Published by the Center for Engaged Learning at Elon University
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Limed: Teaching with a Twist

Episode 9 – Bite-Sized Learning to Support Young Professionals

Matt Wittstein (00:10):

You are listening to Limed: Teaching with a Twist, a podcast that plays with pedagogy. On this episode of Limed: Teaching with a Twist, we put a twist on our typical topics by chatting with someone outside of higher education trying to develop future leaders in a professional setting. Jon Chesky teaches within the Developing Young Professionals program at L.F. Jennings, a Washington, D.C. area construction company. His short sessions on negotiations are part of a program aimed at preparing young professionals to be leaders within their company and their field.

(00:52):

Brooke Buffington, Jennifer Platania and Andrea Sheetz share their experiences and expertise in professional development and the transition from graduate to young professional as we provide Jon with some ideas of how to get the most out of his bite-sized seminar style learning environment. I'm Matt Wittstein and you're listening to Limed: Teaching with a Twist. Jon Chesky, welcome to the show. It is so good to talk to you today. Would you just introduce yourself to our audience real quick?

Jon Chesky (01:31):

My name is Jon Chesky. I'm a senior project manager for L.F. Jennings, incorporated, a general contractor in the Washington, D.C. area. I teach and facilitate courses for our young professionals, small bite sized three-hour courses, focus around certain topics to help young professionals and their development.

Matt Wittstein (01:51):

So L.F. Jennings is a general contractor. What type of work do they do and is the teaching and facilitating young professional development your primary role?

Jon Chesky (02:00):

Teaching is not my primary responsibility at L.F. Jennings. My main responsibilities are the day-to-day management of multiple projects, multi-family housing apartment complexes, stadiums, entertainments. The teaching is a volunteer responsibility that I've taken on as part of our development goals.

Matt Wittstein (02:23):

How did you get started with working into the professional development side of things?

Jon Chesky (02:27):

It has something that's been always come naturally to me. I love helping and teaching people, especially if it's subjects I'm passionate about. The request initially came in from the human resources department within my company. We were looking to establish a new training program for Young Professionals, which is loosely and roughly defined as people who are within five years of graduation or five years or fewer within the industry, specifically commercial construction.

(02:59):

One of the things that's nice about where I am is that it is a family owned business and a lot of the people who are there are there for a very long time. And by creating the investment and the developing the interest in the younger group of people is both good practice for the long-term health of the company and also provides additional benefits to the people who are volunteering for the program.

Matt Wittstein (03:27):

So I really want to know a little bit more about your actual classroom. What do you teach? What does that look like?

Jon Chesky (03:35):

The way that the Young Professionals program is structured is that every month the group of young professionals is given an experience or a classroom setting or a reading or a discussion or a town hall that is individually structured around a different topic or idea. I specifically have been teaching the negotiations for multiple years at this point. Initially when we started it was a how to negotiate course, but it is slowly evolved over time as an identification of negotiating biases in order to matriculate the people through. We offer multiple years. So there's year one, year two, year three, and I do the year one negotiations course.

(04:23):

There's normally in the neighborhood of 20 to 25 people. A lot of them are in-house administrative and project management teams, although we also have people who are young professionals who work in the field. The other thing that's important to note is that although the vast majority of the people coming into this are young professionals, we'll say 26 years of age and younger, the other qualification or eligibility option is people who have been within the industry for five years or fewer. That opens up a wide variety of other options because it's people who maybe moved from a different industry or from retail and moved into construction.

(05:10):

And they have a whole host of other life experiences that younger people who are just starting out in their professional endeavors don't always have. So you end up with a wide range of both educational experiences and you end up with a wide range professional experiences as well. So one of the challenges we often come across is with our bite size, three hour seminars, our trainings, our introductions to large swaths of topics. How do you best tailor it from maximum impact across all of these different requirements, all of these different experiences, all of these different educational backgrounds? Because they come from different experiences within even the same company, it provides a wide diversity of backgrounds and opinions.

Matt Wittstein (05:59):

So what are some of the techniques you use to teach negotiations?

Jon Chesky (06:03):

The main thing that we use is we use two different role play scenarios within the three-hour class that we conduct. The first one is nice and simple. It's directly from the Harvard School of Negotiations, which is politically known as the ultimatum game where two people have to come to an agreement. If those two people come to an agreement, they can share the amount of, I use candies that are in the bowl in front of them. It's nice, it's quick, it's easy. It talks about power dynamics, it talks about making opening offers and gambits and it also talks about fairness, which is very important.

(06:49):

So a lot of people underestimate how important fairness is as opposed to being rational. And I get a lot of really good discussions out of that, especially because it only takes approximately five minutes and it's a great way to lead off a class. The second thing that we do is a more detailed, a negotiation. It's a one-on-one negotiation that I have developed where I provide the prompts. It's precisely one page and it is the same number of words because that was feedback I received in the past, but it is a negotiation between an agent and a artist and they are required to read the prompt beforehand.

