



Learning to Get Down to Business

Leading Learning Podcast Transcript for Episode 279

Celisa Steele (00:00):

Growing a learning culture is a fundamental skill for any learning business looking to thrive.

Jeff Cobb (00:11):

I'm Jeff Cobb.

Celisa Steele (00:13):

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

Jeff Cobb (00:21):

Welcome to episode 279, the first installment in a seven-part series on what we're calling the learning business MBA.

Celisa Steele (00:29):

Which probably makes you ask what is the learning business MBA? We'll credit the term to Josh Goldman, who now serves as the senior director of consulting at Tagoras, the parent company of Leading Learning, which Jeff and I co-founded. But Josh was not part of the team here when he first used the term.

Jeff Cobb (00:48):

That's right. He was in the certified public accounting world at the time. I believe at the Ohio Society of CPAs, if memory serves me right, and he reached out to me because he was in charge of putting together some programming for a gathering of the educators from that group—people who basically are directors of education, those sorts of people at state CPA societies. And he really wanted to focus in on the business side of providing lifelong learning and continuing education to their audiences.

Jeff Cobb (01:19):

And so somewhere in the conversation—I can't remember if it was in his initial e-mail or if it just came up in our back and forth—the whole idea of MBA emerged and having that be a theme for a day of education. And, of course, an MBA is a master's in business administration—I'm not sure you ever hear anybody say the whole phrase anymore, but that's what the acronym is for. And it's that traditional graduate degree in business. And, of course, we weren't going to accomplish a true MBA in a day, but the idea was that we could really focus in on the business side of learning in a one day session with these educators.

Celisa Steele (01:56):

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So that's your side of the story, Jeff, but you and I had a chance to talk with Josh much more recently than that conversation, that exchange that you're remembering. And we talked to him about this idea of an MBA for learning leaders. And here's what he remembers about why he reached out.

Josh Goldman (02:13):

When I first came up with the idea for that, it was as much to, honestly, serve myself in the role that I found myself in, serving a different and new audience and segment, CPAs, as opposed to I had worked in the higher education space prior, and I needed to up my own skill set. And as I looked across the landscape, I realized that the market was changing. There were a lot of competitive forces at play, and I needed a skill set that I hadn't earned either formally through formal training and education or informally via kind of on-the-job learning. I think like many of my association colleagues, I didn't plan a career in association management.

Josh Goldman (02:51):

My background was in educational administration, and I gained experiences along the way in training design, event management, both formally and informally. And as I advanced in my career and worked with those different audiences and in increasingly complex associations, I recognized I personally was lacking some of the explicit knowledge, skills that you would find inside of a traditional MBA program—concepts like new product development, pricing methodologies and considerations, how to conduct valid market assessments using new and complex methodologies to get at the sense of a real, true sense of needs and preferences.

Josh Goldman (03:27):

I had not conducted risk assessments to anticipate threats to the business that were coming down the pipeline. Just a number of areas where I had not found knowledge or skills either formally or informally over time. And so, at the time I approached you, I was serving that segment that was increasingly seeing competition from for-profit spaces. There was a shrinking market size of the traditional definition of the traditional member, and mergers and acquisitions were occurring. And so the market was changing needs, and I felt at that time that that collective audience—all of those learning leaders across a number of CPA associations and myself—could use something like a learning MBA that helped us focus on some of those more business-focused or corporate-focused knowledge and skill sets. And so I was looking for a way to quickly come up to speed on new ways to examine the business, and, knowing the work that Tagoras did, wanted to approach you and have a conversation about that.

Celisa Steele (04:19):

Josh shared based on his personal background, working in associations, but I think what he's describing—that landing somewhere accidentally, or maybe I should say serendipitously in a role where you feel like you're short of some key skills—I don't think that's unique to folks working in the association world.

Jeff Cobb (04:39):

Yeah, probably not. I mean, I think people end up in the learning business probably accidentally more often than not. Even if you're coming to something like a commercial training firm that they might be focused on the adult lifelong learning market, chances are you didn't go to school thinking that's where you were going to end up. So you may be lacking some of those skills. And I mean, certainly if you're in academia or, as Josh was, in an association, good chance that you're coming from an education background in general. If you even have that, but you

probably don't have those business skills, those business chops. So I think across all sorts of learning businesses, you have that, and I think it can be a little bit of tension too in just about any type of learning business because when you think about education—learning experiences is what you're providing—I think for a lot of people, it can feel...there can be some cognitive dissonance, or it can feel a little bit distasteful to be combining learning and education with something like business.

