Connie Hello learning people and welcome to episode 84 of the eLearning coach podcast. When you think about leadership and the traits of leaders, do you typically think about people with responsibility and authority at the top of an organization? In this episode, I speak with David Kelly, Chairman of the Learning Guild. He explains why developing leadership skills in Learning and Development, is important for people at every level of an organization and in any role. We discuss his eBook, Nine Core Behavioral Traits Learning Leaders Should Cultivate. And we discuss how to go about doing this.

David Kelly is the Chairman of the Learning Guild. He has been a learning and performance consultant and training director for over 20 years. David is a leading voice exploring how technology can be used to enhance training, education, learning, and organizational performance. David is an active member of the learning community building events and resources with the Guild and as a dynamic speaker and writer, inspiring others to view their work through a fresh, technology-enhanced lens. You can find the show notes with resources and a transcript at theelearningcoach.com/podcasts/84. Here's our conversation.

Connie: Hi David. Welcome to the eLearning Coach Podcast.

David: Thank you so much for having me.

Connie: It's my pleasure. I read your eBook on learning leadership, and I was curious what inspired you to write that?

David: I mean, I've been in this field for a while. I never put a number on it. I just describe it as a couple of hair colors, but I have noticed that most of the conversations around leadership in our field tend to focus on job titles. They tend to focus on roles. And most importantly, a lot of the language that we use around these leadership conversations tend to focus on leadership as something you are rather than something you do. And I found myself being very interested in what are the things that people do that make them a leader. The work that I do at The Learning Guild, being someone who works at a company that hosts conferences and such, getting people to come in and speak, this phrase that I don't like on a personal level, but I have to pay attention to from a work level of thought

leadership, it comes up a lot. And a lot of people think, I want to be a thought leader, I want to be a thought leader.

I only bring that up in the context of it resonates with me in terms of this look, it always bothers me when someone says, I'm a thought leader. You don't get to say that. Only someone else can tell you that they see you as a thought leader. You don't get to anoint yourself that. It's kind of something that happened when other people see you as that. Following that trail of thought of so what are the things that people do that have other people look at them as a leader? Focus on the stuff that people do that gets you to be seen as a leader.

Connie: Nice. Do you have a definition for leadership that you like?

David: Yeah, I don't have a standard thing that I look at all the time, but for me it's more about the language that we use. I find myself at this point in my career being very interested in the language that we use to describe our work because my definition of leadership, however, and I would encourage other people to do this as well. However, you personally describe leadership, are you describing things that you are, or are you describing things that you do? Like a leader is someone who is this or a leader is someone who does these sorts of things? And that to me is where my mind naturally goes towards how to define it is what are the set of behaviors that someone does that get them to be recognized about a leader? And sometimes that's not even what they do. Sometimes what they do is a subset of how they do it.

Connie: Well, you may have answered the next thing I was going to ask you, which was how do you differentiate between behavioral traits which you write about in the book and characteristics that are innate in someone, that someone is "born with" or that someone has developed. And maybe you explained it, but if you have anything more to say about the difference between behavioral traits and characteristics?

David: Well, there are two ways that I can answer that. One would be the science route. I'm more interested these days in terms of forget about what the book says the definition is, what is the definition in terms of how we practice it and what our day-to-day conversations are? Because most of the time when people are talking about a trait, they talk about it in the

context of this person's a natural-born leader. They have all the leadership traits, they're a natural one, as if it's something that they didn't earn, as if it's something they didn't necessarily do.

For me, it's more a matter of are you intentionally doing things to reinforce people's perceptions of you as a leader? Because that to me is where the rubber hits the road is I find myself using that word intentional a lot. There are a lot of things when we talk about traits and we talk about leadership, there are so many cliches that we just say. To be empathetic, you got to put yourself in someone else's shoes. And sometimes with the language that we use, we have to step back and say, but what does that mean? What does that look like? How do we do that? Rather than just spouting off the cliche of what it means to be empathetic, what does that mean and how do we do that as a practice?

Connie: I see parallels here to creativity where many people will think of it as something innate, but people can develop creativity skills.