(07:31):

And then when we go to breakout into groups, there are assigned groups that I try to cross mix with people who come from either different divisions or departments. So that way I try to avoid situations where people who have offices back to back with each other or who share projects with one another or are more familiar, I try to make sure that they're not in the same group. So we're not bringing in previously existing biases or experiences. So I do that.

(08:04):

My largest concern, and part of the reason that I'm talking about the respect of time is that I would love to do more. However, I think requiring on a volunteer basis more than a couple of pages of reading in a non-traditional academic setting with at some a certain point in time we'll butt up against the place where more people will forego the reading or forego the prerequisite and show up and then possibly provide a less than desirable experience for the people who did the reading.

Matt Wittstein (08:42):

What are some of the things that has worked well for you in the first few times you've done this and where are you looking to go with the next couple times?

Jon Chesky (08:51):

Well, as I'm sure you're aware, feedback of the participants is incredibly useful when both creating and iterating within the classroom setting. My human resources director, the person running the program, is gracious enough to send out surveys. We get a very good response rate back as you would expect from a group that is volunteering to do this process initially. And a lot of it has been in the realm of setting expectations, setting goals, clear ideas on what we're looking to accomplish, being able to verify that, creating a check process at the end.

(09:28):

Initially when I started running these courses, it was very much of a, do you have any questions at the end? And it became much more of a sharing opportunity where it's tell us one thing that you learned or you thought was neat or something you had never thought of before, and it could be anything that you've picked up within this last three hours.

(09:49):

And one of the things that we've discovered is that people are really interested in sharing, but when other people have the same realization or epiphany, it creates additional conversations that happen outside of the structure. And I see those people having the conversations. And that's really nice and beneficial in the long run because you can extend the learning, have an afterburn effect where people are still engaged because now they're realizing the things that they didn't know other people didn't know, and it creates a higher level of discussion.

Matt Wittstein (10:21):

I would imagine with those diverse backgrounds that you just described, that your students probably also have really different goals that they're hoping to achieve through being part of this program. Do you have any sense of what some of those goals might be for some of the different folks in the classroom?

Jon Chesky (10:39):

Well, one of the things I love about this particular program is that it is 100% volunteer. There's nobody who's being required or compelled to be there. A lot of the people are looking to create a good strong foundation for their professional careers. I assume, and what I would hope is that everybody who comes into the course is there because they are trying to better themselves in just a slight way.

(11:07):

And that's one of the things that we've always spoken about. What we do is try to discuss and open up the possibilities of understanding, looking at both what the big intent of each one of the individual topics is while also giving them the basis and the foundations to identify some of the ways that they interact in those situations.

Matt Wittstein (11:28):

In some of our previous conversation, you had mentioned that some of the ways things get done in your industry are the ways it's always been done, which is a typical phrase we hear often. Do you have any examples of ways you want to move that and shift that to new ways to do things within a professional development program?

Jon Chesky (11:50):

Construction is an industry that is sold as time, and a lot of things because they work and they're effective continue forward. One of the things that I think we're looking at as an industry not dissimilar to a lot of other places is that there's a donut hole effect. We have a lot of people who've been in the industry for a very long time, and we have a lot of people who are new to the industry. And there's this kind of gap that exists between the first cohort and the second cohort.

(12:20):

When we talk about providing people the opportunities, we talk about not only shaping the people who you're going to work with today, but theoretically the people who are going to lead this industry 20 or 30 years from now. So one of the things that we've come to realize is that as the industry continues to change, we get more modernized, we move digitally. That some of the younger generations, the younger professionals have the opportunity because they're native to this.

(12:52):

They have a more diverse perspective from people who've grown up as digital natives, if you will. That they have abilities to provide input that are beneficial on the whole in the long run and in the short term. And it goes for not just our digital natives, it's people who come from a diverse range of backgrounds and perspectives, people who understand how things work in different areas, country, different cultures, different educational experiences.

Matt Wittstein (13:24):

It sounds like this professional development program that your company is developing is really a means to reinvigorate opportunities for leaders that come from all sorts of backgrounds. What is the piece that we can help you with as an instructor that I can focus some of our panel's conversation around?

Jon Chesky (13:45):

So for me it is really threefold. One, being able to provide the amount of prerequisite work for a wide variety of students who have different backgrounds and experiences that is not going to bog them. That moves nicely into the second piece which is, having the ability within those three hours to provide them with the most bang for the buck if, you will, to value their time, to give them benefit, to make sure they're deriving the appropriate experiences from the lesson, from the seminar.

(14:22):

And then the third is making sure that there's a continuing education piece. Again, because it's such a short period of time, I don't always get to have the conversations that I want to have. And unfortunately quite frequently we shut down really productive conversations with the goal of continuing and finishing the set course material as opposed to saying this is a valuable thing, we should continue to have this conversation.