Celisa Steele (05:41):

Well, I think that's an interesting point. And I do think that perhaps there is some tension inherent in how we describe our audience. We talk about learning businesses. Learning is this innate impetus—all humans learn—and so it seems learning should be wide open, freely available. Business, on the other hand is about competition and profit and charging for access. So it can feel distasteful for people who really buy into the learning mission of a learning business to think of it as a business.

Jeff Cobb (06:16):

And I was saying that a lot of people may end up there from that learning or education perspective. But, of course, there are people who do land in a learning business with business skills and acumen, and those people might be uncomfortable or at least unfamiliar with the learning side of things and might feel at a loss when it comes to understanding what goes into making an effective learning experience, which, of course, is what they're trying to provide as a business. That is the "product."

Celisa Steele (06:45):

And so we're beginning to get into what the course of study for this mythical learning business MBA might cover if it existed. And I want to talk more about the course of study and those topics. But, before we do that, I want to circle back to the question of "What is the learning business MBA?" and make sure that we answer that. For me, the learning business MBA is shorthand for getting at the core skills and knowledge needed to run a successful learning business. Just as the traditional master's of business administration focuses on key areas that are important for the successful operations of a business, the learning business MBA does the same thing. It identifies the core skills and knowledge in specific areas that are necessary for one particular type of business, for a learning business, and what it takes for that to be successful. So the main difference is that the learning business MBA is focused on that specific type of business, that learning business that serves learners and helps them learn, and that's so important to their profitability.

Jeff Cobb (07:53):

And I'm not sure I can really improve on that core definition. One of the things we'll aim to do over the course of this series is to enumerate some of those skills and knowledge areas, try to dig into them a little bit, have conversations with people who can help to illuminate them a little bit in the context of a learning business. But, of course, we're talking about a seven-episode podcast series here. The traditional MBA, I think, is usually two years. You get those accelerated ones—they get down to a year—but you're covering a lot of territory in an honest and true MBA. So what we're engaged in here, if we're going to try to take that metaphor, that analogy of an MBA seriously, this might be closer to something like an executive MBA, where we've just got smaller shots of knowledge and skills for people who are in the working world.

Jeff Cobb (08:43):

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You're already out there leading your learning business. This is a way for you to get a little bit of knowledge on top of that. Another model, if we're going to talk about sort of formal MBA-type models or borrowing from MBA-type models is something like the altMBA that Seth Godin introduced a number of years ago. And in both of those cases—executive MBA, altMBA—they're playing off the idea of the full-blown MBA, offer content to people that are really going to be able to put to work in the context of their day-to-day jobs. And, while obviously this is not going to be any sort of true MBA—we're not even going to offer a certificate or anything—we are hoping we're offering MBA-type skills, knowledge, insights, conversations with people from a business perspective that you will be able to hopefully put to work in your learning business as we go along.

Celisa Steele (09:38):

Now, let's talk about what would we study in the learning business MBA. What are the skills and knowledge learning businesses need to be successful?

Jeff Cobb (09:47):

Right. And it's going to vary quite a bit from program to program, but there are some core areas I think that you find in most MBA programs—things like accounting and finance, strategy, management, marketing, and communications. Most are probably going to get into things like human resources at some level, business law. Certainly IT has been, particularly in recent decades has become, a bigger and bigger thing in MBA programs, and more and more are exploring areas like entrepreneurship or having specific programs around innovation, for example.

Celisa Steele (10:20):

Yeah, and some of those areas you just ticked off have already been touched on in our conversation so far, and there are others that aren't necessarily unique to learning businesses but are definitely important to learning businesses. Just thinking back to what Josh mentioned, he talked about product development; he talked about pricing, market assessment, and risk assessment.

Jeff Cobb (10:43):

And those are arguably more specific domains—subdomains you could call them, under some of those broader categories. So pricing, for example, that's going to tie to accounting and finance, but also to marketing where it's one of those classic four Ps of marketing. And maybe we'll talk a little bit more about as we go along product development. That's a subdomain of strategy and marketing and also of operations arguably.

