Future of London City Bites: Leadership Series
Leading & Learning Online – Interview with Miffa Salter, Director of Urbancanda
04.12.20 – Lisa Taylor, Executive Director, FoL & Director, Coherent Cities

INTERVIEW TRANSCRIPT (See http://bit.ly/2KOfUz8 for resources & further podcast info)

LT - We all went online with a bang in March. I know you have lots of coaching and training clients; what happened with you and your own business?

MS - We were very lucky. I've got a good friend and colleague in Italy so we knew this was coming a good month before it hit in the UK, so [Urbancanda associate Dr] Brennan [Jacoby] did a fair amount of work prior to March looking at the best vehicles and in many respects, thinking back 9 -10 months ago, we were much luckier than lots of people (a) because we knew it was coming, (b) because we'd done the research and (c) because I'd been used to colleagues working remotely. Back when I set up the business in 2002, we'd had a colleague working in New York while we were working in London, so I was used to that way of working.

And because Brennan had done so much work on finding the best vehicle for us, I felt very confident that when we started and put everything on Zoom, it was a platform we'd already practiced with. We'd had expert advice from him and others in the Urbancanda group, so it was relatively easy technically, but what was really lovely for us and for me particularly was that it was new. It sounds like a guilty pleasure but I enjoyed it, I liked the challenge and enjoyed the fact that I had to go back, revisit all that work that we'd done, say, with Future of London with FLL and Leaders Plus and it allowed us to revisit it, update it, completely rethink how we communicate it, of course it meant a lot of pressure but as a red-green, of course I enjoyed the pressure.

LT – What was your process with partners to help everyone learn quickly?

MS - We have three different products. With coaching, you do almost the opposite that you do with training, so I cut our coaching sessions from what used to be 2-2h15 minutes down so people could do them in bite-sized chunks, so 45 minutes, then go off and get a coffee then come back.

With the group work, both the training and strategy work we do, what we did initially was give people time at the beginning of sessions to learn the kit and get used to the kit. That doesn't happen so much anymore, so we've changing it so we give people more time at the start and often at the end of sessions just to hang out online and to allow for a level of humanity, which is a word I came back to again and again when I looked at your questions. Just to let some humanity enter into the process, because I think there has been this very big change from the beginning of going online to the experience now. **When we first started, it was all about "Can we do this, how do we operate it?" Now I think it's "Can we humanise it?"** so I think there was a big change and hopefully we're bringing that change into the work that we're doing.

LT - Thank you, I see that very much in your work with us. What's different in terms of the online experience – I'll say specifically for Future of London, for Leaders?

MS - This is really interesting. For both Future London Leaders and Leaders Plus, I think without a shadow of a doubt, it is as if not more effective as a vehicle for transmitting ideas, information and techniques, because it's much more focused time-wise and inevitably there's more 'transmit' from the trainer. As a builder of bonds between you and the participant, we have done our best, but I would say without a shadow of a doubt as a trainer, you build more rapport and more of a human connection when you're in the room with someone.

I think the other thing that I've noticed is that inevitably because we decided, I think rightly for the time being, to break the cohort of 16 into two cohorts of eight, I would say we're losing that beautiful group feel you get when you have 16 people in the room, and I think even in the cohort of eight, they just cannot possibly relate to each other in the same way they would in a room, and that's partly because visually, who are they holding on screen at any one time?, but even with the use of breakout rooms – and we use lots of techniques which involve people talking to each other and talking to us – you just don't have the space intellectually and physically to connect with the other person in the same way.

I would say one of the huge strengths of the Future of London courses has always been the amount of time we have afforded delegates to talk to each other about their experiences. And I think that's a huge loss, and I also think one of the biggest losses is that quite often what people used to do before or after a session is they would sit and have a chat in a very relaxed way with their hot drink and their Lewis Silkin cookie and that's gone. What we lose is that excitement of being with other people. Does that make sense?

Are there any hard and fast rules for effective learning online?

MS – There are some things that I would say are easy wins and that are real quick wins, and I see this happening at the moment– not happening rather, and it's a real pity. People's hydration levels are just way off, and even more so in winter because they're sitting still and they're staying warm and they're not feeling thirsty, and as a result hydration levels are dropping, people's concentration levels are dropping, so quick win for learning, up your hydration level.

Second quick win for learning is you need to be eating and you need to be eating every 2 hours and there's so much research on this, on concentration and your ability to keep focused and not eating sugar. What I see again is everybody talking about lest have biscuits let's have cake etc, if **I could change everybody's drinking pattern if I could help them eat better and eat at better times, I'd be helping their concentration levels, so that is a quick easy win.**

Second quick easy win is about their physiology and their physicality and I still see people working at desks where they're not in alignment, where their bodies aren't in alignment, where they haven't got screens at the right height, where the light is poor, where they're too close to the screens. **People are not doing enough to look after their physiology, so they're not going to be in a good space or place to learn**.

