



Frontline Lessons for Every Learning Business with JD Dillon

Leading Learning Podcast Transcript for Episode 487

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] Help center agents. Nurses. The people fixing your car and ringing you up at the grocery store. They're all part of the frontline workforce, which makes up roughly 80 percent of the global workforce—and yet when we talk about “learning,” we're usually picturing someone with a desk and the ability to decide to carve out dedicated time for focused learning.

Jeff Cobb: [00:00:39] Our guest in this episode, number 487, is JD Dillon, founder of Every Shift Counts and author of *The Frontline Enablement Playbook*. JD spent the first half of his career in frontline operations, a decade at Disney supporting hospitality and contact center teams, and the last decade building technology used by four million frontline workers around the world.

Celisa Steele: [00:01:02] JD and I talk about why courses and conferences—the traditional backbone of a lot of learning businesses' portfolios—don't fit how frontline work happens and what is more effective: reliable access to information at the point of need, connecting learners with peers who can show them how it's done, and short bursts of learning that can fit into a few minutes.

Jeff Cobb: [00:01:22] And what works for frontline learners also tends to work for people who sit at a desk—even though the reverse is often not true. So this conversation isn't only for learning businesses that serve frontline and deskless workers—there's something here even if your learners have more control over their time.

Celisa Steele: [00:01:40] JD and I also talk about how a learning business that sells into an organization needs to understand that the buyer, the manager, and the employee each care about something different.

Jeff Cobb: [00:01:51] So, without further ado, here's the conversation with JD Dillon.

Celisa Steele: [00:02:01] Your most recent book is about frontline workers. It's *The Frontline Enablement Playbook*. You write in the book that you really scrutinized each word in the title other than “the”—that got a pass. But let's talk about the “frontline” and how you define frontline workers.

JD Dillon: [00:02:19] That's an interesting part of the conversation. It's the first thing you always get asked because most people, including people who support frontline teams, don't identify as frontline anything. They identify as retail, grocery, construction, and hospitality—the worlds in which they play. The way that I look at this definition is the frontline workforce are the teams whose primary role is to work directly with your customers, products, and services every day. They're the people that we, as a society, rely on to keep the machine moving—retail grocery, healthcare, all of these different types of environments. In a lot of cases, they're customer-facing individuals who have to work on site, don't sit at a desk all day, are constantly moving, have a different relationship with information and technology and all the tools and resources that make up work. And, in some cases, they're back-of-house, whether they're chefs in a restaurant or in a manufacturing facility working on the line or in the agricultural space—people that we don't regularly see as part of our day-to-day. It's different types of work in different environments in different industries with different goals. But the way the job is done, how people spend their time, and both the organizations as well as our reliance on them are consistent in a way that is not true (in a lot of cases) when it comes to corporate team members.

Celisa Steele: [00:03:42] “Desk” came up when you were talking about these folks, and “deskless” is another word—you used it in the subtitle. You maybe considered it as part of the main title. What do you see as the difference between deskless and frontline, to the extent that you see one at all?

JD Dillon: [00:03:59] Consider contact center operations. I spent about six years supporting contact center operations in a higher education environment, as well as physical campuses where people were directly working with students. If you're a contact center agent, you do sit at a desk all day, in an almost painful way because you can't leave the desk. Rule number one of a contact center is don't take people off the phone because that's where the job is done, and that's where sales are made, and that's where customers are supported. There are different elements of that experience that support improved enablement and performance. I can reach you—you might have an e-mail address or a Microsoft Teams account. You're staring at a screen—you can pull up information when you need to. A lot of that is missing when it comes to people who are in a deskless environment, like people who work in a movie theater or in a theme park.

JD Dillon: [00:04:48] However, there are still commonalities in terms that, even if I work at a desk as a frontline employee (likely an hourly employee), I work a structured shift. I don't have a ton of autonomy. I can't leave the desk. I can't decide, “I'm going to stop taking phone calls for the next 30 minutes or so in order to do some additional training.” That's just not how it works. So the elements of how the job is done—lack of autonomy, task-focused, customer-focused—are all there. There's just a difference in terms of access to information and the tools that are used on the job. Even if you're a contact center operations agent or the front desk person in a healthcare facility. There are a bunch of different people who fit under the frontline umbrella who are desked, but they still have common attributes with those who meet the deskless side of the workplace.