Celisa Steele (11:09):

And there are some domains, though, that are unique to learning businesses, and the main one that jumps to mind for me is an understanding of how adults learn efficiently and effectively. An understanding of how learning happens is, of course, key to developing and delivering products that are going to help a learning business in its arguably most fundamental goal.

Jeff Cobb (11:34):

Yeah, I mean, that's really the sort of stuff of the learning business. The business elements are really built all around that, to serve that, and to make sure that you're being effective with that. Fortunately, we've got good resources around that as well. We just completed a good series—a great series, I think—on learning science for learning businesses. So any listeners who feel

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like—whether you come from the learning background or not but particularly if you're maybe coming from the business background and don't have as much of the learning side—I certainly recommend that series as something to help build knowledge there. And, depending on your role in a learning business, you're going to go deeper or shallower in some areas. So you might add an instructional design specialization or learning technologist concentration to your learning business MBA if you're much more frontlines in those types of areas.

Celisa Steele (12:26):

And so there's a lot that could go into the learning business MBA, and I think we could continue to generate a long laundry list of skills and knowledge needed, but instead let's pause, and let's think about hierarchy. What are the most important skill sets for those leading and working in learning businesses?

Jeff Cobb (12:49):

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Speaker 4 (12:59):

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Jeff Cobb (13:42):

We're grateful to Cadmium for sponsoring this series, and we encourage you to visit gocadmium.com to learn more. So what are the most important skill sets for those leading and working in learning businesses? I think the answer to that, of course, is going to change depending on the nature of the organization, the people involved, whatever the situation is. So, probably hard to generalize too much about it. I think really anybody working in a business situation, in a learning business situation, needs to have at least a good grasp of the fundamentals.

Jeff Cobb (14:20):

You need to know how to work with a spreadsheet. You need to understand things like the four Ps of marketing and why they matter and have some basic understanding of how to develop strategy, whether or not you're going to be the person developing the high-level strategy for your learning business. But I think aside from—really in addition to—those sort of concrete core skills around business, really anybody working in the learning business—and maybe this just applies to any business—has to really be skilled in what I guess I would call critical thinking. It's got aspects of judgment to it.

Jeff Cobb (14:56):

Maybe it's even got aspects of what we've written and talked about before as metalearning, but it's really the ability to step back and truly make sense of what's going on and figuring out how to find the value and how to go forward with it. Whether we're talking about big organizational

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decisions or just small day-to-day decisions. A couple of illustrations of what I'm talking about. We've already said in the context of this podcast that there can be this sort of cognitive dissonance between the idea of business on the one hand, where you've got competition and profit and those sorts of things going on, and learning and education on the other hand, where there's a, I think, people have a sense of purity about that. And so you have to be able to look at those two areas and recognize the ways that maybe they legitimately are an opposition but also recognize the ways in which they overlap—and overlap very strongly when your business is learning—and be able to figure out what to do with that.

Jeff Cobb (15:57):

That's one area where that kind of critical thinking judgment really applies. Another is that, like so many areas of life right now, there's a lot of trendiness, buzzwords out there. We all hear we have to do personalization, or we have to do microlearning, or we have to do gamification or whatever's coming next. We all have to transform digitally, and you have to be able to, again, to step back and make some sense of that and be able to come to judgments that are going to result in value for the business and for the learners that you aim to serve.

Celisa Steele (16:30):

I like that focus on critical thinking. And I think it helps because in some ways this can feel like a trick question, right? What are the most important skill sets for those leading and working in a learning business? I mean, the clearest answer is it depends, which is sort of where you started, Jeff, but critical thinking is going to help you get from the "It depends" to really what is the answer for me and in my organization. You're going to be able to sort through that chatter of buzzwords. You're going to be able to look at the role you're playing in the organization, where your organization is. Is it more of a startup? Has it been around for 150 years? Do you have growing market share, shrinking market share? All these things are going to influence what really are the most important skills in any particular moment for yourself and for your learning business. I really like that focus on critical thinking.

Jeff Cobb (17:22):

That said, there are sort of perennial issues that we see come up that you have to have skills to address.

