**RedZone Podcast Episode #97: Shift from a “Know It All” Company to a “Learn It All” Company with Chris Pirie**

Bill Murphy: 00:00 Chris, I want to welcome you to the show today.

Chris Pirie: 00:03 Thanks. It's absolutely great to join you, great to be here.

Bill Murphy: 00:07 Well, I think for the listeners today, this is going to be a real treat. And I wanted to just thank you for coming on the show. Maybe we could start by, why don't you just tell us a little bit about what you're doing right now as of 2018 and then how you got to where you are today. I think you and I have talked offline about kind of your trajectory and you've been, couple major career moves through time. Where are you today and what does it look like for the future for you?

Chris Pirie: 00:44 Great. Thanks, Bill. I'm in a very, very exciting place as we talked about before. I've been so blessed in my career that I've fallen into some amazing environments to do work in the sort of three big blocks where some time in the UK working for a bank where I learned that I absolutely am the wrong person to work in a bank. And then I found myself in Silicon Valley working for Oracle in the early 2000s, and what an amazing experience that was, through the dotcom boom and so on and so forth. And then I had the great fortune to work for Microsoft and I've just sort of completed 14 years of work at Microsoft in their customer education business and then really helping Satya and team with the transformation that that company's gone through over the last six years.

So, just blessed to have these amazing experiences. I did decide after 108 quarters in the software business that there's some other things that I want to get done in my life. And so, I'm just in the process of transitioning from Microsoft and starting up a new enterprise, which we're calling the Learning Futures Group. The Learning Futures Group is me and a collection of kind of really smart, like-minded people that I know from my years of experience in corporate learning. We really have a mission to go help drive the next kind of 2.0 of corporate learning, the future of what corporate learning needs to look like. And there are some really important reasons why we think that needs to happen. And so that's what we're doing. Brand new venture, the Learning Futures Group, and just a history of working in amazing companies through really an amazing period in history.

Bill Murphy: 02:41 We're going to get into, I think what's really going to be important for us to talk about is the future of corporate learning. I think that that's, it's funny I've been, the irony is over the past two weeks I've listened to Satya a couple times and what an absolute, an assassin in a good way, an absolute assassin. I just love it because I've been with Microsoft, been associated with Microsoft since the late 90s. Microsoft's kind of gone through its ups and downs with, we're in the partner side of the fence and ...

Chris Pirie: 03:12 You bet.

Bill Murphy: 03:12 Holy Moly, what changes have happened, when Bill was running the show was a little different than when Ballmer was running the show, sorry, when Gates and Ballmer-

Chris Pirie: 03:23 Yeah, Steve.

Bill Murphy: 03:24 Yeah, and all of a sudden now, I just love the changes that were made. And I'd love to know from a corporate learning point of view like when Satya came in, was there like a definitive mark in the ground saying we're going to do things differently or was it, with Ballmer, did it start then? What does it look like when you started corporate learning at Microsoft and then how is it kind of as you're leaving?

Chris Pirie: 03:46 Let me tell you a story if I can Bill. Imagine, I'm actually at a meeting in Washington DC, which I think is where you hang out. I'm on the board of an organization, I'm sitting in the board, my phone lights up and Microsoft just announces a new CEO, Satya Nadella. And of course, it wasn't really a surprise that we were going to get a new CEO, that was all kind of worked out in a very public way. But it was certainly a big deal that they picked an internal guy and that was Satya. Satya sent out of this first email to the Microsoft ecosystem, to the employees. And in that email, Satya said, there's one thing that you should know about me above everything else, and that is that I'm a learner. He said, I buy more books than I could possibly read and I sign up for more courses than I can take.

Bill Murphy: 03:46 I love it.

Chris Pirie: 04:45 I know. Such a humble guy, right? And he also said, you know, I believe that our value is our ability to kind of learn. And of course, my phone lit up with my team. That time, I was running the team that did, I was kind of chief learning officer for the Microsoft field and my team, a couple hundred people kind of working on getting our field, our technical field and our sales field kind of ready. And we're all learning geeks. My phone lit up with emails from the team saying, wow, isn't this fantastic? Our new CEO is a learning geek.

And of course, my reaction was the opposite. You know, my heart sank. My heart sank because I knew that as a team, and even as a discipline, as a profession, we were not getting the job done. We were really failing to help people be great learners because we didn't know how to do it in the new world. So much had changed around us. The people who were selling Microsoft at the time were out in the world undergoing this massive transition of how we go to market and Bill, you've seen that transition as a partner. We used to talk to technical people in the IT department. We used to sell on speeds and feeds and features and functions comparisons with our competitors. And along came a few competitors, formidable competitors, let's say salesforce.com. And they said, boy, we're not going to talk to those departments, we're going to go straight to the line of business leaders, and we're actually going to use in a kind of jujitsu move, we're going to use the fact that IT departments across the world are often difficult to work with and slow and deliberate and all the things that they really need to be, we're going to use that against them and we're going to use that against Microsoft and we're going to go and talk to line of business leaders and essentially provision them with a software they need to do their business more effectively, and sort of cut out all the box software and all the sort of deployment kind of systems, right? Does this ring true?