Matt Wittstein (14:50):

Jon, so as I bring this back to our panel, I'm seeing three big pieces you want us to address. You have diverse learners coming from all sorts of backgrounds. How do you get them up to the same page to be ready to engage in your class? Second, how to take this workshop style format, this three-hour one shot, that's all you get, format and get a lot of content and experience into that time. And then third, thinking about ways to continue that education maybe in more informal ways through the relationships that they develop with you and with their peers. And those are the things that I think our panel are going to focus on. How does that sound?

Jon Chesky (15:35):

That sounds wonderful. I'm really looking forward to hearing what they have to say.

Matt Wittstein (15:38):

Awesome, Jon. Well thank you so much for being on the show. We'll be back in touch in a little while.

Jon Chesky (15:44):

Thank you, Matt. It's my pleasure.

Matt Wittstein (16:02):

Brooke, Jen, Andrea, I am so excited to have you on the show. We had a cool conversation with my friend Jon Chesky about some professional development. And I want you to answer this question to help you introduce yourself to our audience, is what do you view as the best trends in professional development today? Brooke, I'm going to lead off with you.

Brooke Buffington (16:23):

Great, thank you so much. I'm Brooke Buffington. I am the director of the Student Professional Development Center at Elon University which is a long way of saying our career services office. I'm so happy to have the chance to talk about professional development. It's what I talk about every single day. So when you ask about what's the trend in professional development?

(16:41):

I would say with COVID, one of the trends that I really saw was access. When people were working from home and working in virtual environments, all of a sudden there was a lot more access to different learning modules online, to different upskilling certificates online that maybe weren't there before. So access has really broadened, which has provided a lot more opportunity for professionals that maybe wasn't there before.

Jen Platania (17:05):

Hi everybody. My name is Jen Platania. I serve as the Associate Provost for Academic Affairs at Elon University. I think one of the things under my role, a lot of what I think about is obviously under academic affairs, I think a lot about curriculum. And so, one of the things that we've been thinking a lot about at Elon in particular is micro-credentials and how those can help both our students and our alumni. So I think, Matt, when you ask about the best trends in professional development, I think of the ones, I don't know whether it's the best or not, but we've been seeing and thinking about the most is micro-credentials.

(17:39):

Elon has recently undertaken a new digital badge initiative for our current students. We also have an Elon Next program, which is a series of different courses, micro-credentials that either students or alumni or community members anybody can take at Elon, but I think we've been thinking a lot about what that looks like. And I think these micro-credentials as opposed to a four-year degree, obviously a micro-credential's really it's a nice, it's a succinct, it's an easy way to upskill and to really either expand your current skillset or really try something new. So I think this is one of the things that we've been thinking a lot about at Elon. And I think that industry professionals are as well.

Andrea Sheetz (18:19):

My name is Andrea Sheetz. I do Workforce & Economic Development in Forsyth County, North Carolina. The biggest trend or best trend I've been seeing is upskilling and reskilling of workers, especially in the face of automation, companies in the tightly record of the last couple years, and as well as cost-cutting technologies.

(18:39):

So we're putting workers out of jobs for workers to keep advancing, doing those two year certificate programs that allow them to move within their industry or to a different one. And also those shorter education opportunities allow for more economic opportunity. And so as wages fluctuate in different industries emerge it really provides more accessible education for a much higher wage.

Matt Wittstein (19:06):

I really like the overlap in all of your answers. So diving right into it, you all brought up the concept of upskilling. And Andrea, you mentioned reskilling. Can you talk a little bit more about, from my perspective, upskilling is learning a skill I didn't learn in school, but does it have a broader definition?

Andrea Sheetz (19:24):

I don't know the technical definition, Brooke might, but that's one where I really see it as if someone is in an industry and working for a few years, but they choose to take their education to the next level, go back to school, get that additional certification, credential, even if it's just take a couple courses, it'll vary within their industry. I learned a couple weeks ago that there are many different types of welding and you can get a credential in a different thickness and it changes that way, but that makes you or a worker more attractive to employers, I'm sorry.

(19:59):

And so that's one where navigating the landscape and making the employee more marketable, just having more skills. I was at a manufacturing plant a couple weeks ago where the way they get all of their cans off of the plan into trucks, there are no more forklifts. It's all an automated roll-in. And so all of those forklift operators are now out of a job, but if they can go back to a manufacturing curriculum and get a job in that same plant they're in a much better situation.

Brooke Buffington (20:29):

I really like what you said because in your first response about the workforce changing and the needs in the workforce changing, and that's because of the digital just buy-in from every organization to create efficiency using digital tools, that's going to continue to happen. So as employees upskill, the definition is really to teach an employee a new skill. To teach an employee a new skill is the definition of upskilling. So it's seeing where with the forklift operators, there's no longer going to be a job.