Celisa Steele: [00:05:36] Thanks for that clarification and highlighting the similarities of whether there is a desk there or not in terms of these frontline workers. As you know, a lot of frontline workers are employed by organizations that don't have a human resources or an L&D function

at all—some car washes, mom-and-pop-type shops, those kinds of things. I'm going to ask you a leading question here for the Leading Learning Podcast. Is that kind of need something that associations and other types of learning businesses can help fill for frontline workers whose employers don't necessarily have those HR and L&D functions?

JD Dillon: [00:06:15] It's a "yes, and..." type of an answer because I do not think it requires a dedicated L&D and/or HR function. Part of the challenge with enablement of large, distributed workforces is that we silo by function, tool, accountability, and metrics in a way that is detrimental to the person doing the job. Because you have a corporate communications team pushing information. You have the product owners pushing information. You have compliance and legal, HR, learning and development, operations. Where all of those conversations meet is the management team and the frontline employees who have to execute on all of their different priorities and instructions. The more we silo, the more difficult that gets.

JD Dillon: [00:07:01] When you look at smaller businesses or mid-market businesses, you start to see a natural consolidation of function because they just don't have that many people in a support center. A regional grocery chain might have four people in their corporate training team, and they also own corporate communications and a bunch of other activities because they've naturally consolidated based on resourcing, but it also simplifies the experience for employees who are just looking for help to do the job. It's less about needing these discrete corporate functions and more that there has to be someone who cares about helping people get the support they need to do their job effectively and have as positive an experience as they can in this job to make sure that they're getting value from it and then supporting the value to the organization. It's looking more at what people need to be successful and to drive outcomes and less about distinctly bucketing that by function.

Celisa Steele: [00:07:53] That idea of having an enablement person who's focused on that and the outcome focus, like you're saying, and what those frontline employees really need to be able to do their job well—it sounds like there is the potential for that enablement person to be drawing on many different sources, including potentially offerings that an association that's relevant to that field or profession might be providing and offering.

JD Dillon: [00:08:16] They can't do everything themselves. If you're a multi-billion-dollar company, you have the resourcing—from a corporate perspective—to be able to build resources and tools internally. But then again it gets complicated because you have so many different competing siloed functions. It's essential for someone who's playing that kind of enablement role in businesses that don't have so many people and so many tools to be able to reach out and get those resources. And the prototype is sales enablement. It's right there. If you look at the difference between the traditional corporate training team and the sales enablement team—whoever's driving sales enablement is goal-oriented. They're driving pipeline and deals in terms of what they do.

JD Dillon: [00:08:57] Learning and development is one of the tools they have at their disposal, but they're directly connected into the CRO or VP of sales, and they're driving outcomes by enabling the team. It's that same model. They're not building all of their own sales methodologies. They're reaching out to the models that are proven to work in this type of

environment, pulling in advisors, consultants, content, and shaping the ecosystem in a way that helps drive the outcome but maximizes their resources. Because, if you have one person, that one person, even with AI and related tools at their disposal, can't do everything on their own. And they shouldn't be recreating the wheel, given that other organizations—especially organizations that are in a similar space, similar business model, or similar industry—are likely struggling in the same types of ways.

Celisa Steele: [00:09:50] If we think about association learning portfolios for a minute, at least historically, they're often largely built around courses and conferences and certifications. I want your take on how that kind of portfolio works or potentially doesn't work for reaching those frontline workers.

JD Dillon: [00:10:10] There's a fundamental gap in terms of traditional tactics and the reality of how the job is done. As an example, there are a lot of small shops in the auto mechanics space. Well, let's just talk about the facility. How many auto shops have a back room and/or a classroom setup where people can separate themselves from the work, sit down, not hear everything that's going on, and focus on a course? How many auto shops schedule the number of people where they can pull people out of the garage, away from customers, and dedicate time to development? Now if we want to scale a support mechanism across this space, how do we do it in a way that's respectful of how the job is done and fits and drives an outcome? Part of that conversation is can you make it easier for these organizations to make information available to their teams because they're working with complex products? Does everyone need their own knowledge base, or is there a shared knowledge base opportunity that you can make available? Is it less selling courses and more selling reliable access to information in a way that's easily consumed and applied? There's still a place for courses in all of this story. I just don't think it can be the primary mechanism or business model. Same for events.