Bill Murphy: 06:55 Yeah, I mean, you're kind of saying somewhat like shadow IT, correct? We're going to do an end around IT because they're slow as molasses and we're going to go get it done.

Chris Pirie: 07:05 Yeah, and I'm just, I'm exaggerating to prove a point. But, essentially that was salesforce.com's pitch. They had that kind of symbol with no software, right? It was kind of software with a red line drawn through it. They were deliberately coming after the existing sort of paradigm of selling software, which was, we'll sell you all the pieces and then you can wheel in an Accenture or one of the Microsoft partners and they can help us finish it off and install it on your machines in your basement and so on and so forth.

And basically, the cloud came. And the cloud came and said, hey, you don't need to do that. And so, basically, we had an army of salespeople who were absolutely best in class at selling. And by the way, this extends to our partner force as well. I think hundreds of thousands of partners around the world. The best in class at selling technology to technologists. We needed them to shift. We needed them to be best in class at selling technology to business leaders. That was a tough change. So that was kind of one of the sort of tectonic shifts going on around our sales force, but there were others. We used to ship software on a three year cycle. How easy was that? We had time to prepare and get technologists ready and try out the software in controlled environments and develop the training materials and the certification paths and then we could launch that all kind of on the end of year three.

Now we find ourselves ship, I think Azure ships something like 50 to 100 features a month. How can our sales force and our partners by extension really stay on top of that? How can they be current on what's going on, and not only with shipping features but with decrementing features. The world is shifting around us all the time. So, I think to net it out, as a training guys, a technical communication guy, the world just got much more complicated and all the tools that we have at our disposal just didn't seem to work anymore. People are drowning under the amount of content that's coming at them. They don't know what the source of truth is. And they're being asked to do very different things, talk to different people, exercise different muscles.

That story sort of encapsulates what's going on in that sort of totality of corporate learning. We've got a set of tools, classrooms, learning paths, assessment engines, all these things that were sort of developed in the early 1900s in the work study movement, in the sort of second industrial revolution. And here we are facing the fourth industrial revolution and it feels like a lot of those tools need to be radically updated.

Bill Murphy: 10:03 Yeah, this is really fascinating because, as you know, I run an innovation group here separate from Red Zone but a group of CIOs and we often, it's about 40 to 60 guys get together and ladies and we talk about innovation and how you create speed in a, sorry, not how do you create speed but how you can be agile when things are so much faster. One of the pieces is sometimes they don't have the ability to respond with technology, but we've been talking about how you can create an agile learning environment so that we're actually able to have people that can keep pace, not necessarily with our technology, but at least our current with where technology is. And so, as you explained that story about Microsoft, I felt that dramatically as a partner. I'm sure every company is experiencing that within their domain. Is that true?

Chris Pirie: 11:04 I can tell you, Bill, I think skills are absolutely top of mind for leaders everywhere. I gave a talk and I talk about how, I've got kind of slide after slide, survey after survey says that CEOs and you're just proving this to me with your group there. CEOs actually think of talent and the ability to attract and retain and develop talent as their kind of number one problem. There was survey recently at the conference board. There's lots and lots of data that says skills have really become a kind of top tier challenge for everybody. Governments too.
A report at the beginning of this year from the World Economic Forum about the need for a re-skilling revolution. And there's sort of two sides to the coin. One is, you know, there is a kind of hunger for let's say, let's pick a job like data science, right? We need millions of data scientists in the world. And you can go to LinkedIn and you can look at all the open positions for data science and there's just this vast appetite for this new skill that will help us create value from all the data that's being generated in the world. Now that's the future. Where do we get those people from? The universities cannot pump them out fast enough. We're going to need to re-skill existing workforce in those techniques and its non-trivial. It's not rocket science but it's non-trivial, right? It's going to take work, it's going to take energy.

On the flip side, the guys at Singularity University always have head spinning data around the pace of change and the technology, the exponential technologies that are forces at work on us all. There's a real kind of understanding that this kind of next wave of technologies is going to really impact the kind of jobs that we haven't seen impacted before through the second and third industrial revolutions. So we have a responsibility and clearly, society and governments are looking to corporations to have a social responsibility and help the people that are displaced by technology kind of find the new thing. So there's two sides of the coin that both are going to demand people like me and my cohorts to get much, much better at how we help people build new skills, new knowledge frames and new capabilities and habits.
We are anxious because we're not sure, we're not confident that we can do it because our tool sets are second industrial revolution tool sets, not fourth industrial revolution tool sets.