(20:57):

What skill can we teach them that's going to then allow them to be a contributing member to the organization? The jobs that our students were looking at our undergraduate population are coming in for as first years may not even be existence when they come in as a first year student when they graduate as a senior. So we think a social media influencer, a person who supports an influencer was not a job five years ago. Now that's a pivotal part of that industry. So upskilling is a critical component with this changing workforce need.

Jen Platania (21:35):

I think that's such a great point. I would add too, as we've thought a lot about our micro-credentials and digital badges, I think one of the things that's really important is a collaboration and a coordination between institutions of higher ed and industry executives and partners to see what are those skills that are going to be needed? Because in higher ed, I mean we know a little bit, but we really only know by talking to employers. I mean, Brooke, this better than anybody. And so I think we've been thinking a lot about how can we again, coordinate and collaborate with employers and with industry professionals to know what exactly are the skills that they're looking for now and how can we help to provide those

Brooke Buffington (22:12):

And even workforce professionals like what Andrea's doing because she's hearing from multiple organizations within her area that are saying we have workforce needs and skills that aren't being met, and how can both the organizations in the areas and the institutions in the areas support those needs? So it really does all work together.

Matt Wittstein (22:30):

So I was able to chat with Jon Chesky, who is a senior project manager at L.F. Jennings, which is a construction company based out of Washington, D.C. His full-time role is to be a project manager to manage their contracts and building projects and so on. But he's taken on this volunteer responsibility to teach within their young professional development program. And this program is a multi-year. They meet about once a month with a small-ish cohort of Young Professionals, which they've defined as five years or fewer within the industry.

(23:06):

He actually only teaches one course within that. He teaches a fundamentals of negotiations course. And that course is this workshop style course and what you all were sharing about upskilling and reskilling really reflects L.F. Jennings need to have new leaders that they're lacking in their current field. Where I want to direct this conversation to start is when we're thinking about that micro credential, we're usually thinking of short-term courses. In Jon setting he teaches a workshop about a fairly complex topic, negotiation. How do you get the most bang out of your buck in that sort of setting?

Jen Platania (23:48):

So maybe I'll take this. Now I think back to my days teaching in the classroom, how do you get the most out of your students in a short amount of time? I think one of the ways that certainly the scholarship and the research has shown is by engagement. I think students learn more when they're more engaged. So engaged learning is a really important component, especially when you only have a short amount of time with students.

(24:13):

So I would suggest to Jon try and get the students as engaged as quickly as possible and as deeply as possible in the short amount of time that he has. In a negotiations course they could see him doing some role playing and to have some different exercises where students were engaged in different possibilities or different aspects of negotiations, and I think that could be a really effective way for him to use that time.

Brooke Buffington (24:39):

Yeah. I will second the role playing. So we do a lot of professional development work in our career services office and we can talk about it until we're blue in the face, but until the students and young professionals actually practice it doesn't stick. So role playing is critical for negotiation. And even role playing under pressure, not role playing with the person that you came to the session with, that you're comfortable with and already have a relationship with, but role playing with another instructor.

(25:04):

Potentially if you could bring in some other leaders within the organization that might feel a little bit more intimidating to the young professionals that are in the room because most likely those that they're going to be negotiating with aren't going to be maybe their peers. They're going to be somebody that has a bit of a power over them. And so they need to be able to feel that and as much as possible in the session itself.

(25:25):

So I absolutely think that that experiential component is really important and even potentially dividing up some of the more nuanced pieces of negotiation, sending him out, if he's got a lot of different types of learners in the room to the researchers in the room and having them teach some of the fine teach, so them part of the education. Having the students becoming the educators oftentimes makes the space really dynamic as well, is what I'm trying to say.

Andrea Sheetz (25:55):

I think also with one of the more soft skills like negotiation, it'll be different for every individual. And so, if there's some sense of application and self-analysis there just for a student to think through when they were in a negotiation and how that went and what they could have done better alongside Jon's curriculum. I was in a handling conflict workshop a couple weeks ago and I had a pretty sizable one about a week before that, and part of me wishes I could have gone back and done it better with what I had learned. And so I think that self-reflection will serve the students very well.

Matt Wittstein (26:34):

So when we think about this workshop format, very often when you go to a workshop you don't have students that are going to do a lot of pre-work, you don't have homework that you're going to send them home with, maybe stuff that they could work on individually. What's the extent that you can expect students or participants, young professionals to prepare for this type of learning experience and how might you encourage them to do that? Andrea, I want to start with you. You just mentioned having attended a workshop, did you have to do pre-work? How much pre-work did you have to do? How much would you be willing to do for something that you're volunteering for?