Third thing for learning really well online is you as a learner need to be a little more directive and assertive if it isn't coming through to you in the way that you want and what I've noticed is getting better certainly on Leaders Plus and Future London Leaders is I keep encouraging delegates to tell us if we're doing this too fast or too slow or it isn't sufficiently engaging, but I think **as a learner online you need to grab the attention of whoever is providing the information and say "I need it different." But I think people become far more receptive when they're watching; they go into a passivity, and I think as online learners they've got to challenge passivity.**

I'd also say that to get the best from the experience, you've got to be familiar with the tool, and use the Chat, use the fact that you can stay online afterwards. It's such a versatile too, but what I see people doing is using it in a fairly linear way and in a boundaried way and that's a pity. So those are just some ideas of what I think people could be doing differently in the virtual classroom that they're unfortunately not doing at the moment or not doing enough of.

MS - Because we cover quite a wide spectrum, public, private, voluntary and we do quite a lot of work in the built environment and with the NHS and with creative industries and banking, I think there was something really interesting happening right across all of those, and when I was thinking about this question, I would generalise it as follows: **I think March-April saw this extraordinary 'surge capacity' hit, and what we saw in terms of clients was this very positive – and very positively motivated – adrenal rush, almost a sort of excitement of sorts, a real pulling together, a rethinking of things,** I would say for the first 6-8 weeks a very distinct energy in the system, and it didn't matter if I was talking to leaders in say banking or talking to leaders in housing associations, they were coming together almost in almost like disaster relief, they came together, they mobilised kit, they mobilised people, they mobilised ideas in a way I've never seen in my whole career, it was really extraordinary. The only other times I've seen that happen in that kind of way was on the back of Grenfell or on the back of other natural disasters. So I saw that same kind of surge.

What's happening now is really different and **what I'm seeing is the result of excessive surge capacity, essentially people putting what I call the pedal to the metal for far too long and quite often when it isn't necessary so now what I'm seeing are huge spikes in both boredom and burnout, sort of opposite ends of what one would call the classic [Yerkes Dodson curve](#) of peak performance**, so I'm seeing loads of people across all these different agencies reporting fatigue, reporting all the classic symptoms of physical and psychological burnout, but I'm also seeing people demotivated, bored, hacked off, had enough, so you're seeing just that split into two very unhealthy camps.

I would say there's almost no one who I could say right now who is what I would call in peak motivation, in perfect alignment, and would say that's including myself, and I do more than other people to get myself into that space every single day because that's part of your job as a coach and a trainer but I know I'm oscillating between burnout and boredom and I think almost everybody else is as well.

LT – Agree. I've had conversations with colleagues and client, where we all agree there are people working flat out and people out of work and there's almost no business-as-usual, When you have work, you feel you should be grateful even when the situation's not that great, so people aren't treating themselves very well right now.

MS - Even people who've got a job are doing it 6 or 7 days a week because there's nothing else for them to do. Working yesterday with some of your Leaders Plus colleagues from Greater Manchester Combined Authority, it was fascinating to hear them say "We're working like crazy but there's nothing else to do."

LT – What you said there is really germane to what happens next. This idea of the world of work: it's going be a while before we go back to what we consider to be usual if not normal. What do you see happening and what would you like to happen as we emerge from various stages of lockdown?

MS - What I can already see happening is that **without a shadow of a doubt what we have experienced in the last 9 months is the most incredibly positive vehicle to actually promote individual and community wellbeing, and that is just extraordinary and it warms my heart, and what I see is a rounding out of people's lives**.

Particularly when I 'm doing my coaching work, I hear people talking about very different lives to the lives they historically had when people's live were compartmentalised into home and work. And I hear them talking about it very positively so everything from the number of clients I've got now who have suddenly found themselves 'pandemic pregnant', the number of people who've bought dogs, the number of people who are volunteering, the number of people who've taken on very different roles within their local community and **as they become more evolved and more energised, they come back into the workplace as more rounded more humane more compassionate, just more intelligent and wise and that's really positive.** Today, I was listening to 'Thought for the Day' which had a similar theme – people relating differently to their families and to their colleagues because their colleagues are now coming into their houses and their families and so on so I think that is great and I think that rounding out, that losing of boundaries is fantastic.

However, what I'm much more concerned about are all the people who don't have that potential benefit and what is happening here and I think this is an absolute inevitability, is that **a hybrid model is going to fuel a divide in society that is going to reinforce class, gender, race lines which we've been actively, I would argue, seeking to eradicate for hundreds of years**. I can see it now, that certain people will be winners in this and certain people will be losers and the people who will be losers are people who were historically seeking to move from a certain place within society anyway and that really worries me.

LT – Agreed, and I suppose the only thing we can do is focus on it and keep making it an issue.

MS - I come from a background and family that is very strong on collective action, and I'm really worried about erosion of union power, I'm really worried about collective power within the workforce. Even moving to a hybrid model, I think the potential for abuse of power is huge, I think that working hours and practices and erosion of the under-48hr week is ripe, I think this links also to massive invasions of privacy and personal lives which is really worrying for a whole number of people.