Bill Murphy: 13:51 Yeah. I mean, this is really quite interesting because you had an example earlier and I'm sure this applies to everyone, but I'm just going to talk about it from the story within my domain because I think everybody will find their own mental domain of where it applies to them. But like, for example, Azure, we're security experts, but within Azure, you're only an expert from the last release that might have been just last week of a capability. And like you're saying, you might understand everything up until last week, but then all of a sudden, a 5% or 2% or even a .5% change on some feature that was important just got released the previous week.

All of a sudden, we are finding that to be security, an ongoing security expert because we've been doing this 19 years, but in the past, you had three months to learn the new tool sets. Now, something just happened. Now, you've got to be aware of that and then you've got to push that into all of your teams so that your team, not just somebody who's a real grinder and goes home at night to learn versus someone who may be just has other responsibilities in the evening and is not learning. How do you integrate that within your organization?

Chris Pirie: 15:10 Yes. I mean, it's absolutely right. I mean, you probably know this, you employ people, you want smart people. Their workers learners is never done. That's never been clearer. So, one frame, a really interesting frame that I learned at the conference that you and I met at the Singularity Conference, they talk about, there's IQ, which is your sort of kind of raw intelligence, your ability to sort of process information. There's EQ, which is increasingly important. Survey yesterday from LinkedIn about the most in demand skills, you might think is coding, it's actually not, it's actually communication skills. Coding is in demand, but we need increasingly these more human skills is where we're going to find value. But the Singularity folks also talk about this thing called AQ, agility quotient. This is really defined as your ability to learn and unlearn. And in a world where things are changing fast, fast, fast, this becomes a sort of critical capability. I would argue that there's sort of two dimensions for that. There's a sort of individual kind of agility fitness for individuals. How can I be a better learner? Help me. Help me make the most of the tools that are available and help me just really be a great learner because I know that's going to differentiate me and frankly, keep me relevant in a world where things are changing all the time.

And then the biggest or the question here is how do organizations and companies and networks create the environment to foster that kind of approach. So I would say the story at Microsoft right now is Satya has made a kind of big bold bet. And he said, in his book Hit Refresh, he talks about this journey that he's taking Microsoft on and it's a culture journey. And he said he wants to move this company from being the know it all company, and I think we can all think back and reflect on that might be a good sort of description for a certain era in the company. He wants to move us from a know it all company to a learn it all company. And I think that Satya is really doing a bold experiment. He sees the ability of an organization and the people within it to learn effectively as a competitive advantage.

If you're learning geek like me, this is exciting stuff, but it's also hard. I don't think we can apply some of our own models to make it work. We've got to think differently.

Bill Murphy: 18:03 It's interesting. I love that. I love that agility, agility quotient.

Chris Pirie: 18:08 Quotient.

Bill Murphy: 18:09 Yeah. You're right. Singularity has this unique, Singularity University has this unique ability to come up with some really fancy funny words that they kind of, I call them kind of verbal two by fours.

Chris Pirie: 18:21 That's right. It was just a really interesting frame, isn't it? I've been sort of struggling to put this into words myself over time. You know, it's kind of like how do you help people be successful in a world where things are moving very, very quickly. Well, you help them learn and unlearn. That sort of mental agility, I think everyone can recognize become super important. Even in very practical terms, if you're managing security for your company's internet, then nothing is going to stand still. You can't read a book that was published last week and expect to be on top of your game.

Bill Murphy: 19:00 It's interesting. I have two questions. One, I'm going to go with my gut on this one, and how do you break out knowledge of things versus wisdom? And what I mean by that is, again, I'll use my domain because it just comes to me but I'm sure you have other stories where it's more equally applicable, is someone who has a wealth of experience over time might not understand a little specific, and I'm talking about an individual human, not an organization. But an individual might have this depth 30 years history. Like my father-in-law, he builds tunnels and bridges and he does all this fancy, but he's done for over 50 years. They cannot find engineers to replace him. He's 80 years old and he works for a company with 50,000 people. So they basically have thrown like 20 engineers at him to just kind of model and try to understand at least the specific domains.

But he has wisdom, because, did he understand the latest AutoCAD updates to the software that just got released for modeling? No. But here's the wisdom to know that if he's off 1% on that payload, then that elevator shaft that goes 1000 feet to the ground is going to break. Nobody told him that, it's just wisdom. So how do you balance wisdom versus just the raw grinding knowledge?

Chris Pirie: 20:24 Yeah. I think it's really, it's a really interesting problem and to extend your question a little bit, is how do you help people get both those things. So, there's a couple of trends in corporate learning now, a lot of buzzwords around in corporate learning. I think that sort of corporate learning domain has been trying to embrace technology over the last 15 years. We tried e-learning, you know, we've tried all these kind of, as new technologies have come available, we try and leverage them to help people learn more effectively.