JD Dillon: [00:11:24] There's huge value in bringing people together, having conversations, and sharing practices, but it's not something that you can regularly do because of how the work is done and how labor budgets are created. Can you make it easier for people to access information? Can you make it easier for people to practice in certain ways, working through certain challenges, or working with a simulated model of a piece of equipment that they might not regularly see but need to be ready to handle when it happens? Or a certain type of vehicle that, when it rolls into the shop, they need to be ready to go, knowing certain things—how to repair this safely while referencing certain information? Regardless of the industry and the type of work, there's a certain consistency in terms of what people need, and it's reliable access to information in a way that they can apply it. Increasingly in the frontline, it's also about accessing information in the language that I prefer and using tools (maybe I'm not the greatest reader) that can help me understand and apply information. Is there a different way we can think about tooling people with resources, scaling those types of resources across an industry, and being that type of team or that type of provider?

JD Dillon: [00:12:34] I've worked with providers that support associations in providing those practice activities and reinforcement activities. It's not just about courses. If you work in a shop, and you have three minutes today, we could provide an activity that'll help refresh what you need to know or introduce a new topic to you for three minutes. It's similar to courses, but it's

restructured to match the access points and the time availability people have on the job. When I talk about three minutes of shift, that doesn't sound like a lot. What can you even learn in three minutes? Three minutes every day of focused activity adds up pretty quickly versus once a quarter we put everyone in a room and tell them stuff because that's not how people can effectively consume and retain information. Three minutes a day actually matches how we work as people in terms of our memory, especially if we're able to apply that information quickly. So it's restructuring the model around how the job is done and what time is available because those are the biggest obstacles. Even in corporate environments people struggle with those exact same factors.

Celisa Steele: [00:13:42] How much is your critique of the course-and-event-heavy approach to learning specific to frontline workers? Or is it what we know about how humans tend to work and learn best? It's in those shorter and more consistent bursts. It's in the flow of work, all of that.

JD Dillon: [00:14:04] Based on my experience, I find enabling frontline workers to be infinitely more interesting than talking about corporate employees. Because it represents 80 percent of the world—about 2.7 billion people. This is where the numbers are. Every environment has these unique attributes to them, or it's a puzzle of figuring out how to match how we can best support people based on how people work and the unique environment and challenges of that particular industry, company, workspace, job. It's a really interesting puzzle. But, at the same time, if we figure this out for frontline workers, or we have practices that work in these types of environments, they transfer because we're talking about people, like you said. The limitations of a course mirror the limitations of a course from the frontline to the corporate environment. The challenge is it doesn't go the other direction very often. Tools, resources, and technologies that work in a corporate setting have a hard time in frontline environments because, for some reason, we decided, as an industry, that learning and development is a digital concept. I don't know why. I don't think e-learning is that good and has been that helpful for the last 25 years to anybody, but it provided scale and consistency and speed. It's cheaper and faster to put people through that environment versus figuring out the logistics of putting people in a room, especially if those rooms are not all in the same place.

JD Dillon: [00:15:33] Then again you look at the frontline workforce—the vast majority of structured learning activity takes place shoulder to shoulder with a peer or manager, and it's hands-on job training, a conversation we just don't have a whole bunch anymore. A lot of the things, if you make it work in the frontline where time is restricted, people in corporate roles also don't have a lot of time. Overloaded. All types of stuff. But most corporate employees can maybe decline that meeting. A lot of people are salaried, so they can decide, "I'm going to stay late today" or "Over the weekend, I'm going to...." Most frontline workers—at least in certain parts of the world—can't make those decisions. In fact, we often cut off their access to information as soon as they're clocked out for the day. Rules. The cool thing is that, if we have more conversations that are not necessarily focused on frontline and deskless workers but inclusive of frontline and deskless workers, it works for everybody in a lot of cases. We just rotate in the direction of people who sit at a desk and do their job the way I do my job and forget that, oh, yes, 80 percent of the world doesn't do that.

