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[00:00:00] **Intro:** Hello, and welcome to Workplace Stories, the podcast where human capital experts share their real-world experiences and insights. Hosted by RedThread Research, Workplace Stories surfaces the latest industry trends, innovative talent strategies, and best practices for success. Tune in for practical advice on how to best transform your workplace.

[00:00:22] **Dani Johnson:** Hey, welcome to Workplace Stories. I'm Dani Johnson, and today I had the opportunity to sit down with Tracy Cantu, who is a chief learning strategist and the author of a new book called Running L&D Like a Business. This book and this conversation resonated with me a lot, not just because I love Tracy, but also because she thinks in terms of systems and processes rather than in terms of fixing individual people.

[00:00:46] **Dani Johnson:** A few things stood out to me in this conversation. The first one is she introduced this idea of a difference between workflow and process pretty on in our discussion as well as in the book. A workflow is a series of tasks that happen one after the other that take you from an idea to a solution at the end, whereas a process is much more strategic.

[00:01:09] **Dani Johnson:** Instead of doing the tactical things involved in a workflow, it is thinking through what we actually want at the end and the workflows as well as the decision points that need to be made to make sure that we get what we want at the end. She used the example of an intake process versus curriculum management.

[00:01:27] **Dani Johnson:** The second thing that really struck me is she talked about coming with problems, not necessarily solutions. L&D is notorious for having shiny thing syndrome. We tend to fall in love with the solution before we define what the problem is, and in this world of AI, we're seeing all kinds of ways that we can use AI to share content, but it may not solve the problem.

[00:01:50] **Dani Johnson:** So coming with the problem and talking through the problem versus coming with a solution and hoping to find a problem that it solves is the way to go. We also talked about expertise, which is one of my pet projects right now, and how corporate America in particularly is setting ourselves up to have a horrifying skills dearth by about twenty t- thirty-two when we've promoted all the middle, and there's no bench, and we've done nothing to develop the bottom level because all of those jobs have been outsourced to AI.

[00:02:23] **Dani Johnson:** Finally, we had a chance to talk about the future of L&D. There are lots of theories right now about what's gonna happen with L&D. She went a way I didn't think she would. She said that L&D is going to not exist in the organization that we see it today. She sees it being divided maybe into two groups. One of them gets restructured as a workforce enablement organization that may or may not sit under talent management, and the other is a small production arm that can create things very simply, like decks and job aids.

[00:02:58] **Dani Johnson:** As always, this was a fascinating conversation. I always like to hear what Tracy has to say because of her very rich background in working for some pretty large organizations. And the fact that she gets to peek into all kinds of organizations as she does her consulting. Listen to the conversation. It was great.

[00:03:15] **Dani Johnson:** We will put a link to the book and all of the books that she's mentioned during this podcast in the notes. And if you like this conversation and others that we do, please subscribe to Workplace Stories. And if you really, really like it, visit us at redthreadresearch.com and get a membership. Thanks so much

[00:03:43] **Dani Johnson:** Tracy, thanks for being with us.

[00:03:45] **Tracie Cantu:** Thanks for having me.

[00:03:47] **Dani Johnson:** I'm thrilled to get to talk to you. You wrote a book that dropped in April, and we haven't had a minute to sit down and talk about it. So today we're gonna talk a little bit about your book, and then my conversations with you are also always, what's the right word, spirited.

[00:04:02] **Dani Johnson:** And so I'm excited to talk a little bit as well about how you see L&D moving forward, and what are some of the major roadblocks and some of the things associated with that. So with that, let's dive in. I'm gonna start with a couple of introduction questions, and then we'll go to book, and then we'll talk about where L&D is going.

[00:04:18] **Dani Johnson:** So to start, just tell us a little bit about yourself.

[00:04:23] **Tracie Cantu:** Oh my goodness. Obviously name, Tracy Cantoo, but I have ... Well, I am an accidental L&D person. I meant to go to school to be a historian. Literally never planned on graduating, but then bills. So I stumbled

into L&D while I was working in commercial aviation during college, and it just stuck, and I've really enjoyed it.

[00:04:45] **Tracie Cantu:** One of the things I've really enjoyed about it comes from having a frontline operational formative experience, in the fact that my brain thinks of operational chaos as gears and levers that can be optimized to make things run smoother, even though it may feel like chaos in the beginning. And oddly enough, I found that to be a wonderful fit in L&D.

[00:05:11] **Dani Johnson:** I gotta love that, because you can see, as you read through your book, you can see that. You're making order out of something that is generally fairly chaotic. So that definitely comes through. We're gonna talk about L&D today, as I mentioned. Why should people listen to you with respect to L&D?

[00:05:25] **Tracie Cantu:** Been there, done that, have the scraped knees, the bruises, the bad decisions, the lessons learned, and the amazing high points to go with it.

[00:05:35] **Tracie Cantu:** So I have been the team of one in a very small enterprise. It wasn't even enterprise, if I use that word technically. And I have worked for global companies that have had millions of employees and contractors in them, and one of the amazing things there is people problems are not unique. Workforce problems are not unique.