There's a good model that Josh Bersin has, he's an analyst in the area, where he talks about, there are kind of knowledge pieces chunks that you need in the context of your daily work. So, I need to learn a new programming language for example or I need to understand a programming class that I want to use. It's kind of like, I already have the frames of reference, I already understand the domain, I already have the conceptual framework, and I just need to sort of tweak specific pieces of knowledge to support that. That's kind of one set of learning problems. And you might say, your people who are running your security group, they understand what are the sort of fundamental concepts and principles behind what they need to do, but they constantly need to top up on the techniques and the specifics, right?

That's kind of one set of problems and there's a whole school of thought that are talking about micro learning. Micro learning is kind of an approach where because people work often in a technology environment, how can we drip feed that kind of information and knowledge in the context of where people are doing work. Many years ago, this was called performance support. But imagine if you're a sales person and you're about to go on a sales call to a pharmaceutical company and sell them collaboration software. How can technology help you prepare for that call almost in real time? And that's kind of a, there's a ton of value in that. People gravitate towards those kind of systems and they can be pretty cool because you get the information just when you need to use it. The neuroscientists will tell you that's a good time to get it because you're going to move that information into kind of long term memory because you have a need to do it. You're at sort of learning at the point of needs. That's kind of one thing.

And then the second thing is kind of a much harder thing. And this is really getting towards your, I think your father-in-law. What about these sort of broader fundamental concepts and experience applying them, what we call deliberate practice, right? You can understand the conceptual way to do something but until you do it, you're not really going to kind of move that into your kind of long term knowledge. As you do that again and again and again, this concept of deliberate practice, you sort of build the muscle memory and make the signups connections that you need to make to really bring expertise to this, and you have sort of deep nuanced view of any one of these things. It's a combination of cemented behaviors but also just kind of years of accumulated experience around a set of concept or a set of behaviors.

This is a much harder thing to do, right? There's a concept that the neuroscientists talk about called, it just comes from normal language. You've heard the phrase to pay attention, right? To pay attention. Well, no surprise, kind of learning is expensive. You have to pay. Your brain uses 20% of your body's energy. And when you put it into learning mode, especially if it's learning those macro things, big new conceptual frames, it's really, really expensive and you have to pay a lot of attention. I think one of the things that we need to do is we need to create the space and time in our work environments as well as our home environments, of course, to do the hard work of really learning fundamentally new concepts. That's what we're just not good at. We're great at sending people to college for four years to build the foundations. But I think there's a sense that there has to be a kind of more efficient, a smarter way to build fundamental concepts. And then deliberate practice just takes time.

Bill Murphy: 25:19 Because that needs to be the domain of universities, correct? Maybe an executive education course of some sort, right? Then you're saying that that has to fundamentally change. Is that a correct assumption?

Chris Pirie: 25:33 Absolutely. I think there's a lot of dialogue in the industry right now about what is the role in the future. Again, let's channel our friends at Singularity and say, imagine a world which they tell us is actually upon us where people live to the age of 120, right? The likelihood is that they're going to have careers that are not 40 years long but 60 or 80 years long.

Bill Murphy: 25:58 Sure.

Chris Pirie: 25:59 Can you imagine that however we prepare them to start that career in maybe four years at college before they start, we can build some fundamental frames of reference but they're probably not likely to be relevant at the end of that period, right? And we're already seeing that, we're already seeing that today. There's data out there that says the shelf life of a skill today in technology is less than two years. So, something you learn today will be irrelevant in two years’ time.

Imagine stretching that out over a 40, 50 year work career. So universities are probably going to have to operate differently. They're not really incented to change at the moment because there's just this tremendous bubble around what they do. But some of the progressive ones, I've done a lot of work with INSEAD for example out of Paris, London Business School. I'm doing some work with USC. They really understand that in the future, they're going to have to have a set of offerings and services that are really useful for mid-career people. We may have to take learning breaks in our career. Go back to school, kind of rewire some of the fundamental concepts that we have and then spend some time doing deliberate practice and get into completely different new domains. This is all achievable, but right now, the models that we have to take time and money and there's no funding model for that. So there's just a lot of work to do.

Bill Murphy: 27:39 Yeah, we talk about the innovation group, the need for digital leaders in particular, paying attention to the CIO role as it's changing. And CIOs potentially being the COOs of the future as they become more and more important for the business and CEOs. Well, what's needed? What skills are needed? There's a big gap in a finance area for many of them. And being able to communicate confidently within finance. This is just one vertical, this is just a digital leaders of an organization but, what are those gaps with HR, what are those gaps for marketing leaders and sales leaders and such. But for CIOs for sure, if you had to rank generally their ability to communicate financial concepts at a board level, it's just not there.
Then the next question is how do you close that gap? That's what you're saying is that there's going to be new models that are going to be emerging.