David: Yep.

Connie: But anyway, back to what we're talking about. What have you observed about leadership in the field of learning and development?

David: I think too often leadership in L&D is confused with management. We're not unique in that. I think a lot of organizations that we associate being a manager with being a leader, it's associated with the same thing I mentioned earlier about your title and your business but that doesn't necessarily make you a leader. But I think that we make that mistake. One of the best examples is we assume that someone who is a leader in L&D oversees a team. That is a natural thing. Even I encounter that in the work that I do at the Guild when we talk about different audiences that we have and someone throws out the term leader, there's this assumption built into it that that person is overseeing other people.

And it doesn't necessarily need to be that way. I mean, I spent a good portion of my career as a department of one. I didn't have any direct reports, but everyone in that organization that I partnered with that I helped solve performance problems with saw me as a leader within the organization because of the way that I did my job, not because of the fact

that I had a role in direct reports. And I think we make that mistake where we confuse management of a function with being a leader rather than how we do our job.

Connie: Good point. Do you think the behavioral traits needed for learning leadership are any different from those needed in other fields?

David: I think there might be a couple of unique things that are on the list. The eBook that I had written, and when I give talks on this topic, it's by no means a complete set of leadership skills. It's kind of like the top nine that I personally picked out that I thought are the biggest rocks in the room. And I think those big rocks in the room are probably the same no matter what field you're in terms of how to do it. But it's a matter of putting in the context. What does it mean to be an empathetic leader? If you had a Venn diagram that's probably L&D and just generic and there's a lot of overlap, but then as you start looking into the weeds of it, what does it mean to do it in the context of L&D?

The work that we do, empathy was the first one that came to mind. The weight that I would give empathy as a leadership skill carries more weight in the context of the work that L&D professionals, not that it's not important anywhere. The nature of the work that we do in supporting people's growth and meeting people where they are and building that context of their environment, if we're not being empathetic about that then our programs are probably not going to be as effective as they could be. So, I give that more weight than when you bring in the context of L&D then empathy might have in a different sort of a role or an environment. It's always important, but what it looks like in practice and maybe how much weight it should be given might vary depending on where you're at.

Connie: First, what you just said makes so much sense because context is always so important, whatever we do. But then the other thing is, as you say, we typically associate leadership with people who have responsibilities or in a position of authority. And I love that you talk about that leadership is important for people who are not necessarily in positions of "power", not power in a bad way, just like responsibility. Can you explain to listeners why the behavioral traits of leadership are important for people in other positions too? Even someone who's maybe entered the field a year ago.

David: Sure. There are two answers that I would give. First off, I think most people are on some level engaged in their professional growth and career growth. So, if I'm on this stage of the ladder today, I want to get to whatever the next stage in my career is, I want to continue moving forward and however you might define that. And I think being a leader where you are is probably the best strategy for opening the door to where you want to go next, operating as a leader. And I think that part of that is think about the interpersonal relations. If I'm new in the field, I'm operating in my space with a leadership mindset. It's taking ownership of even though my sphere of influence may be smaller because I'm new and I'm new to the organization, I might be junior in my field, but whatever my sphere of influence is, if I own that, I'm accountable for them.

If I'm giving people around me the confidence that I'm going to get things done, and I'm going to take things on, and I'm going to be the person who steps up when someone needs to step up. In the context of my small space, then that is going to give everybody around me confidence in who I am as a member of this team and who I am as a human being and as a person. And all these things help build that perception that people have around who you are as an individual. Again, sometimes they're not necessarily described in the context of leadership, but leadership is all about perception. And if you do these things, it positions you as a leader. People see you as a leader. One of the most interesting perspectives that I heard on this and just my own personal experience was one of the roles that I had within the Guild.

The way that David Holcombe, the founder of the Guild, had said this to me when I was going through a transition from one role to another. He said, I know that this is a good move for you because you're not pushing for it. I'm not pulling for it. People have put you in that space. Everyone around you in the team has already seen you in the role that I want to put you in. It just makes it easy to do it that way. I never looked at it through that angle. That it wasn't about my boss, it wasn't about me. It was about what he saw from everyone around me in terms of how I perceive to know that he wanted to put me in a larger sphere of influence.