Andrea Sheetz (27:09):

Absolutely. A lot of the ones I attend are part of larger conferences, and so they might give pre-work with the odds of it getting done are much lower, but I think just the general topics, this one was handling conflict, I've been in other negotiation ones, and that one was right before I accepted a job offer, so I had that one on my mind. But having a general sense of what it's going to be about, maybe asking attendees to think about a couple situations [inaudible 00:27:39] upcoming that they have ready to go, but I think also there doesn't need to be much pre-work, I don't think so, for the students to really get all they can. So some is good, but you don't want to rely on it so much when you can probably assume that a third half of people if that aren't going to do it in the first place.

Jen Platania (28:01):

I think another thing that's really important, and as an economist, and Andrea will appreciate this as a fellow economist, but I think making sure to articulate the benefits of the professional development opportunity for the attendees. I mean, I think that people are self-interested. So people are going to do things that they know are going to help themselves.

(28:24):

And I think these types of professional development opportunities are fantastic for young professionals in their fields. And so I think really, I mean, one of the most important things that I would think in my mind is articulating the benefits of doing this. If participants see the benefits of doing this for themselves, I think they're far more likely to engage in pre-work or homework or whatever it might be, because they see the value to themselves.

Brooke Buffington (28:48):

What could be interesting there as you say that, Jen, is really then looking at the assessment at the end because the assessment, if you can capture some of the impact on the learned material and how the participants are planning on utilizing it, or maybe if you assess three weeks after or four weeks after how they actually have utilized it, then you've got a narrative to tell the next cohort coming in, that next class coming in that drives that impact.

Jen Platania (29:14):

Yeah, I agree, Brooke. I think you can tell some really great stories through data.

Matt Wittstein (29:17):

And this kind of leads me into my next question. You've all hinted at it a little bit that even though the class ends at the workshop, the learning doesn't necessarily end at the workshop. And you've talked about how to maybe bring parts of their individual job functions or individual identities into the classroom space to enhance their engagement. What are some mechanisms, especially in this low touch setting, to encourage that learning?

Brooke Buffington (29:52):

So I think the assessment is, because it makes them take that reflection time that was mentioned earlier, a chance to actually process and reflect how have I used this? What did I take away from it? And how has it impacted my work? But then just offering the opportunity but in a low risk, high reward setting. So is it coffee and co-working? That you bring people back together.

(30:14):

They don't have to have prepared material, they don't have to have even reflected on the conversation of the workshop, but it offers another chance two, three weeks after the workshop itself to bring some people together who all have that common engagement to just debrief a little bit more afterwards. We do that with our staff. When we have a workshop come in, we typically do a debriefer, a coffee and co-working a couple of weeks after to say what impacted? What hit? What stuck? And how have you used it?

Jen Platania (30:47):

Yeah, Brooke, I was going to say something very similar. I think when I've done workshops here on campus, one of the things, because these professionals are going to be together for a significant amount of time. I mean, three hours for this workshop, but really this program it sounds like is about a two-year program. And so they're going to form some communities. And so how could you leverage the relationships that they're forming during these workshops and during the overall program?

(31:14):

So to the extent that you can bring them back, like I said, when I do workshops on campus, we'll do a day long workshop for instance, but then give folks the opportunity to sign up to say, "All right, in two weeks, who wants to meet over lunch or coffee and just talk about this a little bit more?" And make it something that's, again, incentivized.

(31:32):

So I'll buy coffee for everybody that wants to show up and think about this question that came up that everybody seemed interested in and we didn't have a chance to, or can we reflect on some of the things that we talked about today. So I think building on the relationships that are formed during these professional development opportunities can be really powerful as well. And that creates this lasting thing that carries through beyond just the three-hour workshop.

Andrea Sheetz (31:59):

I'll add that in a situation like this where the employer is running the program for all of their employees they have a sense of the situation, the negotiations that their employees will have to deal with. And if they can start to think through any upcoming contracts and maybe take the last 20 minutes of class and how can they apply what they've learned here to what's upcoming, and there's some follow through there and action steps, and then other people on that project can tag team that as well.

Brooke Buffington (32:28):

And now say one more thing to that. I really like the follow-up steps because it gives you a takeaway to go into your next job with a mindset of how am I going to utilize what I just learned? With that potential regathering of the cohort it isn't always need to be about celebrations. Let's talk about what we tried and didn't work too. Offering space for failure or missteps.

(32:51):

I think oftentimes really because maybe some people don't come because they feel like they haven't been able to institute what they learned or they don't feel like they've achieved at it, so offering space for both the celebrations of learning achieved and missteps when a learning was tried and celebrating that as well because we're not always going to hit it out of the part the first time, but we still want to encourage that learning to be initiated.

Matt Wittstein (33:17):

As you think about this setting of being a long-term program in short little pockets of one day sessions and town halls and social gatherings, types of things, what are some of the challenges that you anticipate that type of program would need to be prepared to address?

