

L&D ARE NOT THE DESIGNERS OF LEARNING

For many years, Leif has worked with organizational change. He founded a series of start-up companies and has worked as CEO of Relation Technologies from 2010 to 2017. From 2018 Leif is venturing a new chapter in his career as the founder and CEO of the company Actee, where they have developed a digital simulation hub, and create a world of games and tools for better workplace learning.

Leif is also an experienced keynote speaker and loves to share his thoughts on gamification and workplace learning. He will be one of the speakers on L&D Talks on October 25 in Brussels, organized by Stimulearning.

So, who is Leif Sørensen?

I am a family father of 2 almost adult kids. I live very close to the sea; I enjoy sailing. But most of all I love my work. I think “work” when I get up in the morning; I think “work” when I go to sleep at night. In my mind, I am always close to processes around my work and the company, so I think basically, that is me.

Then how would you define work? Because the way you describe it, it is not “work” for you like a lot of people would determine work.

I totally agree. To me, there is also a personal interest. One of the other things that define me is that I suffer from dyslexia, and so do my 2 sons. So we are constantly exploring alternative ways of learning and searching for ways to be engaged in the learning when it is not fun to write and read.

The essence in being a leader is having a purpose. What is your purpose in life?

My purpose is influencing the learning agenda in the world. If I have one wish for myself and for my company, it is to affect the way we learn in organizations. I know for a fact that we are still in an ancient paradigm. We are looking at learning at an old-fashioned way, and all of that is

shifting at the moment. One of the things I really want to be part of is pushing learning into the work environment.

The practical working environments are about the highest levels of learning we can reach because if we can learn people in their work environment what is essential to them, that is the highest goal. And that is where we create the value for the company. Whenever you can help people in their work environment, you create value for the company, but you also create value for the persons who are affected and who need that learning.

How have you translated that purpose into your organization Actee?

The mission for Actee is to change the world for workplace learning, and that is the sum of what we should be doing. If we do learning in a work environment, we can do it with a lot of people at the same time, and that will change the world. What will change is that you will not be able to control what people are learning. You have to offer learning differently, and people will be able to decide what they need at that moment. And that is a total shift.

Just imagine a person that needs to learn something and can find the information in the way that works best for him that could be different from his colleagues. He could also form a group that is struggling with the same issues that can become a sort of safe haven for him, or you could find someone who you can ask for the information. That would really transform something.

How do you bring this mission to life? What is Actees’ strategy for the next few years?

We will focus on creating tools that can be used in a workshop setting. That has already influenced where we are right now. Instead of designing games for our customers ourselves, we encourage them to create games for their content. That design strategy is the first step in a flipped direction.

And this concept will be much extended in the coming years. We will allow users to influence and dynamically interact with our tools on the hub; they will also be able to interact with each other in the tools.

We have taken an enormous leap forward already because now you can basically build your own games. We have collected leadership data since 2010 and have a lot of data that we display to the user and the companies. So if you want to build your own game, you can add your personal model and theory. At the same time, you will be able to collect data that is relevant to you.

Regarding the learning path, the second generation learning that will emerge in the next five years is related to the fact that if you want the learner to be able to extract learning that is important and relevant, the



learner should also be able to influence. To be able to do that, requires more user-friendly tools, secure interconnection between people who want the same kind of learning environment.

That is what we will focus on in the future: I as a learner can extract things when I want to and the way I want to. It is not in the way LMS are functioning where the learner gets this video, then has to go through this module, has to do the quiz. The change will be: I need to see I video, I can find it on Youtube, then I think I need answers to a particular question, and I just enter them in the system so someone can answer them. So in the end, I build my own learning path. I don't have an HR professional or a strategic learning environment saying "this is the learning path you need to go". I have built it myself because it becomes user-friendly. Or maybe somebody in my line of business has gone through the same issues, and I can use their learning designs. And that will be the second generation and what we will be focussing on: allowing the learner to design themselves.

I hear a lot of innovation and creativity in what is going on in your organization. How do you encourage creative thinking? Where do the great ideas come from in your organization?

I am very good at listening and catching needs, so I more consider myself as a moderator for things I see that needs to be addressed. Of course, I am also very interested in learning, and I focus on how to transform ideas into processes. In the company, it is not me who does it. We have structures that allow us to influence the tool, and there is a lot of autonomy in Actee, in all positions. The processes in our organization are very iterative. Something starts as an idea, and obviously we have a lot of ideas. We use a simple tool, Trello, to gather all the ideas. And then they have to be sorted and prioritized, to make sure they are relevant for the clients on the hub. We become better and better at choosing the best ideas.

Our organization is agile and knows how to prioritize. We have a yearly strategy seminar and review this strategy every quarter. This creates a transparent framework for all the small decisions that we take on a daily basis in an autonomous way.

Your organization has gone through a lot in the last year. What have you learned in the last year that will impact this company in the next year?

We have learned a lot about releasing updates. Since we are now mainly an IT software providing company, selling licenses, we have discovered that updates are relevant and we need to be more firm with the structure around development and updating things on the hub. We are now a company that has people at the hub at all times. So we need to be respectful and more structured on when we do updates and what type of updates we are doing at what time.

We have also learned to work with developers teams in India at one hand, clients in the US at the other hand, both from offices in Denmark. And we are also upscaling. All that we do has to be multiplied times ten. Every time we make a decision, we have to ask ourselves: will this also hold when we have ten times as much pressure on this specific process?



Leadership wise, we made a shift from being able to control our processes to not being able to control our processes because there are so many and things are happening so fast. That means that we need to monitor values and we need to monitor the idea of what is happening in the next three months. And also creating knowledge on how we treat clients. How do we handle big clients? Small clients? Who are the clients? And that has to be aligned with who we are as a company. So it is not just a process that you can implement. It is also a kind of an idea that we have been a company that is fast growing, that is good in servicing clients, big and small. To do so, we need to be close enough to the clients' needs and understand the clients. This requires that we ask questions and be honest with the limits of our products. And also being open about what is going to happen next. That is a leadership shift as an organization.

Leiff, this article will be read by a lot of HR and L&D professionals. What message would you like to give them?

Let go of control. Let go of the idea that you are the designers of learning. You should see yourself as a provider, not as a controller. You should become very occupied with the idea of how people learn in their own environment. That would make them relevant. L&D and HR consider themselves as a strategic partner, which they also are, and should be. But the strategy is not control. That is the old paradigm. You can not control, and you should not control the learning. The most used learning all over the world is Google. How much control do we have on Google? None! And Youtube is the second most used one. And then you have Bing or Yahoo. So that basically means that we don't have control anyway. So being respectful of where people are searching for learning, we need to make that shift as well and be really strategic in how we provide learning.

That is absolutely a mind-shifting statement. I guess this will give us food for thought and great conversation opportunities at the L&D talks in October. Thank you so much, Leiff, for this fantastic opportunity to dig deeper into your vision and experience with learning. ■



Helena Demuyndt is Founding Partner of Konsensus Leadership Coaching & Development and oxygen4leadership. Both platforms offer international expertise in developing Leadership Development Trails for Senior Leadership Teams and Executives.