Jeff Cobb: [00:00:00] Helping leaders in organizations lead learning in the field, industry, or profession they serve is at the heart of what we do as Leading Learning and as Tagoras. The two go hand in hand.

Celisa Steele: [00:00:18] I'm Celisa Steele.

Jeff Cobb: [00:00:19] I'm Jeff Cobb, and this is the Leading Learning Podcast.

Celisa Steele: [00:00:27] This is the Leading Learning Podcast, but, if you've been listening for a while, you know that we frequently mention Tagoras in a little audio blurb that runs during episodes.

Jeff Cobb: [00:00:38] And we realized that some listeners might not understand who or what Tagoras is and does or the relationship between Tagoras and Leading Learning. And even those who do might appreciate more detail or an update to their understanding.

Celisa Steele: [00:00:54] So that's what we're going to unpack in this episode, with some commentary along the way on the kinds of things that learning businesses need to be able to do, whether through the skills and knowledge of their own internal team or by looking for outside support.

Jeff Cobb: [00:01:11] And, of course, we didn't start doing this yesterday. In fact, it was 17 years ago that we founded Tagoras, the parent company of Leading Learning.

Celisa Steele: [00:01:21] That's right. Jeff and I co-founded Tagoras back in 2007. It's not necessarily a straight shot from what we studied in school to founding Tagoras. It's a circuitous path. We both majored in comparative literature in school, as you might remember from past episodes where we've talked a little bit about our background. And so it was a circuitous path to get from comp lit to consulting, and there were many steps along the way.

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Jeff Cobb: [00:01:49] That's true. There was really nothing in my comparative literature curriculum that said anything about creating startups, consulting, or working with learning businesses. Yes, we had to pick that up along the way. We earned our stripes, so to speak. We got involved with the dot-com era—that's what pulled us out of graduate school way back in the day—working for a company called University Access, which, in many ways, was an early version of what we now see with Coursera and edX, those types of companies, which morphed into Quisic. And then, you and I left and started our first company, the one that preceded Tagoras, which we called Isoph.

Celisa Steele: [00:02:26] Yes, I think it might be worth saying a little bit more about University Access because, as you said, that is what took us out of academia. We were both in a PhD program. I know I was thinking I was going to be a university professor. That was the path I thought I was on.

Jeff Cobb: [00:02:42] And I had already been teaching for probably five years at that point, working on my PhD. Those of you who have gone through particularly a humanities PhD, know that, once you're at that level, you are basically a very low-paid professor with full professorial responsibilities, but you're still supposed to be writing your dissertation in the meantime.

Celisa Steele: [00:03:02] But your connection to the University of North Carolina was part of what got you roped in to being part of University Access. And you already said it's a little bit like what we see now in Courseras and Udemys and that sort of thing, but the fundamental idea there was that these professors at the top-caliber schools really would benefit if their message could be more broadly heard. So, if they could serve not just the learners at Harvard or whatever other top institution in their field, but if their instruction could be taken out to a broader audience, that would benefit everyone involved, and that was the driving force behind University Access.

Jeff Cobb: [00:03:43] Yes, it was a fascinating time. Folks have to remember this was the very early days of the Internet, early days of the World Wide Web, when the Internet actually became useful. YouTube had not been created yet, and University Access grew out of…one of the founders came from Hollywood. He was a Hollywood producer. A successful one. Wanted to create high-quality video and deliver it over the Web. The other one came from McKinsey, and he had the business background. They were childhood friends. They started this company. Back in those days, it was possible to go out and raise a gazillion dollars because it was the dot-

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com era. So we raised a lot of money to do this, and, frankly, it was just too early to be delivering high-quality video over the Internet.

Jeff Cobb: [00:04:21] So we would actually do a combination of Web-based stuff with video tapes, high-production video, distributed those through community colleges and other universities. And these were top professors from the top business schools. It was really focused on business schools that we were capturing and putting out there into the world and had so much going for it. But, like I said, it was a little too early. We were in the fortunate position of learning a lot without necessarily having our names on the line for the business because, like so many dot-com businesses, that one did not make it. I'll mention that right about the same time is when Blackboard was created. I can remember when Blackboard was created. That's one that did make it.