[00:06:01] **Tracie Cantu:** They cross industries and professions, and that is an amazing lesson I've learned, and it's one that I just really enjoy sharing. And I also like to share the, I went down this way, found out it was a cul-de-sac, had to back all the way out and redo the work so other people don't have to make that same bad turn.

[00:06:21] **Dani Johnson:** Awesome. Well, you recently wrote a book called- Running L&D Like a Business. This dropped in April, so it's available right now. We'll drop the link to purchase it in the notes. But I'm wondering if we could take just a second and set that up. What is the book about that the title doesn't already tell you?

[00:06:39] **Tracie Cantu:** Yeah. One of the things I always think of is the fact that there is a tactical aspect to every role, even when you're running an entire learning function, and that's operations. And I wrote this book for any leader of a learning function who's desperately trying to figure out how to scale with

efficiency and effectiveness, but not constantly adding head count, because you can't throw more people at problems.

[00:07:07] **Tracie Cantu:** That really doesn't work long term or even short term really. So my hope is that this book really sets people up to understand that from my point of view, the majority of L&D's problems are operational because they reinvent the wheel problem to problem, whereas if there were more processes and systems in place, the tactical could be rinse and repeated, freeing them up, pardon my French, to do the cool shit, the really strategic, impactful stuff that sits in the Brandon Hall Awards category, the ATD Best Awards category, not the 784th job aid that we produced this year.

[00:07:49] **Tracie Cantu:** So that's really what I wanted to do with this book, is to give people a starting point, an anti-blank page to really just launch how they can scale impact.

[00:08:01] **Dani Johnson:** Okay. Well, you're already speaking our language. RedThread thinks mostly in terms of systems, and that sounds like this is the discussion we're gonna have today.

[00:08:08] **Dani Johnson:** Awesome. If you could have leaders walk away with just one thing from this book, what, what would it be?

[00:08:14] **Tracie Cantu:** Build out the operating model, because so many of you have inherited a way of working, and we might get into this later, but most L&D is built on workflows, not processes. And for anybody who just said, "Tracy, those words are the same," they're not.

[00:08:31] **Tracie Cantu:** A workflow are the tactical steps to accomplish a task that supports a process, and a process is a set of steps and actions that achieve a goal. And L&D is full of workflows and not processes, and I think that's really one thing that I would love people to go in and be like, "Oh, what is all of these tasks in service of?"

[00:08:55] **Tracie Cantu:** It's almost like the skill conversation where it's task, skill, capability, and we just kind of build up. I think L&D as a whole on their operating model, this book kind of sets up The tactical foundation to get them thinking in that order.

[00:09:10] **Dani Johnson:** Okay. I think you might have just answered this, but I'm curious, what idea in this book is gonna get the most pushback or cause the most controversy?

[00:09:20] **Tracie Cantu:** I know what I thought was going to get the most pushback and controversy, and it has been different than what has happened in reality.

[00:09:26] **Dani Johnson:** Okay, tell me both.

[00:09:27] **Tracie Cantu:** I know. I thought it was going to be the consumer versus customer argument, that the learners, AKA employees, aren't our customer. The business is our customer.

[00:09:38] **Tracie Cantu:** The consumer is the employee. Or possibly even, like, I call out how we hide behind vanity metrics. I was like, "Oh, people will push back." It has not been that. It's, "Tracy, if we do this, then we can't say yes to everything." That has been the pushback.

[00:09:54] **Dani Johnson:** Really?

[00:09:55] **Tracie Cantu:** Yeah. But they haven't said it so bluntly. It all starts with, "I can't say no.

[00:10:00] **Tracie Cantu:** I can't say not yet. I can't have trade-off discussions." And, like, everybody digs in their heels over that. They're like, "Well, somebody will always..." And I'm just like, "And I'm sure occasionally a moose walks into a kitchen in Canada. Those are the outliers. How are we going to actually, like, work?" I was like, "You have..."

[00:10:19] **Tracie Cantu:** Like, I keep telling them it's turning a cruise ship, not a kayak. So think long-term, build the muscle. But the amount of pushback against saying no, and I'm like, why is it wrong to say no to something that has little to no value in supporting the business, but helps one team- Solve a performance issue because the leader won't have a difficult conversation.

[00:10:48] **Tracie Cantu:** Why are you doing low value work? I just watch circular arguments the entire time, and I'm ... The past few months, it is on my to-do list. I'm like, "Where do I just throw a disruptor into that argument to get them to think differently?" But it has been the biggest pushback.

[00:11:02] **Dani Johnson:** That's interesting. Do you think it's tied to the fact that L&D often isn't seen as the most credible, so they fall into sort of maybe this people-pleasing mold where they're like, "Well, if we, we make friends with these people, we can get their buy-in into our value, and then maybe we can do some of the more strategic things"?

[00:11:19] **Tracie Cantu:** Yes, and I think I've heard the, well, they'll go elsewhere. And I'm like, one, that's not always a bad thing. Set them up with templates. Be the QA le- lever in this model, not the blocker. And my second thought is if they go elsewhere for better speed and responsiveness, that's a different problem we're having.

[00:11:41] **Tracie Cantu:** I think this is one where I should put on a root cause analysis with some clients and really dig deeper as to is it fear of the economy and the market? Is it fear... Like, some people are still in command and control organizations. We know it. It just is. It is what it is there. Are they afraid that somebody else will do it better, faster, and more impactful than them, or is it all of the above?

