



Leading Learning Podcast Episode 256

Shawn Boynes (00:00):

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Jeff Cobb (00:45):

I'm Jeff Cobb.

Celisa Steele (00:46):

I'm Celisa Steele. And this is the Leading Learning Podcast.

Jeff Cobb (00:53):

Welcome to episode 256 of the Leading Learning Podcast, which features a conversation with Shawn Boynes. This is the sixth episode in a seven-part series on the learning business in disruptive times. Shawn Boynes is the executive director of the American Association for Anatomy, based in the Washington D.C. metro area, and one of the hosts of the Texts to Table podcast, focused on conversations about race and leadership. Celisa spoke with Shawn in September 2020.

Shawn Boynes (01:31):

The American Association for Anatomy is one of the oldest scientific organizations in this country. It's 132 years old, so been around for a very long time. And the primary focus of the organization is on elevating the discipline of anatomy as a science. And members of the association, as I like to say, prepare future doctors and dentists for clinical practice. So they teach in medical and dental schools, and they primarily focus on anatomy, whether it's gross anatomy or the many other disciplines that are related to anatomy, such as histology or cell biology and that sort of thing.

Celisa Steele (02:11):

And so tell us a little bit too about what it means to be executive director there. What do you do?

Shawn Boynes (02:20):

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available at www.leadinglearning.com/episode256.*

You know, it's interesting because even though I'm not from the scientific discipline and certainly I haven't gone to medical school or dental school, I feel that staff's role is to support the work of the members. And, in a very small way, we are contributing to preparing future doctors and dentists. Even though we don't have that direct connection, the work that we do supports members so that they can be their best in how they connect with students.

Celisa Steele (02:48):

So, you and I are talking as part of a podcast series that we're doing on the learning business in a time of disruption. And so when you think about what we're living through, what we're working through, what comes to mind? What are the kinds of disruption that you're experiencing?

Shawn Boynes (03:06):

You know, it's interesting. And I'll actually take it back a step because the whole virtual or online learning area, we've been talking about this for a long time. This isn't new. And from the nonprofit association space, some have made adequate investments to take content that would normally be presented face to face, live, in person, to the online environment. But I'm not sure that the overall association community has really made big enough strides. Now we're being forced to do so. And the shift was quick and drastic. For AAA, as we refer to the organization, the members were in the same situation as many other educators. So they had to quickly move from teaching large lecture halls of students, 300 students in some instances, to the online environment. And while some would say, "Well, yeah, I mean, they're educators, so they should be able to do that," not so much.

Shawn Boynes (04:12):

And then the other part of that is a critical element of medical education and dental school education is around using cadavers as a way to teach students. So how do you do that in an online environment? You can't replace that. Certainly there's technology out there that I would say aids in their ability to teach gross anatomy and working with cadavers, but there's nothing like having a cadaver to work on. People gift their bodies to science for that purpose. But if you're not in the cadaver lab, how are you teaching students?

Shawn Boynes (04:50):

So that was a very difficult thing for them to pivot to. And then you're also dealing with the mental health of students. Because it's already stressful being in medical and dental school. And now, depending on if they're first year or second year, third year, how do you keep them focused enough that they continue their studies? And it was a lot. So the members of the association, it was sort of like drinking from a fire hose nonstop.

Celisa Steele (05:16):

Well, so I think you make some excellent points about the fact that this really isn't new, right? That there has been so much of a need and a desire to move online, even prior to the pandemic. And now it's just sort of forced the hand for some organizations. Some who are perhaps better positioned than others. And then I love the point about the fact that there are things that it can be difficult to translate online. And so that, literally, the hands-on training that can be difficult to offer effectively online. So, in terms of that pivot and in trying to deal with moving your education online, that's sort of one type of disruption that's coming from the pandemic. Are there other types of disruption that you're experiencing and dealing with personally, or as an organization at this moment in time? Other types of disruption?

Shawn Boynes (06:09):

I think, as an organization, the challenge is how do you support members that are not focused on the association like they normally would be? You have volunteers, and volunteers tend to be the engine that drives the work of many organizations. And because they are entrenched and just trying to teach, and then also they have families and taking care of their families, the association is not top of mind. So even though we're doing our best to try to be the resource for them and support them as much as we possibly can, they're not always thinking of us first thing in the morning when they wake up—"Oh yeah, let me see what AAA is offering today." So we're competing with the reality that everyone is struggling with in this pandemic. And just trying to make sure that we remain a resource for them whenever they need us.