Chris Pirie: 28:39 I think we have to find new models. I think we have to kind of relax a little bit. There's a an example that I want to share with you from Microsoft on how we kind of rethought the process around the transfer of skills within the organization. The old models were really kind of top down models. You would find the expert at headquarters, you would put some instructional designers around them who would sort of capture their subject matter expertise. You would produce books and artifacts and e-learning courses and so on and so forth. And then you would sort of trickle them down, sort of like cascade waterfall them down through the organization. That's an example of one of the kind of the old frames of corporate learning. There's two problems with that in the modern age. The first is that things are moving too quickly for those processes to actually have room to operate, right? All that takes time and by the time you've codified and written the book or produced the e-learning course, things have moved on. That's point number one. Point number two, and this is really, really interesting in my opinion, is that the expertise is no longer kind of at the top of the network, the top of the organization in corporate headquarters for example.

Imagine if you are selling, this a real example from a program that we did. An organization selling Microsoft productivity software Office 365 into a railway in France. They've gone through this long sale cycle, implementation cycle. Boy, they've learned a lot. We were running a class, a virtual class, a kind of corporate moot class, and somebody on that team just happened to connect with somebody on a team in South America and Latin America who had an opportunity with a railway company in Latin America. The expertise, like the world experts, like the only people frankly on the planet who knew how to effectively sell and deploy into that kind of customer was the team over in Europe, right? And nobody at headquarters knew a fraction of what they knew about how to kind of deploy the software in that space.

So my point is, the expertise is now fragmented across the organization in pockets all over the place. The job of the corporate learning team is to really map those networks and light up those networks and find where the expertise is and remove all the friction and barriers for people to share that expertise with their peers kind of as and when they need it.

Bill Murphy: 31:35 So is that going to be like a tool ... I'm sure, first of all, it's a strategy and culture shift. Is it like a slack where essentially it's not hub and spoke but it's really the edges of the wheels that talk to each other versus having to come through the hub, like maybe like slack would do?

Chris Pirie: 31:51 Yeah, you bet. I mean, I think this really the shift towards teams as, like both immediate teams, like the software development paradigm have shifted radically in my 28 years in the industry. It used to be a solitary exercise. You write code until it works and then you submit it into some system and it gets wired together. Now if you go to the Microsoft campus or the LinkedIn campus or the Salesforce campus, you'll see people in teams. They're around a sort of common area, they're hacking away, they stand up every night, they have stand up meetings and they talk about the progress they've made and it's a team sport. I think that metaphor transfers to a lot of other companies and organizations.

I read a report yesterday that said the companies that produce the most innovation and patents are the ones that can best consume and take on board ideas and concepts from outside of their organization, right? So these teams not only happened within the group but they span outside the group through professional networks and so on and so forth. So network metaphor is important.

Bill Murphy: 33:08 So the ability for companies to take on new ideas and develop new intellectual property like patents is by their ability to ingest new ideas from outside their four walls, is that what you're saying?

Chris Pirie: 33:22 Yeah. Piece of research, so I think the point is that these teams that we need to enable, this sort of team based learning that we need to figure out is not just your immediate sort of proximate team but your network team. And that network may be across the physical organization. It might be transnational. It may be even outside the walls of your organization, people in your profession, people in your discipline. The kind of work that that frankly, you're doing here with this podcast, sharing ideas across domains and across skills.

Bill Murphy: 33:56 Right. And it can be consumed very easily down to a phone with very little friction and very little latency.

Chris Pirie: 34:03 You bet.

Bill Murphy: 34:04 Access. So building upon that concept you just mentioned, I'm really interested in the role of cognitive bias in learning because, you know, I was just talking to this group that I do my training, I do Spartan races and things like that. One of the ladies in the group, she runs a really successful lacrosse organization locally here and my daughter's involved in it. My daughter has been getting a lot of speed training. Like can actually teach you how to get faster, which is really interesting because when I was growing up, the general thesis was ...

Chris Pirie: 34:48 You're as fast as you are.

Bill Murphy: 34:49 Yeah, you're as fast as you are and you can't get faster. Well, that's actually been debunked heavily. But still, the coach has their mind made up about an individual. They have their mind made up about allowing outside information that would contradict a previous performance. And so I'm like, want to take it just a little bit wider and be like how do we break leaders from being biased.
And that just happened this morning. I was in a lifting session and the dentist beside me, they were arguing with the trainer about, the woman said, "Listen, I was just listening to an MD yesterday at Johns Hopkins talk about how she uses acupuncture to reduce pain by like 70%." And she like literally demonstrated it. And then the guy's sitting there going, "There's no way that's possible." The dentist, the doctor was contradicting the MD. So, I thought this was hysterical because I've actually had a lot of value from acupuncture in the past.

When you multiply that by 1000 people, you sort of had this resonant, like they can't let in new ideas. So how do you deal with that?

Chris Pirie: 35:58 I think [inaudible 00:35:59]. In my thesis about kind of how we need to improve corporate learning, one of the sort of fundamental beliefs that I have is that we need to learn from proximate disciplines, right? Our tools are inadequate but there are disciplines around us that are making a lot of progress. One of those disciplines in neuroscience. There's a number of reasons why progress is being made there. I think the cost of an MRI is down to like less than $1 per MRI and so people are putting people in MRIs and giving them cognitive tasks and sort of mapping what's going on in the brain as well as the sort of black box approach, just kind of studying where people are.