[00:12:04] **Tracie Cantu:** I think there's a lot of things at play, but it was not the pushback I was expecting.

[00:12:08] **Dani Johnson:** Interesting. I wanna dive in a little bit to some of your ideas. In this book, you introduce a learning operations blueprint. Can you tell us what that is and what's included?

[00:12:19] **Tracie Cantu:** Absolutely. One, I love a good blueprint framework.

[00:12:22] **Tracie Cantu:** You can tell I came, was thinking I was gonna be in academia because me and a rubric have never not liked each other. So at a high level, this operations blueprint is the scaffolding that the entire model sits on. It's how work gets requested, how it's funded, what's declined, how and when training gets built and delivered, and it sits on three pillars, and it's people, process, and technology.

[00:12:48] **Tracie Cantu:** So people, how is the team built in L&D? Do we have the right people in the right roles? Are they skilled and capable to meet the demands of the business? Have we over-indexed in some areas of our profession and not enough in others? And then processes. How does the team work? Do we actually have processes or is it workflows?

[00:13:09] **Tracie Cantu:** And if we have just workflows, how do we bring those together to create the process and understand our overarching strategies and systems in play? And then we go into technology, and this one is always near and dear to my heart because I love tech as much as I love ops, and it's do we actually have an ecosystem?

[00:13:29] **Tracie Cantu:** Because if you look up the definition of ecosystem, I know very few people who do. If we have a bunch of siloed products and tools, how are we going to get them integrated? How are we going to get them sharing data? And how does that all come together to build off of An actual team that operates like a business function, because, like marketing, finance, operations, everybody else has this rigor.

[00:13:55] **Tracie Cantu:** We're one of the last holdouts in corporate America. I will say corporate America for anybody who's listening, 'cause I do not know what corporate Europe looks like in depth on this, or corporate Asia or Africa, so please let me know if you're suffering similarly.

[00:14:11] **Dani Johnson:** So you mentioned people, processes, and technology.

[00:14:14] **Dani Johnson:** Some people I've seen really good maps inside of organizations for each one of those things. Like, this is, in theory, what is happening in the organization. Which one of those do you think is usually the messiest?

[00:14:25] **Tracie Cantu:** I'm gonna say processes, because that's where prioritization and portfolio management live, and that's where we come back to those yes if trade-off conversations.

[00:14:38] **Tracie Cantu:** Is this low-value work? Is this high-value work? Are we supporting organizational goals and KPIs or division goals and KPIs or Tracy's goals and KPIs? And because of that, you have to get everybody into an agreement, and you have to have governance in place to define what each one of those criterias are in your processes.

[00:15:01] **Tracie Cantu:** Because otherwise, if people agree to it on paper and then one VP requests a training for their d- department, what was process and systems rigor now just becomes a political minefield, and I think that's where it gets messy because of how much consensus you have to build to really get process working smoothly across the organization.

[00:15:26] **Dani Johnson:** Can we deep dive process just a little bit? So in theory, I understand what we're talking about. We're talking about the things that you do versus, I think, the ways that you get to the end result that you're looking for. Is that an okay way of saying it? Okay. Can you give me an example of something that you see that is workflowy quite a bit?

[00:15:42] **Dani Johnson:** I'm thinking in th- in terms of like intake systems. Those are workflowy. They're not necessarily process-driven. And then give me an example of things that are very sort of process-oriented.

[00:15:52] **Tracie Cantu:** Okay. Let's take intake, because intake is one of the workflows in portfolio management. And as we go through there, intake comes in, then somebody will have the next step.

[00:16:07] **Tracie Cantu:** We just follow the workflow through. Is it meeting with a human being to go through the initial criteria base? Does this qualify? Yes. All right, then we'll start storyboarding and creating a project plan. Whereas that process, intake from intake to delivery is a series of workflows. However, it sits in the overall process of portfolio management.

[00:16:33] **Tracie Cantu:** Is this an investment that the organization wants to make? We only have so many labor hours. We only have so much workforce capability within an L&D function. Is this a deliverable that we have a success metric that we can show goes through? Should we invest our limited resources, capabilities into this and manage it thoroughly from there, or is it low value?

[00:16:58] **Tracie Cantu:** Like, it doesn't sit in an overarching process is what I notice the most. Like, everybody has an intake workflow to delivery workflow, but it is a task list in isolation It doesn't actually have an end-to-end strategy as to what it's a part of. And I utilize portfolio management because it's one of the best analogies you can give to somebody if you look at them and go, "You're only allowed to choose one stock to invest your pension or your 401in for the next 20 years."

[00:17:27] **Tracie Cantu:** And they would look at you like you're insane, because they're like, "No, you've got to be able to flex. Like, the market is volatile and you've got to use diversify." I was like, "Why don't we do that in our learning? Like, why are we not constantly evaluating our investments in workforce development?" Because if I'm constantly training on communication and I need to actually be training on sales enablement, I'm screwed.

[00:17:52] **Tracie Cantu:** Like, I'm obviously not going to have an impactful L&D team. So it's how do we get that process muscle in place that people realize that the tasks they do day to day on an L&D team are in service to a greater arching narrative that's not just, did the business make more money, save more money, or reduce their risk?

