

# THE LOW DOWN

ANNELI BLUNDELL



Fresh from her recent *Dr Alastair Rylatt Award for L&D Professional of the Year* win at the 2021 AITD Excellence Awards, we've sweet-talked author, speaker and professional people whisperer, Anneli Blundell, into joining us in the *Training & Development* hotseat. She takes us through her career path from teenage self-development aficionado, talks phallic training fails and tells us why the zombies might be simply misunderstood.

## How did you find yourself in the learning and development industry?

By accident. 15 years ago, I started my business as a professional coach. I quickly learnt that when you do a good job with leaders, they want you to work with their teams, then their departments and then their whole companies. Before you know it, you're translating personal change work around communication, influence and leadership into enterprise-wide programs on difficult conversations, credible communication and coaching skills.

My journey has called me to develop a wide array of skills from one-to-one coaching to team building, to behaviour change programs to keynote speaking. And yet all the work I do is underpinned by my passion for decoding people and performance dynamics and understanding why people do what they do.

I use the core principles of adult learning, a coaching approach and the neuroscience of connection to help people grow and develop, whether it's in the classroom or on my coaching chair.

## What has been your career highlight so far?

Winning the *Dr Alastair Rylatt L&D Professional of the Year* award 2021!

Seriously. When you spend your professional life doing what you love and loving what you do, it's a wonderful

feeling to be recognised for your obsession. It's the trifecta for me – doing work I love, working with incredible people and actually making a difference at the same time.

For as long as I can remember, I've been addicted to learning. From age 15, I was reading books on human behaviour and listening to tapes on my Walkman about how to reach my potential (yes, you read that right – my Walkman). I guess that addiction to learning and growing and always wanting to be better has paid off.

Fun fact for you: my runner up career highlight is also a learning award... with a twist! I entered some marketing awards years ago, which I didn't win. But I did walk away as the winner of the 'Professional Development Category' – an award they had made up just for me after seeing all the training and development I had done!

Perhaps my nerdy obsession with learning is finally starting to be cool? I hope so...!

## On the flipside, have you ever failed spectacularly at something in your career? (And are you willing to tell us?!)

Whilst perhaps not a spectacular fail, I'm sure every L&D professional can relate to this story.

I once drew a shape on the flip chart to demonstrate the improvements I was talking about. As I was talking and re-emphasising my points, I was drawing over and



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over on the shape. Eventually I noticed giggling and pointing and sideways conversations in the workshop participants.

It was at that point I realised that I had drawn a spectacular and graphic piece of male genitalia. It was something to behold!

Simultaneously embarrassed and amused, I called out my artistic faux pas and went about trying to fix it, only to make it much, much worse. The class was in hysterics as I gave up and tore off the paper to start from scratch.

#TrainerFail

### **Even for L&D professionals who advocate a culture of lifelong learning, it can be tough to squeeze in time to learn – how do you maintain your own professional development?**

I am very, very, very lucky with this. I have the best boss ever – she lets me do all the training I want every year! No annual PD budget for me – as I said, best boss ever.

But in all seriousness, I take my professional development very seriously. As clients of my services are often other L&D and HR professionals (who are time-poor and budget-constrained), I feel an extra obligation to be on top of the latest learning trends so I can share them with my clients.

Also, as a business owner and sole provider of my services, I am keenly aware that I am the ‘product’. I need to be at the top of my game and across the latest trends, in order to deliver results at the level I do. (Or perhaps this is just a story I tell myself so I can attend awesome trainings with masterful gurus... cos I want to.)

### **What do you think is the biggest threat the L&D industry is currently facing and how do you think**

### **the profession will have changed in 10 years’ time?**

The biggest threat to the L&D industry right now is not keeping up with the way people learn. People are consuming content on all devices, across multiple platforms, in a multitude of ways. They don’t necessarily need to sit through a training like they have in the past.