Shawn Boynes (07:14):

I tend to share lots of resources. I curate content around leadership just to draw attention to things that most leaders and execs should be doing, whether it's you're trying to improve your leadership style or you're trying to tweak your leadership style. I think we have to continually learn and grow. And just because you become the exec or CEO doesn't mean that you're done, that you've arrived. That's just one stop along the way, and we should continue to want to grow and be better for ourselves and for the teams that we serve.

Celisa Steele (07:45):

And before you were an executive director, you came up through the learning ranks, right? You were a director of professional development.

Shawn Boynes (07:55):

I did. From my very first association job straight out of college, pretty much. So my entire career has been in the association community for 25 years. And I've worked for, this is my sixth association. So I've worked with scientists, of course; I've worked with nurses; I've worked with lawyers, healthcare professionals. So that, I think, helps me really appreciate the value that associations bring to the world. But my chosen, I would say, stove pipe, when I entered the association space was in the education/professional development space. I did not aspire to be an executive director or CEO. I wanted to continue providing education and resources to professionals of any discipline and help them be better at what they did, whether it's lawyers needing continuing legal education, credit hours, and that sort of thing.

Shawn Boynes (08:51):

So the education and professional development space is near and dear my heart. And I think it actually served me well in becoming an executive director because you have to focus on working with a different group of people for almost every meeting or online learning experience. And you also have to work across the organization to bring teams together, whether it's around marketing, whether or not it's around meetings, logistics, whether or not it's the board of directors and trying to engage them in the organization. And then there's also the money part. There's the business model around education. So all of that served me well when it was time for me to step into the role of executive director. So, yeah, education rocks.

Celisa Steele (09:33):

Amen. Yeah. And I always love it when you have a leader who truly appreciates the importance of that line of business and what it can mean in terms of the impact for the organization but also the impact on the industry or field or profession that you're serving and that ability to move the needle.

Shawn Boynes (09:51):

Absolutely. And one of the things that I like to say is “What’s the stickiness factor for any organization? What keeps people?” And, in many instances, when you look at membership, surveys, needs assessments, and that sort of thing, typically education, professional development content tends to be in the top three. So it’s something that organizations have to continue investing in—organizations have to appreciate the value that that brings to the members that they serve and not lose sight of the fact that, yeah, things changed, but that doesn’t mean that it’s dead. You just have to kind of look at it differently.

Celisa Steele (10:38):

So, what do you see as the threats of these current disruptive times? And I’m thinking in particular for organizations that are in the learning business. So when you think about what you’re dealing with now, what worries you most?

Shawn Boynes (10:52):

I think for many organizations, especially in the association space, we rely on meetings and that’s what brings people together. And there’s energy around that, and there’s also, let’s be honest, the money that most organizations rely on from meetings. Meetings tend to drive significant revenue for many organizations. And, for AAA, we are in, I would say, a good place right now. That’s not to say that we won’t have our own challenges, but we don’t rely on meetings revenue to sustain the organization. We rely on revenue from our journals. That’s kind of our bread and butter. But for those organizations that rely on meetings revenue, they are challenged with trying to figure out how do we fill that gap? How do we make up that revenue? And I think, for this year, there wasn’t enough time to figure that out.

Shawn Boynes (11:47):

So for those groups that had to cancel meetings—and I think almost all groups had to cancel big annual meetings and trade shows and that sort of thing. So I think that the good part of that is it’s forcing organizations to take a step back and figure out their business models and what do they need to do differently in order to survive in uncertainty. Because we don’t know what the next few years are going to bring. And we don’t know if we’ll be able to convene face to face anytime soon.

Shawn Boynes (12:16):

So, certainly, online is one element of that, but that may mean letting go of some things that the organization shouldn’t be doing anyway. And that’s always hard because people hold on to programs and services and get emotionally connected. But sometimes you just have to sunset things. And these are the types of questions that organizations are grappling with, and they have to figure out, because tomorrow is not going to be the same. And looking a year down the line, it’s just so much that’s unknown. And you’re kind of throwing darts in the dark because you don’t know. So, unless organizations are willing to tackle those tough questions, I don’t think that some will survive.