[00:18:13] **Dani Johnson:** Okay. Interesting. So how do you get from one to the other? If when you as a consultant walk into a group and you're like, "Ooh, workflows everywhere, we need to create some process here," how do you do that?

[00:18:24] **Tracie Cantu:** I usually start with a simple grouping activity. Like, what is everything together in a bucket? And then we focus on the bucket of what is it serving.

[00:18:32] **Tracie Cantu:** Like, why are you doing this? Well, they have to get trained. Why? I play the five whys. I know it's a horrible toddler game, but it actually works really well, and you don't have to be as annoying in the corporate world to do it. But just really getting them into what the service is. Like, why are we doing these things?

[00:18:48] **Tracie Cantu:** What is the purpose? Workforce development. Okay, let's break it down. Like, how are we managing this process then? Like, what does the encompassing umbrella look like through there? And then we start drafting it out, and it's never gonna be perfect the first few times. I would say you probably sit with it the first 12 to 18 months as just a, an MVP that you're constantly iterating on.

[00:19:09] **Tracie Cantu:** But it starts with bucketing, and actually people seeing the amount of task work they do versus, once again, tactical, strategical. Like, how much day-to-day rinse and repeat stuff could they get off their plate through simplification, automation, or self-service so they can serve the process versus the task?

[00:19:30] **Dani Johnson:** Yeah. In your experience, are those- This might be an unfair question 'cause the answer is probably both, but do you see more organizations leaning on putting a process in place regardless of the people or do you see them changing the people?

[00:19:44] **Tracie Cantu:** That one's loaded because

[00:19:47] **Dani Johnson:** Yeah, sorry.

[00:19:48] **Tracie Cantu:** I- it's okay. No, it's a good one.

[00:19:50] **Tracie Cantu:** The perfect process will not save you from a badly org designed team, and that is a hard one to do because being a person who has been a people leader, you care about your people. You care about them, and you

have to make a decision of what's best for the business, and it might be reducing the instructional t- design team by 25% and reallocating 25% of your FTEs to data analytics and maybe an API engineer, um, or something like that to support the overall process that you need to succeed.

[00:20:27] **Tracie Cantu:** And it's tough, and a lot of people avoid it. They only do it when business as a whole requires a reduction in force. But in my past lives, I've... Anytime a new... Anytime I had turnover on a team, I always reevaluated the structure 'cause it was the one time I still had a blank FTE and I needed to go how best to serve the business.

[00:20:53] **Tracie Cantu:** Would another X serve or should I get a K? And it's not a question that comes naturally to folks who did not come up through operations or with a business background.

[00:21:07] **Dani Johnson:** Okay. So getting this learning operations blueprint in place and understanding your people, your processes, and your technology, theoretically, if you get it right, you should not make stupid purchasing decisions.

[00:21:19] **Dani Johnson:** In your book, for example, you have a story about a team that spent a half a million dollars on a virtual reality pilot without ever really understanding what the business plan is, or the business problem. First, I would love for you to talk about that a little bit, and maybe flesh that story out a little bit, and then I kinda wanna compare it to where we are sitting now on the new types of technology we've got.

[00:21:42] **Tracie Cantu:** I'm gonna have to be very careful around this story, because there is an NDA in place that I may get too close to. Basically, a VR organization was reached out to because there was a whole section, a large section of employees who were more technical, IT focused, who were really struggling because they would not talk to their team.

[00:22:08] **Tracie Cantu:** So the HR team thought it would be really great to buy them all headsets and have them practice being friendly with their teams. I can't go into too much more detail, but it was, one, it was great for the VR team because it really gave them a way to flesh out and explore what they were doing, and they actually got acquired by a much bigger player.

[00:22:31] **Tracie Cantu:** So having that contract with this company worked out really well for them. However, it did not help out the technical teams, because they needed real-life feedback and to see real-life reaction, not be

trained off of VR, who at that stage was more like had the chatbot logic of machine learning, like if they answer this, then go down this.

[00:22:55] **Tracie Cantu:** It was a choose-your-own-adventure, basically, and it just never encompassed the horror of some of the conversations they were having. And I'm just like, really that coulda been, like- Three all-hands and role-playing and like, like, um- That

[00:23:12] **Dani Johnson:** seems a lot cheaper.

[00:23:13] **Tracie Cantu:** Yeah, it was. But it was shiny object syndrome.

[00:23:16] **Dani Johnson:** Yeah.

[00:23:17] **Dani Johnson:** So okay, so let's maybe dive into shiny object syndrome. So I don't know if you've heard of this thing called AI. I hear it's gonna be a pretty big deal. One of the things that we're seeing is that, maybe for some context right now I'm doing a study on L&D and AI, and I'm having a hard time getting people to think past content creation.

[00:23:36] **Dani Johnson:** We're having another round table tomorrow, I'm sure it will be a little bit better, but to this point, most of the conversations that I'm having and most of the feedback that I'm getting is, "It helps me do my job better," which is not a bad thing. Right. We should be using tools where it can make us more efficient and maybe a little bit more effective.

