#WS 138

[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:** Welcome to Workplace Stories.

[00:00:23] **Dani Johnson:** My name is Dani Johnson.

[00:00:25] **Stacia Garr:** And I'm Stacia Garr.

[00:00:26] **Dani Johnson:** And we just had the best conversation with Marci Paino and Lawrence Stevens at Cisco. Marci's the vice president of Enterprise Learning and Growth, which is basically their chief learning officer, and Lawrence is the director of Cisco Skills Strategy and AI-Powered Learning Ecosystem.

[00:00:43] **Dani Johnson:** Stacia, what stood out to you in this conversation?

[00:00:46] **Stacia Garr:** So we have been looking forward to this conversation for-

[00:00:49] **Dani Johnson:** A year ... months,

[00:00:50] **Stacia Garr:** a year, whatever.

[00:00:51] **Dani Johnson:** A year, yeah.

[00:00:52] **Stacia Garr:** A long time. What I love about summer is we get a chance to do some of these, 'cause we finally get them done. Anyway, so what I loved and thought was different and what we don't typically hear were a few things.

[00:01:04] **Stacia Garr:** First, they talked about designing their skills efforts in a cross-functional manner from the beginning. Marci started talking about talent acquisition and workforce planning and talent management, and, like, we don't hear that. We usually hear it starts as, like, a siloed idea in one part of HR, and then kind of others get brought along.

[00:01:26] **Stacia Garr:** That's not how they did this. They built it cross-functionally from the beginning, which I thought was super cool. The second thing that we don't typically hear is they talked about data, and a lot about data. You know, a lot of times we'll ask the learning folks question about, "Hey, how are you using data?"

[00:01:40] **Stacia Garr:** And they're like... Not that it's not a real answer, but it's not, doesn't have depth. We couldn't go deep enough with Lawrence and Marci on this question of how they're using data and how the data are structured and all this sort of stuff, and they gave a really nice example of what they're building that aligns to what we put in our skills data architecture study.

[00:02:01] **Stacia Garr:** So that was super exciting. The third thing I wanna talk about is when we think about our six elements of a skill strategy, we put scope and purpose at the center, which they did talk about, but then we've also got, like, culture as one of those items, and that almost never comes up in these conversations.

[00:02:18] **Stacia Garr:** But they very intentionally leverage culture in a few different ways, and I loved hearing them talk about that really as a core part of what activated their skills strategy. What about for you, Dani?

[00:02:30] **Dani Johnson:** Yeah, I mean, just to piggyback on that culture idea, it was fascinating. So Marci is, man, she gets stuff done.

[00:02:36] **Dani Johnson:** She came into the organization and said, "Okay, we've gotta start with culture. Let me sit down with every member of the executive leadership team and make sure I understand where they're going. Let's get guiding principles in place, and then let's start building the skills strategy and the learning strategy from there."

[00:02:50] **Dani Johnson:** Which is, again, not very common. And then as you mentioned, she looked cross-functionally to make sure that what they were building was going to work for everybody, which you just don't see very often. She also, they have built a really good relationship with IT. They've both used off-the-shelf stuff and built stuff internally, and so they understand the importance of that relationship with IT, both to make sure that whatever they're dreaming up aligns with where IT is going, but also because ID- IT is basically building stuff.

[00:03:15] **Dani Johnson:** They're the product owner, but IT is the one that is actually building the stuff for them. And so I thought As we hear this

conversation with HR needing to be more closely aligned with IT, I thought this was an excellent example of how it works pretty well.

[00:03:30] **Stacia Garr:** Yeah, she talked about that triangle of it being them as the product owner, internal IT as the product builder, and then their external vendor partners as kind of a further partner, and all three of them as being s-essential.

[00:03:44] **Dani Johnson:** Yeah, for sure. I think this whole podcast was a very good example of how to build trust in an organization. She came in fresh, Lawrence came in fresh, and they just person by person told them how, what their vision was and how they were gonna do it, got everybody on board, made sure that they were shipping things that could help in the meantime while they were building the credibility they needed to execute the whole thing.

[00:04:05] **Dani Johnson:** It was just... It's a fantastic story. It's probably one of the best skills stories we've ever heard.

[00:04:10] **Stacia Garr:** Yeah, I agree. And I think one part of it, too, that we didn't touch on in the actual episode, but I think there was a, at least from the outside, appears to be a lack of ego around who gets credit for this thing.