Connie: I think that's beautiful. So, every year the Learning Guild hosts a conference called the Learning Leaders Conference. Why do you think it's important to have a conference focused on leadership?

David: I think it's important because one of the greatest ironies that I think I find in our field is we are in the business of professional development. We're in the business of growth. That's what we do on a daily basis, and yet we very rarely focus on our own. It's so easy in the day-to-day activities of building programs that other people can grow from that we forget about our own space. Even something that we do like we host DevLearn as well. Most people who go to DevLearn are doing things that's going to help them complete their tasks better, which is important and build strategies and all of those things are important. But Learning 2024, the Learning Leaders Conference is different. We focus on the behaviors that we're talking about. We look for sessions that are not just talking about being a leader. It's focused on kind of some of these questions that we've been exploring here.

What are the specific things that people do that help them build the leadership skillset that help people see them as a leader? A lot of the events that are out there are positioned as if you're in this role, then you should come to this leadership conference. And Learning 2024, the Learning Leadership conference is a little bit different because we look at it as whatever level you're at, you're going to find some content there that will help you be better as a leader in your role. It's all in the context of L&D. It's not just generic leadership stuff. It's all put in the context of L&D, but we're always looking at it through the lens of is this reinforcing a behavior that helps people be perceived as a leader and helps them be perceived not only amongst their peers, which I think this is a critical element of it.

It's not just a matter of being perceived by your peers because your peers understand your context but being seen within your organization. As long as I've been in this field one of the biggest cliches has always been how L&D needs a seat at the table. Part of what we're curating that event around is what are the things that L&D people need to be doing to be perceived as leaders in the organization because that's what ultimately gets us that seat at the table. That's what gets us being invited to strategic discussions is by behaving as not just L&D leaders, but part of being an L&D leader is understanding L&D's role within the business.

Connie: I think where we fit into any organization, whether it's a corporation, an institution, a nonprofit is so important. But I wonder if we're keeping people

in suspense because we never have mentioned so far what your nine behavioral traits of leaders are. Can you read to us what these are and then we'll just delve into a few of them?

David: Sure. So, the nine big rocks that I'm always looking at that are in the room, leaders have integrity. Leaders are innovative. Leaders listen. Leaders have empathy. Leaders are confident. Leaders are visionary. Leaders are great communicators. Leaders are strong at making decisions. Leaders are problem solvers. Those are the ones that I go through most often.

Connie: Those are great. If anyone can demonstrate and achieve all of those behaviors, they've probably done a life's work. So, do you see that any of those behavioral traits are associated or dependent on each other?

David: Oh, all of them. If you had a Venn diagram of all of the leadership traits that are out there, it would be a mess because they're all interconnected in some ways. And I would venture to guess just as an example, some of the stuff that I might describe as behaviors that are representative of being an empathetic leader are probably very similar or could be used in a similar way to say that I'm a good communicator. There's probably a lot of overlap in terms of the traits and the behaviors associated with some. And that makes sense. But empathy to me is a great example. Being really, really empathetic is sometimes less about a specific thing that you do and more the sum of the parts of things.

Connie: Yeah, that's a really good point. So, of all these nine traits, are there some that strike you as most important for leadership in learning and development?

David: That's a great question. So, there's kind of a yes end. The reason I say yes end is there's an element of this to me that says even that's going to vary. For me to say what are the most important things for L&D, I feel like if I was talking to someone and they said, what do you think the most important things are? My first question would probably be, “Tell me a little bit more about your environment. Tell me a little bit more about the work.” Because just using my own history as an example, I mentioned earlier I was a department of one. I've also worked in roles where I was a training director that oversaw a team of 20 people. And those were two very different organizations, very different environments. What were the most

important skills that I needed to do to be perceived as a leader to help drive the initiatives that I was doing?