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www.leadinglearning.com/episode487.

Celisa Steele: [00:16:44] You brought up the asynchronous side—the emphasis on these e-learning modules that can be consumed on your own at whatever point. Even if they're shorter than what may be the typical module, even if it's that three-minute thing, it's still on your own, doing it yourself. But you see the value of social learning, the peer learning, as you were saying there. Talk a little bit about how that could happen. Because, like you're saying, those place-based events where you bring people together for the sharing—very valuable also very hard, depending on the individuals you're trying to bring together, to get them there, to have that time out of the office, to be able to afford bringing those people together. What do you see that's working to connect some of these frontline workers with other peers socially so that some of that transfer you're talking about can happen?

JD Dillon: [00:17:37] A couple of different things I've seen. One is thinking about cohorts differently because a lot of people are moving through the same motion or trying to develop the same set of skills or move forward in a similar way, but they don't see one another, and they're distributed in particular ways. Onboarding is an easy example. There are a lot of people being onboarded right now in the same company in different locations and never seeing one another. Is there a way that we can leverage technology to put people into a virtual cohort where they feel comfortable talking to people who are more like them and asking them questions? This solves a problem that I see on the Internet because, for some reason, there are a lot of frontline workers asking questions on Reddit. They're in the subreddit of their company asking very tactical job questions. I sit there and wonder, "Where's the trainer and/or manager?" Because these are easy. You shouldn't have to turn to the Internet for this. Are you trusting Reddit? You shouldn't. But, in a lot of cases, people are giving good information because it's a peer group that understands. Reddit is not necessarily reflective of the entire employee experience, but it's a lot of people who are very loud and have opinions, and you start to see trends when you pay attention to the things they talk about. There are examples in my book from those types of conversations.

JD Dillon: [00:18:50] There are ways to look at cohorts differently, even from a virtual perspective, even a chat group in an employee communication application that might put people into a group to say, "Hey, you all are onboarded at the same time. If you're running into situations and can't get to your manager, or your trainer doesn't know what they're doing, you can talk about and share your experience." Maybe it prompts people to say, "How was the first day? What are you still not thinking about?" So people know that they're not in this alone. They're not the only person onboarding in this company right now. They might be the only person onboarding in this location or on this shift. A company I worked with that works in the airport lounge space, one of their priorities was making their big company feel small. They always looked for ways to connect people through social tools so that they could learn from one another but also experience different activities with one another. It was less about social media-type activity because we over-rotate into thinking people will act at work like they act on Instagram when they're nowhere near as interested in what they're doing every day, nor willing to be like, "Let's take photos of everything." But, if you prompt people in certain directions, and you recognize people for certain types of sharing, people are more likely to engage—not everybody, but some people will engage. And that's an element of the story.

JD Dillon: [00:20:06] An example from another organization I worked with in the retail space—this person was trying to figure out how to improve product knowledge across a network of retail stores. They don't come from a training background, but they do come from a media background. Instead of building e-learning or any traditional solution, they just went to a store with their phone and recorded a conversation they had with an employee about a particular product. You wouldn't necessarily look at that and think it's a social activity, but it featured people who look like me, who do the job that I do, talking about how they have conversations about certain products or solve certain problems in the same environment. We make a mistake in assuming that people who do this job every day are going to react to either content that doesn't reflect their reality or content that's coming from corporate or the executive team, when, in a lot of cases, people want to see people like them.

JD Dillon: [00:21:10] It may be someone from my company, may be someone who does my job. If you're a mechanic, and I'm a mechanic, we just reflect differently. Another company I was talking to the other day sells content for people who do roofing, and their videos are low-production videos of people on a roof. It's a guy who clearly does this job, talking about how he does particular things. Reflecting the world in which these people work and leveraging people who have credibility in their willingness to share what they're doing. And then we can have a whole conversation about the effective use of AI avatars in this story. Todd's example from product videos is in my book. It's also the reason why this is the only book about frontline performance that will ever include a deer urine story because he works in a retail store that sells deer urine. He shot a video about deer urine, and then wacky things happened in that video. But guess what? After the video got released, they sold more deer urine. That's the point.