[00:23:51] **Dani Johnson:** What I'm curious about, though, is this idea of shiny object syndrome and AI. So one of the things that I've seen recently is a lot of organizations are implementing, and a lot of vendors are also offering, coaches, which seem like the next version of what you just talked about, the VR training where you go down one path and whatever.

[00:24:09] **Dani Johnson:** And so you can train these agents, these coaches, to sort of respond in a certain way. But I'm curious how you're advising companies and how your book advises companies to think about these new technologies and these new ways of both delivery and creation, given your blueprint.

[00:24:29] **Tracie Cantu:** I'm actually going to shout out Chad Udell, and I forget his co-author on this book, and I apologize, but Shock of the New.

[00:24:37] **Tracie Cantu:** It's one of the things I constantly reach back for when evaluating tech. But there was also something a product manager said to me

when I was working at Meta, and that was, "Tracy, stop coming to me with solutions and come to me with problems. I don't build solutions, I solve problems." And I was like, "Wow."

[00:24:59] **Tracie Cantu:** And it made sense to me because if I come with the problem and I have a co-partner to think through the problem with, we can come up with ideas together that are very different than what I could have come up in a silo, or even within a team. So shiny object syndrome is just that. We fall in love with the solution before we've defined the problem, and then we retrofit.

[00:25:21] **Tracie Cantu:** We try. We engineer problems so that way we can justify the tools. Right now, I feel like AI, I have a love-hate with AI. I see the benefit. It does optimize a lot if you use it smartly, but at the same time, the economics of it, I just, I'm waiting. Like, I'm highly skeptical of the economics of it. That being said, everybody wants to use it.

[00:25:45] **Tracie Cantu:** Everybody's playing keeping up with the Joneses, and everybody's only being superficially innovative, and I will also say I have never seen such an amazing lack of imagination across the culture as AI has shown us. Do more with less. Okay, yay. You're optimizing status quo. Great. You're not somebody I'd like to do business with.

[00:26:10] **Tracie Cantu:** You wanna figure out how to do more, how to go to the next step, give me a call. Not because I can help you necessarily, but because I'm interested, and I'm just an intellectual magpie and a polymath who would love to deep dive on that. But something I advise clients on is all tech is an amplifier.

[00:26:30] **Tracie Cantu:** Garbage in, garbage out, only louder with AI. If your back of house is not in order, if you don't have data hygiene, governance, and process documentation, AI is just... It's like having a small office trash can and going to a dumpster fire trash can. Like, it's just gonna be that much of an amplification of everywhere you're sloppy behind the scenes, and that's also why I think a lot of people are trying to just stick to the content level because it's got quick rewards.

[00:27:03] **Tracie Cantu:** It's very superficially gratifying without having to do all that heavy work behind the scenes, which I think is awesome if we could get somebody to let us roll up our sleeves and do.

[00:27:15] **Dani Johnson:** Yeah, and I know we're talking about mostly operations, and so it makes sense that we would, we would use AI or you would talk about AI in the back.

[00:27:22] **Dani Johnson:** Can I pick your brain maybe for a second on something?

[00:27:24] **Tracie Cantu:** Yeah.

[00:27:25] **Dani Johnson:** One of the things that Stacia and I have been talked about is, talking about is this idea of a hollowed out expert, which means that you now can create things that you couldn't create before, and sometimes you don't have the knowledge that it would've taken to create that thing, therefore you're sort of hollowed out.

[00:27:38] **Dani Johnson:** And it's made me think about expertise quite a bit. I might write a book on this. Expertise, I think, has been misunderstood for a really long time, and L&D departments for a really long time have focused on knowledge and more recently skills to make sure that people are developing, quote, unquote, "expertise."

[00:27:55] **Dani Johnson:** But if you think about expertise In what it actually is, it's so much more. It's your network, it's your professional network, it's context, it's judgment, it's the ability to react in the appropriate ways. It's just reps understanding what's going on in the space. It, it's all of those things, and I'm wondering, in your operations blueprint, do you think about the creation of expertise or, like, a more complete version of learning maybe than, than we traditionally have?

[00:28:21] **Tracie Cantu:** All right, now you're gonna get into my hyperfocus. I'm actually legitimately thinking going back for a doctorate to work on this. We have set ourselves up Right now to have an am- I almost said amazing, a horrifying skills dearth of expertise in about 2030, 2032, when we have promoted the mid-level roles to senior, and we have no bench to go up to middle.

[00:28:49] **Tracie Cantu:** So how does the world change to gather expertise? How do we draw that expertise? Simulations. I'm gonna lean in and say liberal arts educations because it helps you draw conclusions across multiple things. One of the strands I'm following is actually off of David Epstein's book, Range, where he discusses how Kepler created astrophysics, and Kepler used it through

analogical reasoning, where he took very far non-similar domains, said, "This model might work here.

[00:29:25] **Tracie Cantu:** Let me try it, test it, hypothesize, experiment, go forward." And honestly, in my mind, I think expertise has to be taught in that way now, since knowledge is changing so quickly and the world is rapidly evolving, and how we define truth and fact changes generationally. It's not just something for the 21st century.

[00:29:48] **Tracie Cantu:** We need people to have an ability to have a critical thinking and a breadth of experience. So operationally, I have no clue how we do this. I'm seeing some places come in. I'm seeing legislation start. It's still very focused on blue-collar work, but the Skills Act p- made it past the House, and it's now in the Senate that Sam Gi- Giarro put through, which focuses on, like, white collar.