Jen Platania (33:36):

I think maybe one of the challenges that they'll face is ensuring that you've got a commitment to the program. So something that only happens very occasionally. Sometimes there's not that level of deep commitment because you're not doing it on a regular basis. So again, I think ensuring that participants have things that they can be thinking about or working on and be sure to articulate the benefits to themselves of doing such could be really helpful. I go back to what I said before that I think one of the biggest, maybe not the only benefit, but certainly a large benefit that comes out of these things are the relationships that are formed.

(34:14):

And so I think maybe encouraging folks to get together in between sessions. Maybe sometimes it works better than others, but more formal sort of mentoring opportunities within. And those kinds of things can happen outside of the sessions. I think there's a lot of literature obviously on the importance of mentoring and having a person or a set of people that you can rely on for help and support. So those sorts of things. Again, just because the sessions are only happening occasionally doesn't necessarily mean that the communication and the relationships only have to happen occasionally.

Brooke Buffington (34:51):

You talk about engagement and making sure that engagement they're invested. Their supervisors need to be invested is a big piece of this and industry. So if you're part of a program, but you don't have the bandwidth or your supervisor doesn't respect the program. Doesn't ask. I wrote down three terms, ask, advocate and support the program. So the supervisor needs to ask and advocate. What did you learn? How have you incorporated it? They need to know at least the structures of the program so that they can follow-up with the participants and show through inquiring themselves about it that they're in support of the program and provide space.

Andrea Sheetz (35:30):

I will second what Brooke said with that prioritization in the workplace and just one of the biggest challenges that I've experienced as well as other young professionals is just balancing everything, all of the competing priorities. And so usually things that are one off and don't have a deadline in a supervisor, like a young professionals group might fall off the radar and if they're irregular suddenly that's a few months that someone hasn't gone and are they really engaged? And so I think providing that space and ensuring it's a priority throughout the organization to the individual communicating the benefits could really help, but I think the supervisors seem to be supportive as well.

Matt Wittstein (36:11):

I'm going to circle back a little bit to something we talked about in the beginning in thinking about upskilling, reskilling, micro credentials, it has this sense that we're not preparing our students to actually be in the workforce. And I want to just create space to have that conversation of what we're doing well in higher education and where corporations may need to come in to develop those specific skills. I would just love to hear your thoughts on that.

Brooke Buffington (36:41):

Oh, I could jump into that. So when we look at workforce, there's soft skills and there's hard skills. And what your friend is really trying to do is take people who have identified as having those hard skills that the organization needs, such as the project management skills, potentially some software skills, but they want to really help them hone their soft skills so they can become leaders and managers, and that they can take that next step in their learning to be future presenters to the same type of workforce of Young Professionals.

(37:17):

So I think what higher education does a really good job of is creating a foundation, especially at a school like Elon, where we have a liberal arts core curriculum where all of our students are learning some essential skills about understanding people's differences, critical thinking, discussions, really trying to grapple with problems that don't have solutions. Because most of the work that we're all doing doesn't have just an easy solution to the problems that we're being faced.

(37:46):

And so our students are learning that in the classroom of how to grapple with problems. They don't have just clear and obvious solutions. Now, where the upskilling comes in is that, like I said at the beginning, technology's constantly changing. A platform or a software that somebody's going to use today in the workforce a year and a half from now might be completely obsolete because there's a new technology out there.

(38:07):

But what the student needs to know and what we're helping them to learn in higher education is how to learn a new software system. Period. So that way the next time they have to learn another new one in the workforce, they can learn it faster, they become more efficient and more effective with that software and in a much shorter amount of time. So it's creating learning agility is part of what I think we do well in higher education.

Jen Platania (38:29):

Ditto.

Andrea Sheetz (38:30):

I will also add that a lot of those soft skills are gained through the extracurricular experiences, and that's something that is really on the individual students to take advantage of. I can tell a difference in my peers and both from Elon and just other people I work with who really took advantage in what they're doing now, and that's something that the university can provide, but there' a degree of personal responsibility there. And I think that in itself is something that we should maintain. And I think enough of it is embedded in the curriculum as it is, but that's on the student and Elon communicates the benefits, but it's on them to take advantage.

Brooke Buffington (39:13):

I love what you said about personal responsibility because one of the things I wrote down, we were talking very early on about professional development is there's the professional development that is your skilling. What skills do I have that I'm bringing to the table? And then there's the personal development which is, what is my narrative and pathway and how do I want to use that for my next step?

(39:32):

And what you're talking about is young professionals owning that narrative and pathway which is, there's a component of responsibility where it's not the organization's job, it's not your supervisor's job to tell you what that is, but for you to go after it and gain the components that you don't see that you have and the parts of the story that you want to build into your professional path.

Andrea Sheetz (39:53):

And I think that's what we're seeing with Jon's course and these Young Professionals program and that it's those employees who attend, who buy in and who get the most from the program that will end up being promoted and filling that donut hole of managers in the middle and they'll see those benefits as well.