Celisa Steele: [00:04:59] After leaving University Access—which changed some names along the way before it finally petered out—Jeff and I left and started Isoph, which was the company that focused initially on nonprofits, and we worked on helping them create online courses. In part of the discussions that we were having with those organizations around their needs, we also realized that a lot of the learning management systems (LMSes) just really did not do what they needed them to do. Too many of them were either coming out of academia and the university world, or they were coming out of the corporate world with the internal captive L&D audience, and, really, these nonprofits needed something that was more market-facing. So we ended up expanding beyond developing online courses into also then developing a learning platform.

Jeff Cobb: [00:05:50] Which was something we swore we would never do, but, yes, we decided we had to do it. This was also back in the days of Microsoft releasing .NET and Web 2.0 coming along. So we created one of the first .NET LMSes. We created what, I think, probably was the first LMS that integrated with association management systems (AMSes) that could issue continuing education credit, that had e-commerce attached to it, all of those things are common now. They were not at the time. You and I were doing a lot of the design work. I can remember I was running queries in SQL databases—again, something that was not in my comparative literature curriculum—but very hands-on. And we're a distance from that now. But we, again, really earned our stripes in that learning technology world and creating hours and hours and hours of online course content for organizations.

Celisa Steele: [00:06:40] We eventually sold Isoph. We ended up working for the company that bought us for a while, but we ultimately decided we wanted to start our own company again. And this time around that's what became Tagoras, and we really wanted to focus on serving

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organizations, and we were a little bit more focused. We didn't want to necessarily get into the nitty-gritty of the software development or even online course development, but we felt like we had a lot of knowledge that could help organizations as they were thinking through, "Okay, what should I develop? How should I develop it? What do I need to be thinking about when assessing technology?" And so that was the point of origin for Tagoras, where we thought we have this wealth of information that we can share with organizations.

Jeff Cobb: [00:07:24] We knew there were already, in the corporate world, groups like Brandon Hall and Josh Bersin who were providing research, guidance, consulting, and that sort of thing. The equivalent didn't really exist in our world because, at that point, we were already focused on what we now call learning businesses and were doing a lot of work with trade and professional associations and other kinds of market-facing organizations. They just weren't getting a lot of good information and guidance at that point in time. This was really new stuff to them, so it made sense to set up a firm that would really focus on that. And maybe this is where we can talk about how we got that name, Tagoras. You can probably already tell, by the fact that our previous company was called Isoph, that we're a little strange about our names.

Celisa Steele: [00:08:04] Right. Both names have ties to philosophers. Isoph ties to the sophists, and those were some of the first traveling teachers, and we thought that fit with this idea of online learning. With Tagoras, we are playing off of Protagoras, again, another philosopher. We're also playing off "tag" in the World Wide Web. We're playing off of "agora," which is the gathering place in Greece, the marketplace that brings people together, that brings information, goods, and knowledge together. So we wanted to pull in all of those various threads, and that's how we came to coin Tagoras.

Jeff Cobb: [00:08:43] It's a name that's just absolutely packed full of meaning. We just unpacked some of it for you there. I'll tell you, it made it very easy to get the domain name too—no problems there at all. Of course, for a while, we were exclusively consulting. It was really just you and me for a while too. We did that on purpose. We wanted to stay small, boutique, really focus in on working with learning businesses, and we did that for a number of years, very successfully grew. But, then, things started to change.

Celisa Steele: [00:09:11] Well, maybe talk a little bit about the kind of work we've done with consulting clients and what we started out doing. And then it's essentially stayed the same, but there's been a little bit of refinement around our areas of expertise and knowledge.