Celisa Steele: [00:22:16] You brought up AI avatars, so I'm going to ask you about the use of AI among frontline workers. You brought up Reddit and people turning there. To what extent do you see AI as a threat? A tool? How do you view it? Because there can be workers just turning directly to whatever they might have access to on their own phone or if they do have access to a computer.

JD Dillon: [00:22:50] Frontline workers have been looking up stuff on the Internet on their own devices forever, so none of this is new. Whether it's approved or not. My research as well as my experience around the use of AI in frontline teams has to be informed by the fact that, again, we leave frontline workers out of conversations around the future of work constantly. The remote and hybrid work conversation is a great example, where the vast majority of workers have no option, and at no point did we include...because the hybrid / remote work conversation is ultimately a conversation about workplace flexibility. You can have a conversation about workplace flexibility with frontline workers too, but it's more about scheduling practices, making it easy to trade shifts, and that type of stuff where there is a role for technology to play to make all of that more seamless. Today you should not require a manager to be less busy to figure out if you can adjust your schedule. We should have figured this one out by now. But there's a whole future-of-work conversation that's missing from the frontline workforce, and that includes the broader conversation around AI, where I'm excited about what the tech can do now for frontline workers. And it doesn't have anything to do with the word "agentic."

JD Dillon: [00:24:01] When you talk about AI in the frontline workforce, it's a combination of how tools are used and then how people are impacted in a very specific way. Frontline workers are way less concerned about this because there's a level of stability in frontline work. A lot of people who do these jobs understand the value that they provide, and the automation conversation's been impacting them for decades at this point because companies are finding ways to reduce labor hours, and it's a constant struggle to be able to get my hours, to get the paycheck I need if you work in these jobs, in a lot of cases. That's not new. That's the nature of this work. It's a lot newer on the corporate side of the conversation right now. But, when you look at existing technology capabilities, inclusive of AI, there are certain things there. A simple example: access to information, being able to ask a question and get an answer back. Huge when it comes to these jobs because how often are you relying on the person next to you to be able to answer whatever question a customer comes in with? And customers come in with way more information than they used to. I'm one of them.

JD Dillon: [00:25:04] When I buy a car, I know more about the car than the person selling me the car because I'm doing a ridiculous amount of research and then coming into the conversation informed. And that is true in retail. It's true in hotel environments in terms of the services available at this hotel, restaurants in terms of the ingredients and the food. People just know things and therefore have a higher expectation of what the employees know and are able to do. Having information at your disposal, where, if you just started yesterday, or you've been here for 30 years, we can level out that knowledge base a little bit more. The translation piece of things is huge for frontline workers. The fact that we're going from a world where, when I was developing training in a corporate environment, we had to pick because translation was a time-consuming and expensive problem. We translated information to three to four languages—the most commonly spoken languages in our environment—not knowing who did we just leave behind because they need information communicated differently. When I was in tech, one of my favorite things to do was to pull language information from the customer base, just to see who was using our tools in what languages, and I loved finding a company where there was one employee in one region of the world who was picking one particular language—because that was the whole point.

JD Dillon: [00:26:22] That one person now has a chance where, in the past, they spent a lot of time potentially understanding information, yet alone learning or applying anything. So translation in all forms, while not perfect by any means.... AI is still largely written in English in terms of its capabilities, but we can do more to the point where, when I present in different languages, I translate all of my own stuff, and I'm usually near to perfect, but I always have someone who has expertise in that language review the information for me when it's important. Social exchanges, basic communication stuff—we can translate that in a large number of languages now as well as we need to be able to. And then one layer deeper (I already mentioned this) is regardless of what the job description says, you have a lot of people who are doing these jobs who are not great readers for different reasons. We can now use language differently, and people can talk to and engage with information and get the information to come back to them—that's meaningful. Again, in a way that we tend not to have to think about in a corporate environment. There are obviously accessibility considerations and all of that side of it.