Celisa Steele (17:30):

Well, absolutely. And, when we asked Josh what he sees as the most important skills for those leading and working in learning businesses, he was able to answer and give us sort of two things. So here's what Josh had to say.

Josh Goldman (17:43):

The two that come to mind immediately and I think are most critical to the success of a market-facing learning business is a deep understanding of the current and as well potential customers. And that has to go beyond some of just the basic demographics and delivery method preferences that we often ask about. I think we really have to understand motivations behind why your potential customers, your current customers are pursuing those programs and services. That can help you iterate on the messaging and really, really expand on your value and your value proposition to those customers if you truly understand why they are approaching you, what value you're adding, what value you're bringing and the decisions that they make and the criteria that they use when they're choosing to interact and engage with you

versus another association or another organization or a competitor in that space. So I think a much deeper understanding of the customer to me is number one.

Josh Goldman (18:36):

And especially as things are changing and workplace environments are moving faster and faster, finding methods and finding ways to stay up to date with those changes and staying well connected to the customer so that you aren't making decisions off of outdated and inaccurate information or perceptions about what you think your customers are doing and knowing and what they believe and what they value. Once you have a deep understanding of your current and your potential customers, and beyond that surface-level area of understanding, and you get really to their motivations, the decision criteria that they use or why they're working with you versus working with others, then you can move on to what I think is the number two most important competency. It's thinking about how you then translate and transition that into how you position your value in front of them

Josh Goldman (19:19):

and how you bring that credibility to the market because you have such a deep understanding, a deep expertise in what they are doing, what they think, and what they're concerned about. And, if you demonstrate that understanding and you position that as a value proposition for them, then you're more likely to be able to adequately serve them, attract them, and hopefully gain some stickiness in that part of the market that you're trying to serve.

Celisa Steele (19:41):

I appreciate how Josh boils the essential down to two big overarching areas of competency. You've got to understand the customer, and then you've got to translate that understanding into credible products and services that speak to the needs and wants of the audience you're serving. And it was interesting to me that Arianne Urena, who has served on the Elevate LMS team at CommPartners for years and is now part of Cadmium, she focused in on the same two areas as Josh. Here's Arianne.

Arianne Urena (20:17):

If I had to kind of pick out a few key things, it would be the ability and really the drive to do the research, anticipate the needs and wants of the audience of those learners, and really being able to hone in on that. And then, once that data is kind of gathered, to ensure that whatever we're offering—between the networking, the education, the development—making sure that it's accessible, and also really, really ensuring that the value is shown and portrayed. I think sometimes that also gets lost on the sidelines, where we're focusing a lot on the content, but the marketing and the excitement behind it may have been missed a little bit.

Celisa Steele (21:02):

To understand the audience, as Josh and Arianne both home in on, a learning business needs to "get" market research and market analysis. And then to translate that understanding into products and services, a learning business has to understand product development and the pricing and promotion aspects of marketing.

Jeff Cobb (21:24):

And I think to bring it back to that sort of higher level where we started this is where critical thinking and judgment are needed because there's so many sort of cut-and-paste things you can do around things like market assessment and understanding your audience. Send out your

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average needs assessment survey, that sort of thing. Those can be useful, but, if you can't really apply that judgment to both crafting those instruments and then analyzing and evaluating what you get out of them, then you're not going to get very far with that. You need to be able to do that to determine, okay, we've been in our market; we're seeing what's happening out there. Is this a situation where just we're just going to respond, and it's a clear need, and we're going to get what the market is asking us for out there as quickly as possible? Or, for example, are we seeing a market that maybe doesn't fully understand the opportunities and the challenges in front of it, that are looking for guidance, that are looking for us to lead them with the types of products and services we're offering?

Jeff Cobb (22:24):

All of that comes out of understanding your audience absolutely, and then you're really applying that judgment, that critical thinking, to then make the decisions that are going to create the value that you need to create as a learning business.