Probably looked a little bit different in those two different environments because of just the nature of the work there. I think that being a communicator is critical. The work that we do with stakeholders, the work that we do in terms of programs that are built in a way that can support people's learning. There are so many things that we do that if you're not communicating well, your ability to execute these aspects of your job are probably compromised. You could be the greatest instructional designer in the world, but if you can't communicate well with your stakeholders, your stuff is going to be lacking because you weren't able to pull the information you needed to do the design.

Communication is probably an enormous one for me. I think empathy has a lot of weight for me just in the sense of I see the field going in a direction that I hope we continue going in direction, which is just being more mindful of the needs of the people that we serve. That we're not just putting together a course based on what's in the book, but being mindful of who's taking this information, who's going to absorb it, what are their unique challenges. Just being mindful of who's in the room and how can we best support the uniqueness of all of the individuals who are in the room. I like the fact that there's more techniques evolving around that that help us be more empathetic in a practical way. Those are the two that immediately come to mind.

Connie: Those are great. Would you say that there are some behavioral traits, probably depends on the person, but do you think there are some that are most difficult to achieve?

David: Broad stroke I think that the gap that I see most often is around the innovation and visionary stuff that a lot of people, we do what we do because it's what we do. And especially now where everyone metaphorically sometimes feels like they're on a treadmill and they're just constantly churning stuff out that sometimes we're so busy doing stuff that we don't pause to think about what we could or should be doing. That can be a gap. The second part of the answer I think is it's a universal gap that is very contextually individualized, is being aware of where your strengths and weaknesses are. So sometimes it's a matter of where are your

strengths, where are your weaknesses and the stuff that you know could do better, what are some intentional things that you can do? I have Post-it notes up on my wall that are constant mental reminders and one of them literally says, WAIT, and it's an acronym that just says, why am I talking? Because sometimes I just need to listen.

Connie: I love that quote that says you were born with two ears and one mouth for a reason.

David: Yes, exactly. I think that quote also echoes one of the challenges of being a leader is in the sense of if we're not actively contributing something, the idea that sometimes being a good leader means stepping back and being quiet or letting other people do stuff is almost counterintuitive to what you feel like you should be doing based on the corporate structure that sometimes is surrounding us.

Connie: That is so true. One thing I like about the eBook is you don't just list these behavioral traits and explain them, but there are links to resources for helping people learn to develop these behaviors. And I wondered if you could just talk about a few that don't seem that easy to develop. And one is the one you mentioned, being a visionary. So, can you just explain how can someone work on being a visionary?

David: Sure. I think that there are different ways you can do that. First, it's kind of an understanding of what we mean when we say visionary. A lot of people describe being a visionary as being able to see things that other people can't, but I think you have to dig deeper. That's kind of the cliche because I have an idea of what the future can be like, but I can't articulate it to you so that you can see it too and articulate it in a way that is compelling or inspiring enough so that you can get excited by the idea then I'm not a visionary leader. But just seeing it is one thing, but can you do something about it? Can you build a plan that will help bring it to fruition?

When I was managing a team, we would schedule a pitch session. And I would say, all right, so you've got this idea, pitch it to me, get me to buy it. And because it would start with just like, this is a really cool thing and it's going to do all these things, pitch it to me. And then I would ask the challenging questions, so how are we going to do that? One of the people that I coached on my team, I just remember the face that she had because

she was going through this and I was like, that sounds really fun and interesting, but why does it matter to me? And she was just confused. I was looking at her face like well, what do you mean? You want me on board, you got to sell it to me. What problem is this going to solve? Just because it's cool and it might be innovative doesn't mean it's creating value.

Can you articulate it so that other people can see the vision? Can you articulate a path from A to Z that is going to that vision to fruition? And that was the piece that she had that aha moment of just, oh, I got to connect this. I got to connect the dots here. And I think sometimes just asking those challenging questions, I think building the skill. Sometimes we don't know that we need this skill until it's actively in play and that's too late. You're in a meeting and someone's asking these questions, you're like, oh, I don't know. Finding safe environments to do that. The pitch sessions that we would go through, they weren't with the stakeholders. When we were pitching it was just during someone's one-on-one, and it was a safe space to practice some of these skills.