We need to acknowledge the role we play in learning has shifted from content creators to experience curators. Our job is to facilitate experiences where people learn and grow from each other as much as from the materials presented. The discovery will be more and more in the self-directed dialogue, facilitated by learning professionals skilled in the art of managing energy, engagement and intellectual curiosity.

In 10 years from now, I’d expect to see more microlearning, more just-in-time content consumed from various sources and more self-directed learning groups where people get together and create their own development experiences.

### **What do you think is the biggest mistake L&D practitioners can make?**

Focusing on content, rather than application. It’s an oldy but a goody. I still see too much discussion on training topics over learning strategies. I say to my clients all the time, effective sustainable change is about integration, not information.

As custodians of learning in the professional world we need to safeguard the integrity of our outcomes and ensure our clients know what they are really buying. It might seem cheaper and quicker to buy a one-day program but are you getting the result you want? Carefully designed behaviour-change programs, whilst more expensive and time consuming at the outset, provide a far better return on investment because they actually create sustainable change.

### **If you had to work for any company based on their learning culture alone, who would it be and why?**

Canva. Hands down.

Not only is Melanie Perkins (CEO and co-founder) a wonderful role model for women in leadership, but, along with her co-founders, she has built an incredible business that thrives through a learning culture.

Learning and growing (with each other and from each other) is not only part of how they work, but they have dedicated in-house coaches to help bring out the best in their people. This is the ultimate in personalised learning and development for the good of the business, their customers and themselves.

Plus, they use a unique and highly sophisticated profiling tool for their team building and talent purposes. This tool is close to my heart as I have used it for many years and co-authored a book and two specialist publications on it. It further demonstrates to me the depth of their investment in supporting people to be at their best through targeted self-awareness and personal growth.

### **Who do you really admire within the L&D industry? Who makes you stop and think?**

Thiagi – Dr. Sivasailam Thiagarajan. He is my engagement hero. He teaches learning through play, games and activities. What I love most about his work (apart from his cheeky humour and generosity of spirit), is that he is always challenging us to break the mould, to be creative and to stretch ourselves. He knows how to make even the most mundane activity lively and engaging without making it gimmicky, which I abhor.

I also admire Dr Alastair Rylatt (after whom the L&D professional of the year award is named). Whilst I didn't know him personally, I googled him when submitting my award application to learn more about him. He seemed a man after my own heart. He mentioned in an interview I read that we should always be learning and stretching ourselves in fields outside our profession and I concur. I have done many things to stretch myself personally and professionally and know my clients have benefited from this experience. You'd be surprised how often I draw on lessons I've learnt from eclectic learning experiences such as singing, dancing, acting, improv, high ropes courses and even bush survival skills.

## **THE REAL LOWDOWN:**

### **No 5-year-old tells their parents that they want to be an L&D professional when they grow up (yet – we're working on it!) What did you really want to be when you grew up?**

A dancer. I've done all types of dancing since I was young and now, as an adult, I still try to get to the occasional ballet and jazz class when I can. (FYI, online ballet was a new thing for me!) Nowadays, though, my heart is with salsa. Not just because it feels amazing, but I suspect it's because I don't have to be flexible anymore and I don't have to remember any routines.

In my household, I'm known for always saying, 'I did a dance to this once!'

### **If you could banish one piece of corporate jargon forever (you know, that one phrase that is like fingernails down a chalkboard to you), what would it be?**

I don't really mind corporate jargon. I could touch base, circle back and take a deep dive into the new normal just for the synergy of the new agile company, any day of the week, going forward.

### **The zombie apocalypse has begun and there's one space left in the Training & Development bunker – what special skill can you bring so we let you in?**

Working with creative tension. I'm good at bringing polarised people together. But be warned... If you let me in, I'd let the zombies in too so we could talk about our feelings, look for the good in each other and find a way to work together! And if that didn't work, I could also effectively allocate them to a breakout room at record speed. (Unless we're all on Teams – in which case we would be dead by the time the rooms opened!)