Celisa Steele (22:36):

Well, and Jeff, what you were just talking about there, I think you've described it elsewhere, as are you going to have a market-focused approach or are you going to have more of a product-focused approach? And I feel like what Josh and Arianne are talking about is that market-focused approach—really understanding that market and then giving them what they need and want. And then what you were just hinting at is there's an alternative to that. There's leading the market, leading your audience, giving them what you actually can see that they need, even if they haven't fully recognized that. And so I think that gets back to the critical thinking skill that we sort of started with. And I think it also ties very clearly to strategy. There are these choices, these decisions to make, and it's critical thinking to decide which strategic approach you're going to follow and execute on.

Jeff Cobb (23:25):

It's so true because that really is the essence of strategy. And that's probably, if I had to be a business geek and say where my heart is when it comes to business and thinking about business, it's in that strategy area; it's around strategic thinking, which, of course, you have to have the critical thinking. You have to have the judgment. You have to be able to step back and reflect and make sense of things. And that focus on strategy reminds me of something that Cristyn Johnson said when we spoke with her. She doesn't talk about strategy per se—I mean, we weren't talking about strategy per se when we started going down this road—but she talks about planning, and planning, of course, is an important aspect of strategy. The plan has to make the strategy a reality in the end, has to align with it, and really bring it to life.

Celisa Steele (24:11):

Right. Cristyn currently works at Cadmium, and she focuses on both training and development opportunities for Cadmium clients and also on internal training for Cadmium staff. She was an Elevate LMS customer when she worked in a learning business—before joining the team there, she worked at Americans for the Arts—and, I love this, is a self-described learning nerd.

Jeff Cobb (24:36):

Yeah. More power to you, their Nerd Cristyn. Here's what Cristyn said when we asked her what she thinks those leading and working in a learning business need to know or be able to do in order to be successful.

Cristyn Johnson (24:49):

The first thing that I really think about that may seem a little bit like a no-brainer—but it seems to be frequently missed when we're kind of all in a rush to get things done—is creating an actual plan to achieve those learning goals that you're looking to achieve. That plan should have kind of a mix of short-term as well as long-term goals and objectives. For example, let's say that you set a goal to increase your revenue by 20 percent in the next quarter. How are you going to achieve this goal? Of course, you can do things like increasing your marketing efforts, but what I like to think about during this planning process are kind of those other things that you have control over that can really help you achieve those goals. In this specific context, you want to make sure that you're thinking about the types of learning that you're offering, the subjects of that learning, the frequency in which you're releasing the content to your users but possibly more importantly is kind of how you're engaging learners throughout the process.

Cristyn Johnson (25:48):

So one thing that I like to kind of reiterate time and time again is that an engaged learner is much more likely to not only retain that information that you're giving them, but they're also more likely to come back and purchase again—and then also tell their friends and colleagues about that amazing experience that they had. Diving into kind of that planning process a little bit more, there's really a few things that I like to kind of recommend and call out in terms of focusing attention on. The first and foremost and kind of the most important thing to me—and, as I mentioned, I'm a total learning nerd so some of this comes very naturally to me—but is you should really strive to kind of foster an environment of learning both internally within your organization and then, of course, externally with all of your learners, but that kind of environment and fostering that behavior and that mindset really goes a long way for everybody embracing what it is that you're doing.

Jeff Cobb (26:43):

Cristyn mentions planning, but at the end she also got into learning culture, which is a concept we strongly believe in as well. And, in fact, it's hard to have a successful learning business if you haven't really thought about the overall culture in which you are working, the different constituents that make up that culture, not just your internal culture at the learning business, but more broadly, that universe of your learners and the different providers and subject matter experts that are out there in your marketplace, and really understanding the context in which you're working as a learning business.

Celisa Steele (27:21):

I wholeheartedly agree, Jeff. Growing a learning culture is a fundamental skill for any learning business looking to thrive.

Jeff Cobb (27:36):

As we mentioned at the beginning, this is just the first in a seven-part series. We'll continue to explore the learning business MBA and what skills and knowledge learning businesses need to succeed, and we'll dig deeper on topics we touched on today—things like product development, innovation, finance, pricing, marketing, and more.

Celisa Steele (27:53):

We'll offer one reflection question for you to ponder. If you were putting together a learning business MBA, what subjects and skills would you include? What was missing from the topics we touched on today?

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Jeff Cobb (28:06):

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Celisa Steele (28:22):

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Jeff Cobb (28:44):

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Celisa Steele (28:54):

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

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