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Jeff Cobb: [00:09:26] It stayed similar, though the emphasis has changed a lot because I think there are still people who worked with us, boy, 17 years ago, 15 years ago, or whatever, who do think of our primary focus as being e-learning and being learning management systems (LMSes). And it's really not. Those are important to us. Obviously, you can't be in the learning business or the education world now without knowing about and caring about those things. But, originally, we focused a lot on learning management selection, even some implementation-type projects. We originally did a lot of research, in-depth research, around learning management systems (LMSes) and published that for many years. And we still do selection work around learning platforms. But really early on the bulk of what we did was more around strategy development because there was a real gap in that at the time. It was easy enough to go out and license an LMS and build some courses, run some Webinars, whatever, but to actually turn that into a viable business that would grow and thrive was a different matter.

Jeff Cobb: [00:10:24] So probably the bulk of our time and certainly the bulk of our revenue over the years has come from strategy projects, which usually also incorporate a significant amount of market assessment to really understand a client's situation—doing surveying, doing interviews, focus groups, pricing sensitivity, just a full range of different tools we'll use to really assess a market situation and then work with the organization, with the staff, with the board to really develop that strategy. And, yes, we do still do platform selection, though we're finding more and more now that it's less about selecting a platform and more about aligning technologies within an organization because a lot of organizations might be on their second or third learning management system (LMS). They don't want to have to select another platform. They just want what they have to work well and to get a return off of it in the context of their overall technology ecosystem. So we're much more focused on that now.

Celisa Steele: [00:11:17] At Tagoras, we partner with professional and trade associations, continuing education units, training firms, and other learning businesses to help them to understand market realities and potential, to connect better with existing customers and find new ones, and to make smart investment decisions around product development and portfolio management. Drawing on our expertise in lifelong learning, market assessment, and strategy formulation, we can help you achieve greater reach, revenue, and impact. Learn more at tagoras.com/more.

Celisa Steele: [00:11:55] Tagoras, we started that back in 2007. But then somewhat organically— or very organically, I would say—in 2014, we introduced a sub-brand. We introduced Leading Learning. We first used that term to brand one of our Webinars. And then, the following year, in 2015, we held our first place-based event, the Leading Learning Symposium. So that 2014,

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2015 was really the kickoff of Leading Learning, which is this sub-brand underneath the Tagoras brand.

Jeff Cobb: [00:12:30] Yes, and that happened organically, though it happened organically out of something that we were doing intentionally, which was content marketing. We were very focused on publishing research, putting blog content out there, developing those resources, starting to do Webinars. Content marketing. If you were paying attention to marketing at all, this was all the rage then. We took that very seriously and then wanted to provide value in that way. And then it started to morph into, well, this really is kind of its own thing, so let's call it something different because it felt different than what we had been doing with consulting, and we wanted to distinguish it.

Celisa Steele: [00:13:06] That's right. We wanted to be as helpful as possible to as many learning businesses as possible, and Leading Learning became this way for us to support organizations—and that's organizations that we've done consulting with, organizations that we haven't yet consulted with, organizations that we may never consult with. But we want to be able to provide some resources and support around strategy and market assessment and thinking through what it is you need to do to be able to survive and thrive as a market-facing learning business. As you said, we started doing a lot of blogging, research, report development, and Webinars, and we did a lot of that initially from that content marketing standpoint of potentially bringing in consulting clients. But then we realized there really was value beyond just serving consulting clients or potentially attracting consulting clients, and that's when we had this idea of "Let's put this under a separate brand, and we can then put it out there." And, yes, it will still serve that content marketing role, but we can also be providing value under that Leading Learning brand all on its own.

Jeff Cobb: [00:14:15] And, as we've matured and evolved as an organization, I think we've become much more clear and focused on what our mission is. We really are here to serve this broader, lifelong learning landscape, to help the learning businesses within that landscape be able to elevate their reach, revenue, impact—those are three terms you hear us say again and again and again—and Leading Learning is a way for us to fulfill that mission as broadly as possible because we know the simple fact is we're not going to consult with most of the organizations that are out there. Numerically, it doesn't work, and, frankly, we're not cheap. There are a lot of organizations that are not going to make the level of investment that it takes to work with us from a consulting standpoint, but we still want to be providing the resources and the value out to learning businesses that do help to elevate lifelong learning, that do help to

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elevate the learning business, that make it clear—another term we talk about again and again—how important this third sector of education is. So it's part of our serving that sector.