The current thinking is that bias plays a very massive role in how we operate as human beings. We literally don't know much about how the brain works. We know that it's a wonderful thing. But there is, I believe like 170 documented biases that are just a fundamental part of how the brain operates. These 170 biases are the ones that we know about and were sort of actively being studied. For example, we favor simple looking things, simple looking options over complex options and ambiguous options. And so we have, there's a bias called the less is better effect, right? There's the Occam's Razor theory where you just keep dividing things into smaller and smaller chunks.

The frame of all this is that the brain works by bias. In real time, if you just look around you now and you'll see I'm guessing a table and a computer and a window and chairs, you don't have to relearn what those things are. Your brain has already sort of encoded a set of assumptions about what a table is. This is an efficiency play because if you had to relearn what a table was, every time you saw one, your head would explode and you wouldn't be able to operate very efficiently. And so, it relies on sort of encoding encoded models of things.

So this is why perhaps metaphor is such an important part of language because I can explain something to you by saying, you know, an autonomous car is like your car except it has these differences, right? And so, all your brain has to do is focus on the differences, it already understands what a car is and how it operates and so on and so forth. So this is kind of fundamentally how we think, how the brain works and that sort of bias mechanism, there's lots of instantiations of how it is. So, for example, are people studying the fact that when we think about the past, we tend to remember good things in the past more effectively than we remember bad things in the past, right?

And so, once you start to understand this, you can work with it. You can work with it to help people learn and prepare for the future. You can work on, the brain's kind of like the muscles that you described that you were working on this morning. You can work on its ability to do things differently. You can create new models and maps and you can exercise it. So I think this is something that we in the corporate learning space, we need to be paying a lot of attention to is, you know, what are the conditions around which somebody's precious brain can most effectively learn new concepts.

Bill Murphy: 40:03 Most people don't want to learn. I mean, it seems to me that, I mean, just as a general statement, unless you're working at a software company, but even at a software company that's been around for 20, 30 years, what is the payoff for change for people? Like biologically, I don't think we really want change. And I know there's people that embrace it and they embrace the learning and they want to keep learning, but that's got to be, I certainly love it. Satya of course loves it. You love it. But how do you deal with creating a culture of learning but you're dealing with folks that really think that they're at the end part of their life? Because this comes up, and I tell them, no more excuses. Guys, I don't care if you're 40 and you were thinking about retiring in the next 10, 15 years. Those days are over. We need to prepare for your next career. How do you convey that message?

Chris Pirie: 40:56 I think this is really fantastic and I think it's a kind of mindset and a culture thing and I want to give you two stories, Bill, on this, because this has to operate at two levels. First at the individual level. My mom, God bless her, she is in her late 70s and she is a very social person. She is an embodiment of Facebook. But five years ago, she was at home with my kids and she stated very deliberately, like, I will never use a computer to my kids. And my kids are like, this is mind blowing to them. Why would you say that? How could you say that? How can you live without using a computer? And she said, "Look, I've never even been able to type. I don't understand how it works. It's a scary thing to me. I'm afraid I'm going to break things." And she sort of unpacked why she created this kind of rule for herself that she was never going to allow herself to kind of engage with computers.

Well, my kids kind of took this challenge and they created a Windows account for her and we bought her a surface and they set up a Facebook account. And my gosh, she's a terror on this thing now. She is a computer user and a smartphone user and probably one of Zuckerberg's biggest kind of users. Everyone's kind of wondering whether it was the right thing to do.
But there's a good example of somebody who just had a mental block. They just didn't think they could learn, and they had no point of reference for it in their past. It was scary to them. When somebody came along who wasn't a professional teacher or an educator, just somebody who shared the passion and sort of held her hand through a couple of incremental steps, then wow, you know, now all of a sudden she's a learner and she's in great shape. That's pretty played out in many other aspects of her life.

So let's talk about an example at the organizational level because that's where, that's what I care about. How do you multiply that effect and sort of do what my kids were able to do for their grandma for entire organizations. One of the best examples that I've seen so far was, we'll talk about Satya again, such a commanding guy. He made a very deliberate and bold statement across the Microsoft organization fairly early on into his tenure.

We used to go to Safeco Field, which is a ballpark just down the road from where I am right now. Every year in September, the entire campus staff. So it's something like 40, 50,000 people. We'd sit in that stadium with blankets on and soggy sandwiches in a boxed lunch and we would spend all day listening to our executives and leaders tell us how great the future was going to be. It was kind of fun. It was a company tradition. It was interesting to look across this massive outdoor space and see all your colleagues and humbling to hear from some of the super smart people who are running the organization.

But Satya had a different plan, and I think this really came from his sort of, his innate respect for kind of learning and the process of learning. And he said we're not going to do that anymore. We're not going to have you sit down silently and listen to leaders. We're going to create a space, a physical space and a temporal space where we can work together and learn together and teach each other on projects that we want to do.