Celisa Steele (12:57):

So what goes on today that’s exciting to you? Where are you finding hope or energy or enthusiasm despite the disruption?

Shawn Boynes (13:08):

I think people are really figuring out what's important to them. And, for many of us, we have routine. So we get up, and we would commute to work in many instances, and we would just go through the day. And I think people now have time to figure out what's important to them. The other part of that is this whole online piece. I know there are some organizations that struggled with a remote workforce, whether it was "Do you have a telework policy allowing staff to work from home a day a week, a couple of days a week, or how does that work?"

Shawn Boynes (13:45):

Well, now everyone, if they are fortunate, they should have systems in place that allow staff to work from home. And I think the expectation will be going forward that staff have the flexibility to contribute to the organization as a staffer in a remote environment. You don't have to be in an office. You don't have to have long commutes. And I think that's something—especially in the D.C. metro area, traffic is terrible under normal circumstances. Well, if you remove that from the equation, will you have happier employees? Will you have employees that are a little more productive?

Shawn Boynes (14:21):

So that's one of the things that I'm actually excited about because I think the way we work has been turned upside down whether groups wanted to embrace it or not. And I know that some organizations were a little more forward-thinking than others. But for those that didn't make that happen, now they're running to catch up. But hopefully they're seeing that managing remotely, it's different, but people are able to still get stuff done. And the question of "What are people doing?" and kind of the Big Brother element, I think that should not even be part of the consideration anymore.

Celisa Steele (15:07):

What words of advice, of caution, of courage do you have for those in the learning business about how to do right and really thrive in this current moment?

Shawn Boynes (15:20):

Take the risk. Now's the time to take risks and try something different because you don't innovate in spaces of "It's safe" and "It is certain, and we know this is something that is going to work because we've done all of our research" and all of that stuff. I think people are well positioned to try new and different things without the pushback that would normally happen. And that's how you discover something that you may have never thought of before. So instead of looking at it as "Oh my gosh, what are we going to do?" How about you lean in and kind of focus on "Why not give this a try?" It may not work, but we don't know unless we give it a try.

Shawn Boynes (16:04):

And I think it also is forcing a lot of learning professionals to assess their skill sets because we tend to focus on what we know and what we're good at, but I think now it's becoming more about "Are you a generalist in this space?" Being the person who was responsible for live, face-to-face training or courses, okay, that's great. However, in this new environment and going forward, I think the expectation will be that people will have an opportunity to consume their education and their learning and training online when they want it, how they want it. And we have to be well positioned to seize that opportunity.

Celisa Steele (16:49):

Are there risks that you find yourself taking as a leader? You suggested people should embrace this, lean into this, take the risks. Are there areas, any examples that you care to share from what you're trying?

Shawn Boynes (17:03):

Yeah. From my perspective, with my executive director hat on, I will say trying to make sure that the governing body, the board of directors, stays focused enough and appreciates that they still have to govern the organization. And while most groups have face-to-face board meetings several times a year, that's out the window now. And for me, I had not convened the board virtually to have its meeting to conduct its business and that sort of thing. And it's a different animal trying to do it that way. For me, I did not want to convene the board and have them on some sort of virtual platform for eight hours, a full-day board meeting. That's just not ideal. People can't focus that long. However, you still have to conduct the business of the association, so that's been a challenge for me. But I don't have a choice. So we're kind of pushing through and we're doing the best we can do and trying to break down chunks of time where the board can convene to take action and embrace their fiduciary responsibility.

Celisa Steele (18:21):

So tell us about the Texts to Table podcast. What is it, and what prompted you to start it?

Shawn Boynes (18:29):

Texts to Table actually has turned into a work of love for me and my cohosts, Donté Shannon, Michelle Mills Clement, and Irving Washington. And it actually was born out of what's happening in the world right now and especially how the Black community is being impacted by the racial tensions and the social justice movement that is happening right now. And we decided to pull the curtain back and let people into the conversations that Black people are having in this moment, and it's primarily for white people, and we wanted to make sure that we were as transparent and honest as we possibly could be. We didn't go into it with a plan. We just thought, "Okay, we'll do this, and we'll see what happens." And after that first episode, we realized that there was an overwhelming, positive response to the episode. And we decided, "Okay, we got to keep this going."