[00:30:15] **Tracie Cantu:** I do quotes for those of you who don't actually see me on a podcast. Work through there, and there's Paul Cavallaro just wrote about in Forbes about the P-Tech model in New York City, working with the P-Tech high schools, colleges, and then companies like IBM to actually build curriculums based off of capabilities and needs for the workforce two, three years down the road, so that way when they get out, they have, like, an internship and paid work to, and stuff to go through.

[00:30:42] **Tracie Cantu:** I think there's a lot of promise moving around, but I don't think anybody knows. I think we're all conjecturing because this is the first time where I can't point to my library behind me and go, "This is my expertise. I have read these 783 books, and I have written 27 papers," versus, "I had AI scan 720 papers and give me an executive summary, and now I'm going to go speak on it."

[00:31:07] **Tracie Cantu:** We're in a really new world. I imagine the only similarity I can find is probably when we got movable type in the West, and there was just this massive flood of information compared to what they had previously, and we're kind of in that fire hose moment too, trying to define, like- What is professional?

[00:31:28] **Tracie Cantu:** What is expertise? How does development still continue when everybody can contribute?

[00:31:33] **Dani Johnson:** So

[00:31:34] **Tracie Cantu:** yeah, hit me up. I will pre-read your book on that, because it is something that I too am utterly fascinated about. But yes, there is a huge Riddler-shaped question mark right behind expertise right now.

[00:31:47] **Dani Johnson:** Interesting.

[00:31:48] **Dani Johnson:** We're gonna take a quick mental break and ask you three questions to help us to get to know you a little bit better as a person. Not everyone is as lucky as myself, Tracy- ... in, in knowing you. The first question is, what was your last Netflix binge?

[00:32:02] **Tracie Cantu:** We have actually ... It's gonna be a Paramount binge, but we've been re-watching Lower Decks, the Star Trek animation.

[00:32:08] **Tracie Cantu:** We're a huge Star Trek house here, and it's just good nerdy laughs. And with the world today, that's kinda what you need at the end of the day.

[00:32:17] **Dani Johnson:** That's awesome. Do you know what I binged this weekend is, I think it's on Prime. It's called Company Retreat.

[00:32:23] **Tracie Cantu:** Oh.

[00:32:24] **Dani Johnson:** Have you heard of this? No. Where everybody in the entire show is an actor except for one dude, and so sent him into this.

[00:32:32] **Dani Johnson:** It is the quirkiest, funniest ... I laughed my butt off. It was so funny. You should watch it. Anyway, theme song. What's your theme song?

[00:32:40] **Tracie Cantu:** It changes from time to time, but recently a song came out by an artist named Meek, M-E-E-K, called Fabulous. And she just basically goes through like, you know, "Taxman took my money, but I feel effing fabulous."

[00:32:54] **Tracie Cantu:** And it's just one of those, like, you acknowledge the bad day and you're still pretty awesome for it.

[00:32:59] **Dani Johnson:** That's awesome. It

[00:33:00] **Tracie Cantu:** pumps you through.

[00:33:01] **Dani Johnson:** And then the final question is, top three items on your bucket list.

[00:33:05] **Tracie Cantu:** I always joke I don't have a bucket list because I'm neurodivergent, and I, I'm always like, "I'm just gonna do it."

[00:33:11] **Tracie Cantu:** But for the sake of the question, I will come up with one. I want to actually, and I didn't get a chance before I moved out of Austin, Texas, but at one of the museums there, they have two original Gutenberg Bibles.

[00:33:25] **Dani Johnson:** Oh, wow.

[00:33:26] **Tracie Cantu:** And if you go through the handling training, which they open to the public, you can actually hold one.

[00:33:33] **Tracie Cantu:** And I teared up when I saw it, and I just want to just hold one in my hands. So that is, like, number one on my bucket list. Number two would actually be getting to be a digital nomad for a while, once the kids are out of high school. And then three, I would love to do a reading and writing retreat in Scotland.

[00:33:56] **Tracie Cantu:** I see them come over my social media feed so much, and I can't think of anything better than to spend like three weeks in the Highlands reading and writing and just getting to research and be a nerd and be in such delightfully moody and Celtic environments. Yeah.

[00:34:15] **Dani Johnson:** That's amazing. I love all three of those so much.

[00:34:18] **Dani Johnson:** We're gonna link to all the books that you've mentioned and also to that song, Fabulous by Meeks, in the notes. All right, now let's get to the good stuff. Clearly, L&D is changing, and I wanna talk a little bit about what happens next. So your book was written, I, I'm assuming, for sort of like where we are right now and where we need to go in the immediate future.

[00:34:37] **Dani Johnson:** I'm seeing so many theories out there about where it's gonna go and what it's gonna be. I'm seeing L&D teams just decimated, and I'm wondering, do you have a theory of where L&D is going to go and what it's gonna be in 5 to 10 years?

[00:34:51] **Tracie Cantu:** It requires a lot of cognitive dissonance because I think there are two contradictory outcomes that will both be true.