Matt Wittstein (40:10):

One of the things I want to think about in Jon's context, I imagine most of his participants are men. I am speaking to a panel of all women so we should probably acknowledge that difference right there. But I do want to ask the question of just generally speaking, how can managers and workplace mentors and leaders within an organization really help support some of that work-life balance? And specifically Jon who's not at a very high elevated position in his company, how can he be a supportive person for his learners?

Brooke Buffington (40:45):

I think one of the things that when we're coaching young professionals and looking at upskilling young professionals is recognizing that the balance between work and life completely exploded when COVID happened because we all were invited into each other's homes and all of a sudden it smeared this line that was already getting there, but it just blurted very quickly.

(41:07):

And so young professionals I think are really trying and potentially struggling with, you talk about bandwidth. What am I bringing into the office? And I may not even be going into it, but what am I bringing into the office with me and where am I drawing my lines on a personal professional standpoint?

Because it's fascinating right now, and I think it's especially impacting those that didn't have a baseline before.

Andrea Sheetz (41:32):

That's definitely something that talking with some friends and myself I've dealt with in Elon class was in between my internship, which was in between I'd hang out with my friends. And so everything was somehow both personal and professional a little bit, and realizing that there's a hard cutoff for things has just been a big transition as well, but then also there's that balance of I'm young, I'm starting out, I want to be hungry and work late and do what I need to do to really make my mark.

(42:05):

I think especially at a higher level, really any higher than entry level, recognizing that when you do ask an entry level person for something, even if it's just an email, a text, a Teams chat, there's a level of power there, especially when they're first running out and trying to understand the organizational dynamic. And so if someone higher up, then you ask you for something after 5 o'clock there's a question of do I absolutely have to respond right now? And so setting that tone and that expectation very early on from the highest level possible of whether it is expected or whether it's not, making sure that's communicated and consistent throughout the organization.

Brooke Buffington (42:47):

I absolutely second that because everybody's work styles are different. And one of the terms that's being used right now is work-life integration versus work-life balance, because it's recognizing that what is balance? Is it such a thing? What does integration look like and how can I be very purposeful and thoughtful about how I integrate my work and my life together? But setting those unspoken rules, expectations with Young Professionals.

(43:14):

One of the best taglines I saw in somebody's email that I really liked, this was a leader who said the very bottom of the email, it said, "Just because this is a good time for me to send an email doesn't mean it's a good time for you to send an email. Please respond at a time that works with your work schedule." And it gave permission to maybe somebody, if there was a power differential to not respond right away just through that under their signature line.

Jen Platania (43:42):

And I think it's important in these development programs such as the one that your friend Jon is working on, Matt, to make sure that we're thinking about teaching our future leaders how to be conscious and cognizant of these things, how to be conscious of the messages that they're sending when they do send emails after five, or how to be conscious of how they're coming across when they do ask entry level professionals for work to be done and when they ask it for it to be done and in what short amount of time or long amount of time. So I think ensuring that the company's incorporating those sorts of development processes for their future leaders, again, just to teach them about the culture of the institution and about how they might need to be mindful of that is really important as well.

Matt Wittstein (44:29):

I've really enjoyed this conversation and I think I have a lot of stuff to take back to Jon. I want to thank you all for your time and your wisdom and for being a part of our show.

Jen Platania (44:38):

Thanks, Matt.

Brooke Buffington (44:41):

Thank you.

Andrea Sheetz (44:41):

Thank you, Matt.

Matt Wittstein (44:52):

Jon, welcome back. I really enjoyed talking with our panel about your negotiations workshop and Young Professionals program.

Jon Chesky (44:58):

I cannot tell you how much I'm looking forward to this. I've been thinking about it for quite some time.

Matt Wittstein (45:03):

Our panel all had ties to Elon University and it included Brooke Buffington, the director of the Student Professional Development Center, Jen Platania, our associate Provost of Academic Affairs and Professor of Economics, and Andrea Sheetz, who is a 2022 economics graduate who's currently engaged in workforce development work over in Forsyth County in Winston-Salem.

(45:26):

So I led off by asking them about trends in professional development, and it was immediately apparent that short form, easy access ways to upskill and reskill our workforce are really popular and valuable trends from their perspectives highlighting how COVID actually kind of gave us permission to make these types of programs more accessible than they ever were before. So they saw this all as a positive trend. As we got into your teaching context, there was a theme of thinking about relationships and making learning personal.

(45:58):

Jen offered the simple advice of using engaged learning practices, but as the panel conversation continued, that really related more to finding authentic ways for you to connect with your learners and for them to connect with each other. Using real examples that they are likely to experience in their positions to help guide your role playing scenarios or enabling them to co-create an activity to make it a little bit more personal and meaningful might be ways that you could tangibly do that in your workshops.