Shawn Boynes (19:33):

And I think it speaks to a couple of things. It speaks to the need—the timing is right. And then also there's a gap because no one else was really talking about these things in a way. I think they were happening in a vacuum. Black people were talking about stuff and maybe white people were talking about stuff, but no one put it front and center. So we took a risk in that sense, and we used a platform that everyone is now used to in terms of bringing content to the masses, and that was the online platform.

Shawn Boynes (20:07):

And we've continued to do that. And now we're building out a community of people that are interested in talking about race as it relates to leadership and the tough things that we have to deal with. So we're going to offer resources and give people an opportunity to do the work themselves. We're not trying to provide a roadmap or provide a silver-bullet solution for people to figure out how to be anti-racist. However, we're providing people with the resources that they can put together their own toolbox and hopefully be better advocates for Black people because we need that right now.

Celisa Steele (20:46):

I've listened to the first two episodes and really enjoyed it and found it very useful. And I especially appreciated that you mentioned an On Being podcast episode. I'm a longtime listener of Krista Tippett and On Being, and I liked that episode very much that you mentioned with Resmaa and Robin.

Shawn Boynes (21:09):

Robin DiAngelo.

Celisa Steele (21:10):

Yeah. So when you think about the times of disruption, and, when we were talking earlier, focused on the need to shift to online that kind of came out of the coronavirus pandemic, and then you also have this moment of disruption, kind of, our renewed disruption around this systemic racism. How do you see these different types of disruption? The systemic racism, the pandemic, how do you see them overlapping, if you do?

Shawn Boynes (21:47):

Oh, absolutely. I think there's a convergence that's happening. And we can't ignore one over the other; we have to deal with them both. And what I mean by that is when the George Floyd, that seemed to be the flash point for all of these discussions, and it's not new—it's been around for a while—but I think, because of the pandemic and the fact that people are at home, it was a little more top of mind for people, and people had the time to pay closer attention to what was happening. And the fact that it was recorded, and the fact that it was horrible, and people actually saw it and were forced to confront their role, whether they've experienced it personally as a person of color, discrimination and racism, or if white people kind of sat silent and didn't speak up before.

Shawn Boynes (22:45):

The other part of that is organizations were actually forced to address social justice issues that they probably wouldn't have addressed previously. Organizations, the for-profit and the nonprofit communities, some issued statements saying that they were against racism. And those statements, okay, they're fine, but what it did, it also put some in the hot seat because the question then became, "Okay, yeah, these are words, and it sounds great, but look at the internal makeup of the organization. Look at your senior team. Do you have any Black people in your senior team, or people of color for that matter? Are you committed to diversity beyond the words? Do you have any programs in place? Do you have a strategic plan that includes diversity, equity, and inclusion in it?"

Shawn Boynes (23:28):

And I think that's where organizations are struggling still because most groups tend to not dip their toe in the social justice water because it's just something that, if it's not mission-related or -focused, why would we do that? But now they were forced to deal with it. And I think employees and the workforce is demanding that these organizations speak up and support them in some capacity.

Celisa Steele (24:05):

This is probably a big question, but I'm going to ask it anyway. What is it like to be a Black executive director at this moment in time?

Shawn Boynes (24:14):

It's hard. And not that it's not hard any other time, but I think in my role—I remember having to discuss all of this with my team. It was the weekend after the unrest around George Floyd's murder, and I convened a meeting with my team, and we talked about it, and then I told them, "Look, I'm not okay. I'm not in a good place." I also sent a similar message to the board of directors of the association, letting them know that I was struggling. So I had to be vulnerable in that moment.

Shawn Boynes (24:46):

At the same time I recognize that I was hired to lead the organization. And while I needed to make sure that I took care of myself emotionally, mentally, and otherwise, I also had a job to do. So it was hard to navigate, and that's where my network came into play, and the whole Texts to Table idea was born out of that. And I have a group of trusted colleagues that I rely on for the support because we all experience similar things as Black executive directors and CEOs of organizations.