[00:35:00] **Tracie Cantu:** I think we'll get wiped off the org chart. I do think that we will become workforce development focused that way. We're looking in on like workforce planning and operations and thinking workforce capability modeling forward, much more OD kind of related and how we build that in advance. But I don't know where that sits.

[00:35:23] **Tracie Cantu:** It could sit in HR, it could sit in ops, it could sit in a variety of places depending on the industry or organization. And then at the same time, I think there is not a shadow L&D, but a shadow of L&D's former glory still existing called L&D, and all they do is produce decks and e-learnings. They are just a little mini Simon and Schuster sitting within an org who updates people's decks and gets job aids, and they just do, "Yes, ma'am.

[00:35:57] **Tracie Cantu:** Yes, sir Content production. And they're kind of preserved in there. And I don't think there's anything wrong with either. I just think that the L&D that we have known and loved through the late 1900s and early 20s is not going to be the same thing come, like, 2030. And it's a split, but I do think both will hold true, that one side of us goes for workforce development and enablement, and one side of us just stays in content production.

[00:36:29] **Dani Johnson:** Do you see organizations that have workforce development right now, or is it just, are you talking about literally a split of the people that are gonna do the more strategic stuff, they're called something else, and they have different goals and measures, and the other part of L&D is doing the "Yes, ma'am, yes, sir" types of stuff?

[00:36:45] **Tracie Cantu:** I think the business is going to require it. I'm starting to see people slip it into talent management. The new acquisitions that came up just the past few weeks, like, I think it's AMS, please correct me if I'm wrong, but with Korn Ferry, talent acquisition is buying a lot of AI skills capability and putting that in the hiring process.

[00:37:07] **Tracie Cantu:** And it really makes me curious, if we're defining capability and skills and what's acceptable before they walk through the door, and talent acquisition is the judge and jury on that, what does L&D do? And then talent management on the other end is the grader, and then places people and assigns them, sorts them and assigns them to houses, and figures out where they go next.

[00:37:32] **Tracie Cantu:** What does L&D do? If we don't step up, and I think those are the folks who go into workforce enablement and workforce development, is those who step up and say, "No, we understand how to develop people. What we need now is to develop ourselves to be better business partners and fit into a systemic talent environment," versus the three paths that never seem to cross these days, which is shenanigans.

[00:37:59] **Tracie Cantu:** But I think those who stay in the three siloed model keep a traditional content-driven L&D. Those who treat talent as a systemic issue end up with, like, workforce development business partners, how, like, HR transformed many years ago.

[00:38:15] **Dani Johnson:** I think this is so interesting. So this has been a question on my mind forever, but we asked 220 HR leaders, or sorry, L&D leaders earlier this year, we asked them questions about what's gonna go on and, and interestingly, I've heard both sides, right?

[00:38:30] **Dani Johnson:** So I've heard you're gonna be absorbed into talent. I've also heard you're gonna do the stupid stuff while the rest of it goes into the rest of the organization. The thing that I Question, and it could be that we just haven't caught up, it hasn't caught up yet, but I'm not actually seeing that. I'm hearing a lot of rumors about it, but I'm not actually seeing it in organizations.

[00:38:49] **Dani Johnson:** I'm seeing organizations being decimated, but I'm also very curious about whose job is it then to ensure that we have a skilled workforce? So, so talent management is all about putting people in the right house and the sorting, as you mentioned, talent acquisition is about bringing the, quote-unquote, talent in-house.

[00:39:06] **Dani Johnson:** But if you get rid of L&D, then who, who takes overall responsibility for ensuring that we've got the right skills in the organization?

[00:39:14] **Tracie Cantu:** And this is where I think the bad decision-making is happening, because right now businesses are making budgetary decisions. They are totally focused on a bottom line and shareholder satisfaction in a highly riotous economic environment.

[00:39:29] **Tracie Cantu:** They are stealing from Peter to pay Paul, in all reality, and that bill comes due probably in the 2030s, and it probably our first hint of it is that mid-level talent gap

[00:39:42] **Dani Johnson:** Yeah. I was just gonna say, those two things are, are connected, right? So if we, if we don't have someone looking out for the skill development on that bottom level and building judgment and, and helping people build all the things that they need, there will be a gigantic gap in the middle, and it will be because nobody's looking out for it.

[00:39:58] **Dani Johnson:** I keep on, 'cause I've heard this over and over again, I heard it at Cornerstone's thing, well, L&D's just gonna go away. I've heard it in a couple of podcasts, I've heard it... I'm hearing it everywhere, but what I can't figure out is, I don't have a dog in the fight, I'm not in L&D, I can just write about it. But what I can't figure out is if that happens, then whose job is it to make sure that you have the skills in the organization?

[00:40:17] **Dani Johnson:** 'Cause right now it's not talent, it's not talent management right now. And I'm not sure that the organization understands that this is a very big, huge problem. I think some of them do, like when you talk to Heather Stefanski at, um, and Lisa Christiansen for that matter, at McKinsey, they get it. There are a couple of organizations that get it, but, but by and large, I'm not seeing panic, and it, it's interesting to me.