And I think **one of the things that has been lost and will be lost even with a hybrid model is a social discourse and a social challenge which, when we were in the workplace, you were forced to hear different people's points of view and you were forced to work alongside people who came from different backgrounds to you and you had to make it work**. I think now what is going to happen is very much akin to what happens on social media, so if you look at Twitter or Instagram or Facebook, people will align with people like them. Managers will speak to managers, executive directors will speak to executive directors, but what you won't see is people just mashing together in the way I personally believe society needs to mash together.

I think we're going back 200 years, to people retreating into their homes, working from home, with the associated potential for savage abuse of power as a result of that. I think that's a real pity because **unless we're very careful and unless we manage this set of tools that have suddenly been given to us (or we've opted into) very carefully, I think we'll go backwards and not forwards.**

LT – Thanks for that. Certainly a dark view but a very realistic view In a way. Any thoughts on what we might do to avert that or mitigate that?

MS - To be honest, my hope would be that with mass vaccination, at least part of everybody's week would be back in the mash-up and I would hope that it would be back in the mash-up as far more evolved, compassionate, humane and rounded-out individuals. **So ideal would be a hybrid model, but a hybrid model where when we're not doing this, we're requiring ourselves to use that communal time for the discourse, for the challenge, for the reflection.**

What I'm most worried about is when we do a hybrid model and we come back together in the workplace, we're not using the workplace differently and I don't see people talking about that as much as they should. They talk about how they could use online differently, but how about **how do we use the workplace totally differently: where we host our meetings, who they're with, who's involved, how long they're for, whether we have meetings that are about reflection and what I would call 'black box thinking' or whether we still host meetings when we're in the mash-up that are very much like the meetings we're hosting online.**

LT - Thanks for that. Last question then: "Are there hard and fast rules" for leading remotely?

MS - **I've got five points about really being a great leader using this particular mode of communication:**

First thing, brevity and focus: because what I see happening is people repeating the behaviours and communication vehicles that they used in the meeting room or in the board room online and I don't think that works, so **I would say if you can cut every single interface by 50% and if you can focus your time, it will be a better vehicle for leading and a better vehicle for communicating.**

My second point was **if you want to lead rally well remotely, you've got to do it with imagination and innovation and that means using the tech in clever and creative ways, to really engage, tor really inspire** – I mean, one of the things we're doing is on FLL, we have one trainer coming in from Italy. Tomorrow I'm working with London Communications Agency and we're linking up with a trainer in South Africa. There are just endless possibilities.

The third one is for God's sake, guys, inject some humanity into this. **Inject some humanity! You know, set aside time at the beginning of a meeting or at the end of a meeting for reciprocal disclosure.** It's ok – as I am today – to be in sweats. Let people see your house, don't worry about the cat or the dog or the kids or the grandparents or the flatmate. There might be a knock at the door. That's life. **It's OK to be messy and if you can lead with it being messy and humane, I think you'll be doing far better than when we were pre-pandemic.**

Point number four: Flex to people's needs. I can see some clients doing this really well with their staff, some not doing it at all well. I've got amazing clients, London Borough of Southwark, who have literally said to their staff, "When is your sacred time?" as in "When do you not want to be contacted? When do you not want to be on screen?" and staff are allowed to say "D'you know what? I'm not a morning person" or "You know what? after 3 o'clock the kids will be back; that isn't brilliant for me" and I think that **flexing to people's needs as a leader is what we should have all been doing pre-pandemic, but God almighty we can do it now in a way that we've never been able to do before.**

The final point is please, please, **PLEASE leaders, and I count myself amongst you: review, reflect, refine**. People have adopted this way of leading and they're not questioning it, they're not doing it differently. I mean even really basic things: we've moved into the darkest time of the year and yet people are still using Zoom in the same way they did in midsummer and I'm incredulous about that, because you have the capacity to change that so easily. Really basic things which will help your viewer: are you near a window so that as much as possible, the person watching you is also looking at natural light? Really easy win: Start meetings slightly earlier in the day. Make sure you're not doing meetings after 3.30 at night when people are plunged into darkness.

At the more comprehensive level, **how often are teams sitting down and saying, "are we really doing the best we could with this? Are we doing it humanely, are we doing it in a focused way, are we doing it in a flexible way, are we doing it in a creative way?"** and there's not enough of that reflect, refine, review of this mechanism.

LT - Agree 100% and I think that's one of the places where when you talk about the mash-up that happens live, bring in other voices, don't just have the top team think about "What should we do with these people and these meetings?" Have everybody contribute, because ideas come from everywhere, don't they?

MS - Absolutely, and also **look at what other organisations are doing.** Because I have the luxury of dipping into different organisations all the time, I can see that some people are doing some really incredibly flexible, innovative and humane things, and other people are still doing WebEx team meetings; honest to God, it's death by screen. And it's such a pity because it's so easy to do it differently. *-ENDS-*