JD Dillon: [00:27:33] I put a mobile device in your hand, and it can translate the information—great. But what if you can't read or can't read well? Now you can talk to the information, and the information can talk back. It's things like that that could knock down or reduce some significant barriers in terms of people's ability to learn and perform on the job that are driven by AI, that don't have to be complex workflow automations, and all that kind of stuff. I would add there's a key thing to consider around how AI is being used in ways that impact people that don't have anything to do with the tools they use on the job every day. If you're using AI for hiring practices, for scheduling practices, if in some way the data and AI is being used to inform decisions around promotion and training, we have to keep in mind that people need to know how that works, how tools are being used to influence their earning potential and their lives.

JD Dillon: [00:28:35] Especially because there are a lot of frontline environments where you absolutely have to make that information available because you're working in a unionized environment, or you're working in a highly regulated environment, or we're in Europe at all. There are distinct ways where technology and data influence the job and the meaning and motivation behind the job that we have to make sure is clear. And it can't be a black box that managers can't explain why people aren't getting hours. It has to be explicit. Some people are very much not going to care about that story. Some people are very much going to care and click the little question mark next to whatever information and want to understand. "Why am I getting recommended this training?" or "Why am I being scheduled in a particular way?" or "Why didn't I get recommended for promotion?" We need to be able to answer those questions based on why people do this work.

Celisa Steele: [00:29:31] You've been talking a lot about the importance of reaching workers on the job in their actual workflow. That's a real goal that has real benefits, being able to do that. Associations and other learning businesses obviously have a hurdle that those internal L&D teams don't. They can't readily reach those individual frontline employees as directly, as easily. They might be selling to the employer, and then their access to that worker is limited to or mediated through the employer or potentially managers. This kind of proximity issue exists in other contexts too, like franchises. I would love to hear a little bit about how you might solve for that distance issue or at least think about it as something that could be addressed or how it might be addressed.

JD Dillon: [00:30:25] The motivating factor for the buyer, the manager, and the employee all need to make sense based on what they care about. And the answer to all of those is not learning. Because fundamentally no one on the operations side of a business—from the employee through the entire hierarchy—fundamentally cares about the concept of learning. I didn't use the word "learning" very much at all for the past 10 years, despite the fact that I've been in employee enablement and performance the whole time. However, I talked about things like confidence, capability, safety, and risk—those factors. It's critical that, whatever the solution is, it has to check the box in terms of something I care about for the person who's making the decision to bring it into the organization. If you're selling to the VP of operations or the COO or whoever it might be, what do I care about? I care about growing the business and outcomes associated to that. How is this solution going to help me? And the answer is never learning. It's something about the capability. I love using the term "readiness" around

operations teams because they understand that “We need to be ready,” right? “Yes, we do need to be ready.” What does it take to be ready?

JD Dillon: [00:31:34] Knowledge, skill, and capability are all underneath that, but it’s not the headline. It’s supporting capabilities. Then you drop it down to the management team because the management team owns the day. They’re your most important stakeholder because, if you don’t have them, you have nothing. When it comes to franchised operations, as an example, corporate may love it, the franchisee may love it, but, once you hit the restaurant, the shift manager has something to do, and they have a limited number of people to do it, and they’re facing off against the customers and the food inspectors and all of that type of stuff. How is what you’re providing going to help me (manager) hit what I need to hit? Because usually managers make decisions based on two criteria. One, what’s going to get me a phone call? I do whatever it takes not to get the phone call. And, two, how I’m bonused. So the metrics that impact my compensation and the things I’m held accountable for by my boss, how does this help me with those things? That’s going to earn the time and access that you need to be able to reach. Ultimately the manager should be included in the solution, as well as the employee.

Celisa Steele: [00:32:36] If you were to point to something that you hope listeners take away from our conversation today, what would you most like them to remember or think about after hearing this?