[00:40:39] **Tracie Cantu:** This is a very pragmatic statement, but I believe it. It's that change doesn't happen until the pain and friction of staying the same is greater than the pain and friction of making change. So right now, the pain and friction of losing L&D, uh, like the bill hasn't come due, and they're just riding on 21 months APR, no interest, just the bill will be later.

[00:41:10] **Tracie Cantu:** The later. And they're like, "That's another board's problem when that issue comes up, it's for the shareholders." And I really think that is what is happening in this environment, is they are just turning blinders to it, passing the buck, and be like, "By that time we'll figure out how AI can do the middle level."

[00:41:27] **Tracie Cantu:** And they could be blowing smoke up their tuchus, they could not. But I honestly, when you start talking with executive level and bigger businesses and like McKinsey and such like that, they're starting to get nervous. Like, the numbers are starting to hit the paper, and they're like, "Well, if we calculate out five years-" Oh,

[00:41:48] **Dani Johnson:** crap In trouble.

[00:41:49] **Dani Johnson:** Yeah

[00:41:50] **Tracie Cantu:** But not a lot of businesses are in that category of those F100s, so they're not even thinking about it. They're just rolling in the savings and high share prices. I hate to be so pessimistic about it, but I really think that's the environment we're in right now, and it's going to just swing the pendulum the other way when all of a sudden they're like, "We need development," like the pandemic did when we all had to work from home.

[00:42:14] **Tracie Cantu:** And unfortunately, every time you swing a pendulum so far, it has to course-correct again. So we're just gonna be back in this cycle, and God willing, we can at least break the cycle next time or at least redefine ourselves. I believe so many L&D people are willing to redefine themselves as workforce enablement because it's where their passion lies and what they really wanna do.

[00:42:37] **Tracie Cantu:** So I am pragmatically optimistic, as Obama says.

[00:42:42] **Dani Johnson:** I love it. We're coming up on time, and I wanna ask you one more question with respect to this discussion, and then we'll ask you our, our final question that we ask all people who come on our podcast. I'm really curious about bets, because everybody seems to be placing bets.

[00:42:57] **Dani Johnson:** You personally in your consulting practice and in the thought leadership that you do, what's one bet that you're gonna, that you're placing right now that you don't know is gonna pay off?

[00:43:05] **Tracie Cantu:** I am not counting L&D out.

[00:43:08] **Dani Johnson:** Okay.

[00:43:08] **Tracie Cantu:** I love a good redemption narrative and arc, and I am still putting my bet in there.

[00:43:17] **Tracie Cantu:** Like client-wise, I have leaned a lot harder on CFOs, CHROs, COOs, like at that level in work, but I still reach out to L&D. I still show up in L&D environments because I still think there are people who care a lot Who are passionate about the work and passionate about the workforce. And honestly, like we were just talking about, the pendulum has swung so much to, like, we don't need L&D, AI can do all of it.

[00:43:47] **Tracie Cantu:** And if you've been through enough of these cycles, you know the pendulum's gonna swing the other way, and I really think the 2030s are gonna pay off there, but I don't know. But I'm betting that L&D is

going to be the same, but different. Like I said, there's cognitive dissonance in that, but I think that they'll still be around in the 2030s.

[00:44:06] **Tracie Cantu:** It just may not be what we expected coming into the 2020s.

[00:44:10] **Dani Johnson:** One final question for you. We ask everybody this question as they're leaving our podcast. Why do you do the work that you do?

[00:44:16] **Tracie Cantu:** Short version, and then I'll tell the story behind it. No one should have to learn how to do the job by learning everything the hard way.

[00:44:23] **Tracie Cantu:** My first 90 days working for Continental Airlines, a plane landed. Luckily, it was only a 19-seater, little prop from Cleveland. They didn't load any luggage for all 19 passengers, so they were all needing to make baggage claims. Brand new. This is still green screen, like Continental used. Like, you needed to know...

[00:44:44] **Tracie Cantu:** Like, I think it was easier to launch a rocket to the moon than it would've been to make a baggage claim in the system, and I still, like me and another trainee, a supervisor called us up and was like, "Hey, hey, come on up and help." And he was like, "Oh, hold on, I'll be back." And he went and locked the door. 19 angry people, no one got luggage, and you put two brand-new people up there who are literally just going through the book bit by bit trying to figure it out.

[00:45:08] **Tracie Cantu:** And that was the moment where I realized this is not how you develop people. This is how you set up an actual judicial case for premeditated murder, is what I initially thought in my mind. But then I was like, "This is wrong. This is not how people should learn. You shouldn't Learn by messing up. You need friction.

[00:45:26] **Tracie Cantu:** I get that. I can hear, uh, all the practitioners getting on my case, but, like, every item shouldn't be the hard way, and that's why I do what I do because if I can take or help somebody learn something 50% less stressful, then it was worth showing up, and hopefully they will pay it forward as well.

[00:45:48] **Dani Johnson:** Thank you, Tracy.

[00:45:49] **Dani Johnson:** Thanks for being with me, and just thanks for your friendship over the years.

[00:45:52] **Tracie Cantu:** Yeah. Thank you. I appreciate it, Dani.

[00:45:54] **Intro:** Thanks for listening. If this podcast got you thinking differently about how work happens, that's what we're here for.

[00:46:00] **Dani Johnson:** We dig into these topics every week in our research and in the RedThread community.

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