Connie: It seems like what you're saying is there are two parts to this. One is coming up with innovative ideas and the other is being able to figure out how to implement these ideas. And this dovetails so nicely with creativity and reminds me that there are so many other ways to generate innovative ideas besides sitting in a group and brainstorming and everyone agreeing with whatever the boss says. I'll also put a link in the show notes to an episode that has a focus on creativity.

David: We talk about these things as what if someone does, but if you create environments where you can apply these skills, it starts to treat these things that we associate with a trait as if it's a skill. Creating an environment where I can practice something is treating it as a skill. And if you're treating it as a skill, you'll build it.

Connie: That's a really good way to look at it. Let me just ask you about one more trait. How can someone get better at decision-making?

David: First off, it's being aware of what's going on in your environment. Being aware of the constraints and resources that you have available through your organization. Being aware of the culture of your organization. There's

a lot of knowledge building. It's an unfair truth in my mind of leadership. Being seen as a leader is the end result of multiple interactions that you do over time consistently that create this perception that you are a leader. What the unfair part of that is for every 10 things that you do that bring you a step forward, it takes one of those things done wrong to take you three steps back. I bring that up in the context of decision-making. You have to have all of that knowledge because it really hurts your perception as a leader if you bring up a decision and someone in the room is like, you are completely ignoring some really important context in that recommendation.

One of the things that I recommend people do around decision-making, and it's a simple thing, but I think it's a really powerful thing if it's done again intentionally, is when there's a decision to be made, sit down and develop a pro and con list. But don't just do it as a knee-jerk cliche reaction. When I do a pros and cons list, I do a couple of things. Get a piece of paper, draw a line down the middle. Before I start putting the list together, I do 1 through 15 numbers down the side. And there's a reason that I do that. Because anytime you're doing the pros and cons list, depending on what the context of the thing is, the first 5 to 10 that you might have, they're the easy things that are low-hanging fruit that sometimes when you're in a meeting you pull that and you're like, oh, what about this?

And everyone's like, that's great, let's do that. And there's not a lot of critical thinking involved in it. There's not a lot of analysis. I like 15 as the number because regardless of what the context is, chances are 15 is going to make me work. If it's an easy list that I never have to stop writing and I hit the end, that's not doing what I want in it, which is I need to get to the point that I have to work to fill out the list. Because I feel like if I'm doing that, it's going to make me go past the obvious and it's going to make me start needing to connect more dots and think a little bit more outside of my default view to start coming up with more informed decisions.

And when you start going in that direction, you start considering things that influence the decision in this context. When you start looking at that 10 through 15 on the list, you're probably bringing in factors that are probably important and you wouldn't have considered otherwise. So, I find

pros and cons list to be a very simple but powerful way to increase your skill in making informed decisions.

Connie: That is a really good approach and a way to avoid the low-hanging fruit, which are those first ideas that pop into your head. One other thing I'd like to add is that you can interview others and get data and opinions so that you can try to get a 360-degree picture before making a decision.

David: I agree, and I'll add to that. One of the more challenging aspects to me about being seen as having strong decision-making skills as a leader, it's such a challenge to balance that scale of knowing when to just make the call as an individual or as a small group and when something needs to be more collaborative. So that's a big challenge with the leaders being able to know where to kind of put the stake in the ground around this is the decision and this is what's informed it. And admittedly, to be able to stand behind that.

Connie: Right, that's one of the more hidden aspects of decision-making skills. But anyway, David, as we wrap up, I just wanted to say I found this conversation with you inspiring. So, thank you so much.

David: Oh, thanks for inviting me. I love talking about this and always appreciate the opportunity to chat with you.

Connie: I think one of David's key points is that many behavioral traits of leaders, rather than being innate, are skills that can be practiced. And it's important to take opportunities to practice in a safe space because these leadership skills are important at every level of an organization.

If you found this inspiring or if you have observed other important behavioral traits you'd like to add to the list, you can comment at theelearningcoach.com/podcasts/84. You'll also find links to resources and a transcript.