JD Dillon: [00:32:48] Managers are the most important people in the workplace. If you invest in anything when it comes to enabling frontline teams, look straight at the managers because of how much they influence the experience. And the more that you understand how the job gets done and the workflow, the more likely you are to be able to shape a solution that people will actually use, actually get value from, and you’ll actually be able to retain that organization, that customer base. Because so often things sound like a great idea—the buyer leans in because it’s trendy; it’s AI. Then you slam into reality, and people aren’t motivated to take advantage of the solution, don’t have time to take advantage of it, and then you have a really short relationship with that stakeholder or buyer in that organization. Being a person who came from the technology space for the last 10 years, what made me effective was that I did the homework. I spent a lot of time in grocery stores. I not only understood how a grocery store works, but I understand what the owner of a grocery store very much cares about.

JD Dillon: [00:33:51] One particular gentleman said something to me that is in the book, and it echoes in the back of my head: The fact that I come from frontline operations means I don’t just think about ideas and principles and practices. I’m thinking about people when I make decisions or when I make recommendations because it’s the experience I had with these individuals and what I learned from them that I’m pulling together to shape a method, a framework, and practice. This one individual, who runs a set of grocery stores, said to me, “JD, I’m not changing for you. I want spandex, not concrete.” He needed a solution that wrapped around how he runs his business because he’s not going to change his business for what I can do. I’m an expert in human performance. He’s an expert in the grocery business, so I have to meet him where he is. The more you can do that—especially if you specialize in an industry, if you specialize in automotive, you need to know automotive, not just sell to automotive. Because people who run these businesses and own these businesses, this is what they do. It’s serious.

I've had so many conversations with grocery store owners about loss prevention, waste, and cheese. For some reason, whenever I visit a grocery store, people want to show me the cheese case.

Celisa Steele: [00:35:02] I'd want to see the cheese case.

JD Dillon: [00:35:04] It's a higher-margin product. And then they'll also walk me through the spoilage process in terms of produce. They try to sell the pepper, and, if the pepper doesn't sell, then they slice up the pepper and put it in packaging. They sell you pre-sliced peppers. If you don't buy it by the sell-by date in that case, they slice it up more; they put it in a salad. They try to sell you the fully-made food product. If that doesn't sell, then we have a waste situation. They're doing everything they can. They need the employees to understand that waste prevention. Spoilage equals major costs for a low-margin business, so they definitely want you to understand those things. For whatever business that you support or that you're selling products or services to, do you understand their version of that so that you can go in and have a conversation?

JD Dillon: [00:35:47] When I go to a manufacturing facility, and the VP of safety is sitting there, I am absolutely not saying the word "learning" in this meeting, but I'm going to say, "Is it important to you, as the vice president of safety, to have a capable, confident team that's ready to make the right decision at the right time, to keep the line moving, to keep people safe?" The person on the other side of the desk is going to say, "That is absolutely important." And then we're going to talk about how we're going to be able to get there. So do the homework—understand, appreciate, and respect the work that is done by these folks every day so that you can provide a solution that makes it clear that you're contributing to their industry and their business. You're not just trying to sell them stuff.

Jeff Cobb: [00:36:31] That wraps up the conversation with JD Dillon, author of *The Frontline Enablement Playbook*. Stay with us for our recap.

Celisa Steele: [00:36:38] You'll find show notes and a transcript for this episode at leadinglearning.com/episode487, along with links to where you can learn more about *The Frontline Enablement Playbook* and about JD's work in general. And, if you found this episode valuable, we would be grateful if you'd share it so more people can find the show.

Jeff Cobb: [00:36:56] One point JD makes is that courses and events alone aren't effective for frontline workers—their jobs simply don't allow for it. He points learning businesses instead toward reliable access to information, connecting workers with peers who can show them how it's really done, and short, frequent practice that fits into the gaps in a shift. And he argues that what works for frontline learners tends to transfer to people who sit at a desk. So, even if frontline and deskless workers aren't who your learning business serves, there's likely something here worth borrowing.

Celisa Steele: [00:37:33] When it comes to reaching the frontline workforce, JD's advice is to design for the buyer, the manager, and the employee, with a particular focus on the manager since they own the day-to-day experience.

Jeff Cobb: [00:37:45] Thanks for listening—and see you next time on the Leading Learning Podcast.

[music for this episode by Moarn]