Celisa Steele: [00:15:22] And so, both brands—the Tagoras brand and the Leading Learning brand—share a focus on learning businesses and their role in that third sector. It comes down to how much a learning business wants to do on its own versus how much support it might want from us. On the consulting end, we're much more, obviously, hands-on in facilitating the process. On the Leading Learning side, it's more around providing the resources and some guidance, but it's much more of, "Okay, you go do it yourself. You're the one who needs to drive the process and apply it."

Celisa Steele: [00:15:56] Now, of course, in both cases—consulting and the Leading Learning resources—the learning business still has to be very actively involved. Even on the consulting side, we can't do it all. It has to be a partnership working with the learning business because so much of what we're dealing with is fundamental, and it's about really embracing a particular mindset or strategy internally, and we can't come along as an outside group and impose that from outside. That has to be something that the learning business adopts and embraces as well. But it's along the spectrum. Leading Learning is much more self-serve—here are some resources. And then Tagoras, with the consulting, is much more of let us facilitate whatever you need help with in terms of market assessment, strategy, or other areas that are important to your learning business.

Jeff Cobb: [00:16:43] Yes, and then you can think of this in terms of one of our other concepts that we trot out a lot, which is the Value Ramp. If you look at our Value Ramp, we don't have a ton of offerings along our Value Ramp. We're pretty selective in what's there. But consulting is going to be way up the Value Ramp in terms of the investment that's required and the value you're going to get out of it. A lot of what you're getting from Leading Learning is going to be in the lower parts of the Value Ramp, and then heading up. A lot of that's going to be free. And then you head up into things like our paid events and other offerings that we have, and that's something we're conscious of too as we evolve our business over time. We tell organizations to look at their Value Ramp and rationalize it and have it tell a logical value story, and that's something we're always looking at ourselves and continue to do work on building out what that story is from our perspective.

Celisa Steele: [00:17:33] We spent some time explaining the name Tagoras. Maybe we can just touch on the name Leading Learning, although that's much more immediately parseable. It's two words that people are familiar with: "leading" and "learning."

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Jeff Cobb: [00:17:46] It's really at the heart of our work because we feel like the organizations that are working in the third sector, providing the education and the learning experiences that people get in those other 50 years, should be leading learning. If you're an organization working in a particular field, profession, or industry, the way you're going to make a mark on that industry is by helping to guide, helping to advise, helping to point the way to what the professionals, what the individuals in that field or industry need to learn. How do they need to evolve? How are you going to guide them? So don't just sit back and be passively reactive in what you're providing. Really think through what are the opportunities, and how is what you're doing leading learning in the field or industry that you're serving?

Celisa Steele: [00:18:35] That's certainly one perspective. And then there's another nuance to that as well, which is that we tend to focus on the leaders within learning businesses and aspiring leaders in those organizations. We want to support them—support those leaders in leading their own learning business. And then, of course, as you just explained, Jeff, that learning businesses then hopefully leads the field, profession, or industry that it's focused on serving. So it's two layers there.

Jeff Cobb: [00:19:02] Yes, and I will say, I mentioned that it was easy to get the domain for Tagoras. It was easy to get the domain for Isoph as well. It was not easy to get the domain for Leading Learning. We did actually have to buy that one to get it because others wanted that term.

Celisa Steele: [00:19:16] So whether you work with consultants—and I will say that most learning businesses will work with some consultants at some points—but whether you work with consultants or not, there's a need to focus on the kinds of things that we emphasize, both in our consulting work at Tagoras and in the resources that we offer through Leading Learning.