And so, we had this kind of first inaugural hackathon on the Microsoft campus. We literally put these two massive tents, I think the size of four or five football fields. We built these tents, we put the infrastructure in place. There was workspaces for teams. There was an infrastructure where people could submit ideas on projects to work with and join teams that were doing projects that were interesting to you. We encouraged people from all kinds of disciplines. So, if you're a lawyer or a sales person or an HR specialist, definitely there was a place for you, join the team. This has become a tradition on the campus. And for one whole week every year, people teach each other and learn together and use all the resources of the company to do things that they're passionate about.

It's probably the single best example of kind of a modern learning experience that I've ever seen. And it's not directive and it's not paternal. There's no course list, there's no learning objectives. There's none of the things that us professional learners learning types think about. It's just tapping into people's innate ability to want to learn and to want to share and teach. I think that's a kind of glimpse into what the future has to look like for corporate learning, and we need more and more and more examples of models like that.

Bill Murphy: 46:10 So I think that's really fascinating. So basically, in this experience, people would, you mentioned team, they would come together and do things they really want to do. So, would there be like an idea bucket that comes up with like 50 different ideas that got percolated up thematically and then people would join the teams related to those theme areas to go learn about based on what interests them? Are you able to share more information, like more of that details there?

Chris Pirie: 46:41 Sure, yeah. In the learning space, we call that scaffolding, right? How do you help people learn without just teaching them everything, organizing things for them? Well, you create some scaffolding and the scaffolding in this case manifests itself essentially as a website. And that website says you can sign up and you can join into one of these projects or you can sign up and you can suggest a project. You fill out a form and you would obviously, let's say we wanted to build an app.

I'll give you a real example. There is an amazing gentleman out of the UK who's a coder and he is blind, he is sight impaired. He always had this passion for using technology to help people who were challenged with their site in sort of getting better at what they do. And so, he kind of wrote a proposal that they use some of the AI technology that we use at Microsoft to create a phone app that could help people see the world around them. Would look at the world around them, interpret it, and then essentially vocalize a description of what was going on. And of course, people are like, wow, that's something I would love to help with. I have that expertise or I'm passionate about that.

The net result was an application you can download from the Apple store or from the Google store called Seeing Eye, it's called Seeing AI. It was an app that was built by a set of passionate developers who came together inspired by this one developer from the UK. It's really amazing. I love to demo it. It will recognize money. It will describe scenes around it. It will convert text into spoken word. It's really tremendous set of tools that really could have only been kind of catalyzed by somebody who felt passionately about the topic. This I think is corporate learning of the future. And like I say, we need more models to make this happen.

Bill Murphy: 48:59 What I love though is, because we've been talking about this is how do you collapse, because you've been talking about it's not a hub and spoke model but basically in that whole structure you've collapsed the edge expertise to the core, and then basically, you've taken the core which certainly might have some of the expertise as well and married it with the edge.

Chris Pirie: 49:19 Absolutely right. And I think the leader's job is really clear. The leader's job is to first of all, set people free and to make this bold statement about time and space. We're building a temple to this experiment. It's this beautiful big tent, the artwork on the edge of the tent, this is carefully thought through. And we're giving people time. We're actually saying, this is so important to us, it's so important to us that we have a learning culture where we learn from and teaching each other that we're going to give you a week to do this 100%. It's a bold leadership statement. It doesn't micromanage the process but it puts some scaffolding around it. And I think everybody in the company is crystal clear that we're on a journey to make learning a competitive differentiator. That's a very, very exciting prospect.

Bill Murphy: 50:12 Is this what you referred to earlier about relaxing a bit when you said people need to relax a bit? Is that kind of where, and that was probably-

Chris Pirie: 50:21 Yes.

Bill Murphy: 50:21 Okay, okay.

Chris Pirie: 50:25 In my career, I was a technical writer and an educator and a technical educator. I spent all my working life trying to drive ambiguity out of things, right? To make things as clear and simple and to organize information on people's behalf, right? That was the techniques that we used, and it's kind of paternalistic. It's like, I'm telling you what you need to learn, I'm telling you what sequence you need to learn it in. I'm telling you, you know, what the bar is that you meet when I certify you, all these kind of things. Sort of like I'm organizing the world on your behalf.

It turns out that it's much more useful to give people the skills to organize the world for themselves. And that takes a completely different mindset for educators and for corporate training types like me. It's a hard transition for us to make. But when it works, when you see models like the Microsoft annual hackathon, the One Week, you know, it's amazing what comes out of that.

Bill Murphy: 51:30 I love that. That is completely fascinating story. I was kind of looking for, waiting for the how. I know we've talked a lot about the problem, but how you actually deploy and implement and do something new, because you mentioned in the beginning, your new organization, you called it the 2.0 of learning. I don't think that's quite the word you used, but you used 2.0 in there.

