build from.

Celisa Steele: [00:17:36] Similarly, sometimes learning businesses can get too caught up in the need to decide on a format. For example, "Should we have a cohort-based program, or should we have this as a self-paced online offering?" It's important to remember that both options can be piloted, and the downside of being wrong is limited. Again, if you can get past treating it as a one-time, permanent decision, it can help to decrease your anxiety when you see this as something that we're going to try, going to experiment with, going to learn from. Pushing ahead can help you decrease the anxiety and speed up the learning—that learning loop that we were talking about earlier.

Jeff Cobb: [00:18:19] We often hear from organizations that experiments sound risky. Everybody's worried about hurting their reputation. And very often organizations aren't set up to experiment very well, so delay becomes the safest-seeming option. But this is a case where you don't want to delay. You want to stop delaying and get something out there so you can see some actual results.

Celisa Steele: [00:18:44] Because the delay does carry real costs, even though it might feel safe in the moment to not make that choice and feel a little bit more professional, a little bit more buttoned up by saying, "We're going to get more data; we're going to analyze this more." But often delay is just avoidance of making a choice to try that experiment and learn from it.

Jeff Cobb: [00:19:03] Some conversation prompts are around this one. Ask yourself, ask your team, where does that "we need more data"-type perspective really hide fear more than anything else?

Celisa Steele: [00:19:16] Anxiety—the anxiety that we've been talking about. Related to that, be clear with yourself, clear with your team about how do you decide what's knowable enough? You're not going to get to perfect insight, but what's good enough to help you make decisions and pull the trigger on those experiments?

Jeff Cobb: [00:19:35] And a final one. Ask yourself what decisions are reversible—but we might be treating them as permanent?

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Celisa Steele: [00:19:43] A takeaway for me is that good judgment matters more than perfect information—because you're not going to get that perfect information. In this incomprehensible world that BANI describes, this lack of knowing is just a fact. That's a feature of the world and environment in which we work. You have to accept that and then figure out how to act given that there is so much that's undefined and incomprehensible.

Jeff Cobb: [00:20:12] Our fifth and final thing to stop doing (probably more than five in most organizations, but we're going to stop at five) is stop treating stability as the goal.

Celisa Steele: [00:20:25] Stability is fleeting at best. Most systems, if they reach that perfect stasis, equilibrium, they're not going to remain there. Rather than aiming for stability, you should aim for adaptability.

Jeff Cobb: [00:20:41] There's always this idea that, if we get to this destination that we've described, we're done; then we can rest on our laurels; everything's going to be good from there on out. That's almost never the case in the best of circumstances. It's certainly not the case in the circumstances we have right now. You hear a lot about, "How do we get back to normal or establish that new normal?" as if there's a destination we can get to that's going to now be fixed. It just doesn't happen.

Celisa Steele: [00:21:08] A danger here is that you're over-investing in fixed structures when those fixed structures aren't well-suited to the shifting sands of the current environment.

Jeff Cobb: [00:21:22] For me, one is to continue to build out traditional courses without stepping back and thinking maybe that's not the structure for learning going forward. Do we need to do something else? Related to this is an under-investment in sense-making skills. How do we encourage the kind of reflection, curiosity, skills that are going to help people see things differently, develop new knowledge that might lead them to what is next beyond these current structures that we've invested so much in?

Celisa Steele: [00:21:53] Some questions you might ask of yourself and your team. First, what does a healthy learning business look like for you now?

Jeff Cobb: [00:22:02] How does leadership change when volatility is assumed? If you're leading a learning business, what does that look like in this really volatile environment?

Celisa Steele: [00:22:13] What capabilities matter most when any plans you make are going to age very, very quickly? The takeaway here is that your ability to learn as a team within your learning business and your resilience are much more important and much more admirable goals than any sort of stability or equilibrium.

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Jeff Cobb: [00:22:39] To wrap up, now that we've covered our five stops, we can talk a little bit about what they have in common. These aren't tactics. They involve specific actions, maybe, but they're mindset shifts.

Celisa Steele: [00:22:54] That's right. We're talking about moving from the idea of control to judgment. Where can you exercise better judgment? You're unlikely to be able to have control over your market, over your learners, over the world, and so it's better to focus on judgment and making sure that you're assessing the situation accurately, that you're using that good judgment to determine how you respond.

Jeff Cobb: [00:23:21] As part of that, setting yourself up not so much for efficiency, that lockstep "Here's how we get the catalog out; here's how we get the meeting set up; this is the way we've always done it"—but moving from efficiency to resilience. As you are encountering all of this volatility that we're talking about, you have ways to respond to that to not only help you to survive it but even possibly to grow, to become stronger from it. This is the concept of antifragility, which is a good one to spice in here from Nassim Taleb. A lot of what we're talking about points to how can we be not just resilient but antifragile as an organization?

Celisa Steele: [00:23:59] There's also a mindset shift from motion to meaning. By motion, we're talking about all the activities you're sometimes caught up. "We're going to get this done. We're going to get that new course out. We're going to have the conference. We're going to do it on repeat." Rather than getting caught up in that activity and motion, it's really thinking about meaning and where is what you're doing having the most impact. What should you be focusing on? What should you be doing? being a little bit more judicious in what you are focused on.

Jeff Cobb: [00:24:31] And certainly "why" is an important question to ask as part of that repeatedly. Finally, moving from certainty (which there's so little of these days) into learning and ongoing sense-making. Something we've advocated for years is the way that learning business professionals, learning business leaders should operate walking the walk, but it feels more important than ever now.

Celisa Steele: [00:24:58] Environments like those described by BANI (brittle, anxious, nonlinear, and incomprehensible)—in those contexts, leadership is less about having answers and more about choosing better questions and choosing better constraints, better limitations that are going to help you focus on what you need to do to deliver the greatest impact to those that you serve.

Jeff Cobb: [00:25:25] We'll leave you with one final question that you may want to ask of yourself personally, or, if you have a team, we encourage you to consider this with your team. What's one thing you might stop doing—and what would that make possible?

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Jeff Cobb: [00:25:47] When learning business leaders operate in environments that are noisy, pressured, and hard to read, it's easy to default to habits that feel productive—even when they don't lead to good outcomes.

Celisa Steele: [00:25:58] Taking time to question those habits can create space for better judgment and more intentional decisions. Take time to examine where efficiency might be undermining resilience, where motion might be masking anxiety, and where certainty is being chased at the expense of sense-making.

Jeff Cobb: [00:26:16] Stopping some things doesn't mean doing less leadership. It often means making room for clearer thinking about what deserves attention, investment, and care.

Celisa Steele: [00:26:25] You can find show notes, a transcript, and related resources at [leadinglearning.com/episode477](http://leadinglearning.com/episode477).

Jeff Cobb: [00:26:32] If you find the Leading Learning Podcast valuable, please consider sharing this episode or another with a colleague or co-worker.

Celisa Steele: [00:26:38] Thanks for listening—and see you next time on the Leading Learning Podcast.

*[music for this episode by Moarn]*

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