Jeff Cobb: [00:19:37] We like to focus on both the practical and the theoretical/conceptual levels. Both are important. We'll talk to people who say, "I don't want the theory. Just show me what to do, how to apply it." But that theory often is what's setting context for what you're doing. And we've talked about this in many different places around learning—that the context is just so important. We spent a lot of time thinking about the big issues, the trends that are coming. You may have been to one of our annual trends Webinars. What is impacting this whole business that we're in? But then, of course, you do ultimately want to get to what do I do about that? How do I actually apply this? What is the practice that comes out of this?

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Celisa Steele: [00:20:22] The lifelong learning landscape is complex. It's competitive. It's being disrupted. So there's a lot that's unclear and foggy. What we aim to do is to take some of that lack of clarity and grapple with it and then get to a place of clarity so we can help learning businesses say, okay, this is what we want to focus on. This is the path forward that we are choosing. And, to your point, here's why, which is then that theory or that conceptual piece of it. The practical is, okay, this is what we're going to do, but, if you don't have the theory and the concept behind it, then it's very hard to get that internal buy-in and to have that prolonged investment in actually executing on a strategy.

Jeff Cobb: [00:21:09] Yes. This usually plays out in the types of tools, models, and frameworks that we've put out there. If you think of something like the Learning Business Maturity Model, for example, which we've talked about many times—we'll talk about it many times again—on one level, it's very conceptual. Any model is. We're talking about domains and this whole concept of maturing as an organization and different stages of that. But then we want to give you some ways to assess where you are in that, so we've got an assessment that goes with it, so you can actually score yourself and get some concrete information.

Jeff Cobb: [00:21:42] And then we want to guide you in what you then do about what you find out in the Maturity Model. Some of that we do through things like podcast episodes and Webinars, really focusing in. The whole Leading Learning blog is structured around the domains of the Learning Business Maturity Model, so we're constantly putting out content to address those domains that's going to be useful in moving towards maturity. And then, on the consulting side, we have our Maturity Accelerator Program. We can sit down with you, roll up the sleeves, go through the assessment, and design a plan that your organization is going to then implement to move from wherever you are right now to wherever you aspire to be in your maturity journey.

Celisa Steele: [00:22:25] Both practical and conceptual—those are both important to us. We're also big fans of taking a well-balanced view of whatever the issue is. You were just talking about the Maturity Model. We have five domains in that Maturity Model, and, if a learning business focuses too much on a single domain, if they just focus on strategy without also giving time and attention to leadership or to the portfolio of offerings, they're not going to be successful. So there's always this idea—and this is where I think that the conceptual or theoretical can help—that you want to be well-rounded. You want to make sure that, if we're thinking about the Maturity Model, that you're making progress in all five domains. We also talk a lot about reach, revenue, and impact—it's already come up in this episode. But, again, it's this idea that you, as a learning business, need to be thinking about all three because, if you

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focus too much on impact but you aren't keeping the reality of revenue in mind, then you're not going to be able to thrive or make it long-term. So there's this need to be balanced, and this need to think through things at that practical level and at that conceptual level.

Jeff Cobb: [00:23:45] Helping leaders and organizations lead learning in the field, industry, or profession they serve is at the heart of what we do as Leading Learning and as Tagoras. The two go hand in hand.

Celisa Steele: [00:23:59] At leadinglearning.com/episode403, you'll find show notes, a transcript, and options for subscribing to the podcast. If you haven't yet, please, please do subscribe.

Jeff Cobb: [00:24:10] And we'd be grateful if you'd take a minute to rate us on Apple Podcasts or wherever you listen, especially if you enjoy the show. Celisa and I personally appreciate reviews and ratings, and they help the podcast show up when others search for content on leading a learning business.

Celisa Steele: [00:24:26] And please spread the word about Leading Learning. You can do that in a one-on-one note or a one-on-one conversation with a colleague, or you can do it through social media. In the show notes at leadinglearning.com/episode403, you'll find links to connect with us on X, LinkedIn, and Facebook.

Jeff Cobb: [00:24:43] Thanks again, and see you next time on the Leading Learning Podcast.

[music for this episode by DanoSongs, www.danosongs.com]

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