Chris Pirie: 51:56 The mission for me and my organization, The Learning Futures Group is to unearth and find these new modern techniques and evangelize them. And basically show people how to do hackathons, and tell people to stop mandating that people do this training on Monday at 5AM because it might not be the right time for them to train. And how to build a learning culture in your organization, whether it's a corporation or a medium sized company or a network of people. Like, how do we build really strong learning cultures. That's the journey I'm on. So Bill, if any of your listeners have ideas, I really want to learn and I'm just I'm happy to share best practices. I think my point of view at this point is it's a lot about getting out of the way and encouraging people to do what they're wired to do fundamentally which is learn, ingest new concepts and look for patterns and look for changes.

Bill Murphy: 53:01 I think what role initially for you getting started, I think what's interesting from a leadership because I've been thinking about this myself is, how do I get out of being paternalistic view of just a couple top down and then my whole company essentially falling a top down model. But how can we also get, the scaffolding, I like the word scaffolding. I think that's, my family was a bunch of developers in Boston and we used to put of scaffolding. It wasn't the walls, it was a scaffolding.

Chris Pirie: 53:30 But you kind of need it for the walls to happen, right?
Bill Murphy: 53:35 Right, right. Otherwise, the bricks don't go into place. So I think the scaffolding ideas is incredibly interesting to me. As you get launched here with your organization, where do you see sort of the pathway for most medium to large businesses? And maybe it's only a large business issue that can be handled right now but what do you think? Is it something that it's going to start at the smaller business and work its way up or you think it's going to be large businesses coming down?

Chris Pirie: 54:07 My guess, as I said before, I've been in corporate organizations for a long time. And so, I'm probably not best to speak on behalf of small to medium sized enterprises. But my gut feel, my guess is that this transition is going to be easier for small and medium sized enterprises to make because they have to do this today. You talked yourself about the changes in your organization and how you've, you know, the world, the software world and the security world has changed around you like nobody's business and you've had to be agile. And the people that I'm guessing are successful in your world, Bill, are people who can learn quickly and unlearn. And so I think that's great. I think that might be kind of an advantage that smaller organizations have. Having said that, there's a real challenge for leaders, you know, I kind of extrapolate the frustrations and challenges I've had as a kind of learning leader, and I see it in leaders around me is there's a real instinct to just show people what to do. Like, my job as leader is to just show you what to do, to tell you the steps that you need to take to be successful. If you just listen to me, everything would be fine. I see that in kind of leadership behavior everywhere. And I would say if leaders would step back a second and think about how building a learning culture in their organization could just be a source of growth and a source of competitive advantage, then maybe they might be kind of a little bit less, maybe they just might make space for people to bring their natural ability to learn and be curious and teach each other. Just give that some space and see what happens.

Bill Murphy: 56:10 I love this. Chris, this is fantastic. What would be a good way if my listeners want to reach out to you and connect with you, learn more? Would you suggest LinkedIn, Twitter. You have a website for your business that they could ping you on if they were interested in learning more?

Chris Pirie: 56:32 Yeah great. Always I love LinkedIn, what an sort of collaborative tool that is. So you can find me on LinkedIn @ChrisPirie. We have a website we're standing up of course called learningfuturesgroup.com, and we explain what our philosophy is and how we can help in our humble way and would love to, about going with anybody who wants to make learning a competitive advantage for their organization?

Bill Murphy: 57:04 I love that. Learning as a competitive advantage for an organization. As we wrap up, is there any final comments that you wanted to make for leaders listening? Already feel like we've covered all the bases. I just want to make sure that we've gotten your core thesis out to the world.

Chris Pirie: 57:23 Yeah, well, I'd say, Bill, first of all, thank you for doing this. I spent some time looking through your podcast. It's an eclectic mix and you are kind of living and doing one of the things that I would advocate and that is kind of look sideways and start a dialogue with people in the disciplines that surround you and your business, and I just love it. The podcast series is great. I'm humbled to be on it and I've really enjoyed talking to you.

I would actually encourage everybody to think about what the learning culture in their organization is. I would encourage everybody to try to make that a competitive advantage for themselves. We in the Learning Futures Group are happy to help you think that through, but you don't need to work with us, just give it some deep thoughts.

Bill Murphy: 58:16 This is fantastic, Chris. I knew this was going to be a lot of fun. I really enjoyed it. It's got my brain spinning as well. I'm glad we got connected. We're going to have round two as you get your organization launched.

Chris Pirie: 58:27 Oh, great. Yes.

Bill Murphy: 58:27 Yeah. You had some really practical ideas. And we're going to dive into some of the wins and such that you experience in your process in your journey with your new business.

Chris Pirie: 58:38 Great. Well, thank you so much for the time and for the work that you do here and look forward to seeing you around and happy to come back anytime.

Bill Murphy: 58:46 Thank you, Chris. Talk to you soon. Bye, bye.

Chris Pirie: 58:48 Take care.