Shawn Boynes (25:20):

So, for me, it really forced me to be vulnerable in moments where I normally wouldn't be. I tend to compartmentalize aspects of my life because that's how I've had to navigate professionally. And in this instance that wasn't working. So I had to pull the curtain back on myself and just kind of reveal the fact that I was struggling, that I was hurting. And it was not easy for me. And now what I've focused on is "How do I use my voice to amplify the challenges that Black people are facing in the workplace and speaking truth to all of the many different obstacles that I faced along my career?" And I've built my career and my reputation by being true to myself. However, I wanted to make sure that now I was using my megaphone moment to bring attention to the issues that other Black professionals are struggling with as well.

Celisa Steele (26:14):

What do you wish for or from other Black leaders at this moment, and what do you wish for or from non-Black leaders?

Shawn Boynes (26:23):

For Black leaders, I want us to step up and speak our truth. As difficult as that may be, we can't address and move the needle at all if we're not willing to stand in our truth. And that's not an easy thing, but we have to do it and recognize that the support is there—it's just reaching out and asking for it. And I think for non-Black leaders, it's "Do something." There has to be action. Listen to your Black employees, listen to your Black colleagues, and try to figure out what your role can be or should be in addressing this massive issue that we have in this country related to race.

Shawn Boynes (27:03):

And no one is calling anybody out or trying to put someone in the hot seat. I think people need to be self-reflective and figure out where they could have done something and they didn't. And then be honest and learn from it. What are you committing to going forward? What are you willing to do to help address this issue? Because Black people can't do it alone. We need our allies, and we need those to stand front and center with us. And, in some instances, shield us from the nonsense that continues to come from racists in this country. And that is not easy. I get it. However, we can't get to a better place if it's just one group leading over another. We've got to come together and make it happen.

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Celisa Steele (28:00):

I want to give you the chance—is there anything that you were hoping that we might get into that we didn't get into? Anything else you'd like to add or say? I've really appreciated all of your comments and the insights and examples that you shared. But again, just want to leave it open if there's something else that you wanted to have a chance to say.

Shawn Boynes (28:18):

Yeah, I'll just make this comment because I think it's important. So many are looking forward to getting back to normal. And I don't think that that's what we're going back to. We're going back to something that will be different. And what I mean by that is you have to acknowledge that some of these changes were good changes—you know, I already talked about the remote workforce and giving staff the opportunity to telework because it is something that, if you're being mindful of the workforce, and it's becoming increasingly more competitive to find good talent, you've got to change the culture of the organization and make sure that you have policies in place to embrace telework and remote workers. It's just something that it's not going to swing back to having everybody in the office every day and that sort of thing. And then the other part of it is, like I said before, continue to take risks. Now's the time to do it and figure out what that one thing is that may help reposition the organization to better serve. It may be a different audience, not the same audience, but a different audience.

Jeff Cobb (29:36):

Shawn Boynes is the executive director of the American Association for Anatomy. Learn more about AAA at anatomy.org, where you'll find information about who they are, what they do, who they serve, and the discipline of anatomy in general. Shawn is also one of the four co-hosts of the Texts to Table podcast, which focuses on conversations about race and leadership. Find Shawn and connect with him on LinkedIn and Twitter.

Celisa Steele (30:04):

You can find links to the AAA website, Shawn on LinkedIn and Twitter, and the Text to Table podcast in our show notes [@leadinglearning.com/episode256](https://www.leadinglearning.com/episode256), along with a transcript and other resources related to my conversation with Shawn.

Jeff Cobb (30:23):

At [leadinglearner.com/episode256](https://www.leadinglearner.com/episode256), you'll also see options for subscribing to the podcast. To make sure you don't miss the remaining episodes in this series, we encourage you to subscribe. And subscribing also helps us to get some data on the impact of the podcast.

Celisa Steele (30:39):

We'd be grateful if you would take a minute to rate us on Apple podcasts. Jeff and I personally appreciate it and reviews and ratings help the podcast show up when people search for content on leading a learning business. Go to [leadinglearning.com/apple](https://www.leadinglearning.com/apple) to leave a review and rating.

Jeff Cobb (30:55):

Lastly, please spread the word about Leading Learning. In the show notes [@leadinglearning.com/episode256](https://www.leadinglearning.com/episode256), there are links to find us on Twitter, LinkedIn, and Facebook.

Celisa Steele (31:07):

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Thanks again. And see you next time on the Leading Learning Podcast.

[music for this episode by DanoSongs, www.danosongs.com]

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