(46:27):

Andrea also shared the reality that young professionals probably aren't very likely to fully commit to outside work i.e homework without some sort of incentives, but that mirrors on that idea of if you know your students, if you know your learners well, you can probably figure out along with the other instructors what those incentives might be that would properly motivate them to really buy into that Young Professionals program. One idea that came up is that company leadership should really be visibly and actively supporting the program.

(47:01):

This might be asking managers or even executives to participate in different ways in the lessons acknowledging the program or its participants in company-wide communications, or maybe inviting them to serve as sort of short-term mentors within the program as, "Hey, this is where you could be in five, 10, 15 years." I really appreciated how that point built on and is connected to that idea of relationships being a central focus of engagement in your context.

(47:29):

So generally, we talked a lot about what young professional programs really do, and Brooke offered the idea of training professional agility, creating workers that can adapt to technology changing, personnel changing or the world changing and still contributing to the goals of the company. In your context, really evaluating what sub-skills are being developed while focusing on negotiation, for example, communication, quick thinking, persuasion, critical thinking and analysis will enable you to be clear with your students of what they'll get out of your course and develop new ways to approach those learning outcomes.

(48:04):

Within L.F. Jennings, it seems like a lot of the goals are more on the leadership skills and character building that will allow students to grow alongside and within the company. And in that light it was a really good reminder that the culture you're trying to develop as a company, that these students are likely the ones that will be teaching that culture to other workers and other folks in the company in the future. So all of this conversation left me wondering how you might get creative to engage your learners both in your course, but also on the broader scale of the Young Professionals program. So Jon, what are you thinking?

Jon Chesky (48:42):

First and foremost, I love the feedback. This is exactly what I was looking for. The thing I want to make sure that I'm very clear about is that the executives, the presidents, vice president, CEOs, of my company, they're not only the reason that we have this program, but they're involved in it. They serve as mentors, volunteers, they're around all the time.

(49:07):

And our company while it is large, multiple hundreds of people, being on a first name basis with those people who hold either C-level or other vice presidential roles is a common occurrence within our company. I am super interested in the note about things being related to their interests. One of the things that I always struggled with was I wanted to provide a baseline where nobody was given a particular hand up or a head start based on having information that the other people didn't have.

(49:49):

So with everybody having such a diverse background and doing things in our company from accountancy to project management to engineering, it was always a concern that if I looked at something that was specifically designed towards specifically construction project management, people who don't have that background would be disadvantaged in having those conversations, those negotiations, which is why I used musical theater as my option. Did they provide any information or any examples of things that would be mutual interest or a related to their interest that were outside of their current chosen profession?

Matt Wittstein (50:33):

No, I think they actually almost went the opposite way with it, is actually lean into it being a part of their current profession. And maybe that's an opportunity where their supervisors or managers might be able to come in and say, "Hey, this particular role is likely to experience this type of negotiation." And that might put a little bit more pressure on you to design personalized role plays for a given group of students, but it would make that both more meaningful for the learners, but also probably a lot more engaging. They'll immediately be able to see how they're going to be able to use this as their career is progressing.

Jon Chesky (51:15):

My thought process had been the entire time that I wanted to provide them with baseline skills. And I find that, well, it may be more challenging, at least initially having something that's more tailored to the situation could be incredibly beneficial. One of the other questions I had based on the information that came back from the panel was, I believe they referred to it as professional agility. Are there are predefined parameters and what that looks like?

Matt Wittstein (51:47):

When I was sort of recapping for our panelists, what I would share with you, I shared the idea of making your professionals be adaptable, and Brooke specifically offered the term professional agility. It's a term that is encompassing that ability to adapt to things, be resilient to things, cover for other people, learn new skills when a technology changes, but I think the overarching idea is that you want your learners to be leaders in every aspect of their positions at the company.

Jon Chesky (52:21):

Understood. I think back to the cliche about a lot of university education where it is teaching you how to think, in effect allowing you to have the tool set to deal with a wide variety of situations and instances. I also love the note, I wrote it down in my notes as cultural transference, and this goes back to the conversation about having executives and vice presidents and C-level members be involved in this training because I believe that's part of the reason that this particular program was instituted.

(52:58):

It takes people who are mid-level managers, myself and others, and puts them in direct contact as a mentor or mentee relationship, but it also allows for the values that have allowed this company, which is over 70 years old at this point in time to thrive. So you talk about the people that are currently in this young professionals class 15, 20 years down the road being the people who are going to lead the organization. And I believe that's part of why we do this at L.F. Jennings, is specifically so we can keep the things that have made us strong over the long haul.

Matt Wittstein (53:38):

Jon, it sounds like you have some really strong pieces in place already for this program as a whole. And I'm really excited to hear about how this works out for you in the future, how L.F. Jennings continues to develop this program and how you're able to adapt your negotiations course to some of the advice that hopefully was helpful. Thank you so much for sharing your time and your-