[00:04:25] **Stacia Garr:** You know, at the very end, Marcia talks about the importance of ruthless prioritization, and sometimes what HR prioritizes isn't what IT prioritizes or what the business prioritizes, and you may need to compromise. You may need to cut some things in an effort to make sure that you get the thing done that will deliver...

[00:04:43] **Stacia Garr:** What did she call it? Minimal lovable product, you know, to get to where you're going, and then to be able to iterate on that. Lack of ego really struck me.

[00:04:51] **Dani Johnson:** Yeah, for sure. This is a fantastic episode. We highly recommend that you listen to it wherever you get your podcasts. If you like it, please leave us a review and share it with your friends.

[00:05:01] **Dani Johnson:** And if you really, really like it, then visit us at redthreadresearch.com and join our community.

[00:05:15] **Dani Johnson:** Marcia and Lawrence, welcome to Workplace Stories.

[00:05:17] **Marci Paino:** Thanks for having us.

[00:05:18] **Lawrence Stevens:** Yeah, thank you. It's great to be here.

[00:05:20] **Dani Johnson:** We're excited to have you both. To get started, why don't you tell us a little bit about yourselves and what you do at Cisco? And Marcia, let's start with you.

[00:05:28] **Marci Paino:** Sure. Marcia Paino. I'm the chief learning officer here at Cisco, and VP of Enterprise Learning and Growth, and I have a really unique role because I was hired, uh, two years ago to really reimagine and transform learning for the company, but I wear a second hat, and I have the pleasure of leading the AI Workforce Consortium, which is a coalition of 11 tech-leading companies who have come together to study the impact of AI on the workforce, and we publish our research alongside resources, playbooks, frameworks that really help the communities that we serve think about how they can securely, ethically, and responsibly adapt and adopt AI within their own workflow.

[00:06:08] **Dani Johnson:** That's awesome. We're gonna drop the links to those resources in our show notes as well, if that's okay with you, Marcia.

[00:06:13] **Marci Paino:** Yeah, absolutely.

[00:06:15] **Dani Johnson:** Awesome. Lawrence, what about you?

[00:06:17] **Lawrence Stevens:** I'm Lawrence Stevens. I'm on Marcia's team. I'm the director of our learning and skills ecosystem, so I have our company-wide skills strategy, and then the sort of tech stack and ecosystem that helps power that and get the learning to our employees, as well as get the skills data across the ecosystem.

[00:06:35] **Dani Johnson:** So one of the reasons that we wanted to talk to you and talk to you both together is because you partner so closely on something that isn't necessarily traditional learning or skills the way that we're seeing it in other organizations. But it started in learning, which is fascinating to us. Why should we listen to you on this particular topic?

[00:06:53] **Marci Paino:** Well, for me personally, I have been in this space for Gosh, almost 25 years at this point, and have been really studying learning strategy and skill strategy and driving transformation at scale. Before I came to Cisco, I was at Western Digital looking at the end-to-end employee career experience. Before that, I was at American Express.

[00:07:14] **Marci Paino:** Spent a few years in consulting, so was at Accenture and then a couple of boutique consulting companies, and started my career as an instructional designer. So have really experienced every facet of learning, talent management, talent development. And Lawrence and I have been partnering for the two years that I've been here, and really being thought leaders in the space.

[00:07:33] **Marci Paino:** We've talked a lot about skills and how we really need to move towards a skills-first culture, and I think the industry has been talking about it for years, but no one's been successful. And so our partnership has really allowed us to think about this at scale and actually execute on the vision that we have.

[00:07:51] **Marci Paino:** That's super helpful, broader context. Can you maybe give us a little bit more, which is why do you see these two concepts, skills and learning, really going together? I mean, think a lot of times initiatives come out of learning when we're talking about upskilling and reskilling and such, but I think you all have taken a little bit of a different approach here.

[00:08:11] **Marci Paino:** So can you share a bit of background on that?

[00:08:14] **Marci Paino:** Yeah. I think we see skills as being sort of the core of our learning strategy, and so it really is sort of our engine that gives us the insights around the skills that our workforce needs to develop in order to be prepared for the future of work. So we see that really as central to our end-to-end learning strategy.

[00:08:35] **Marci Paino:** So we wanna move from a role-based type of learning culture to a skills first, where we have kind of this dynamic engine that gives us the insights around how roles are evolving based off of skills, and then we give targeted learning based off of the skills that we need to develop across our workforce.

[00:08:54] **Marci Paino:** We also see that skills engine as being part of a shared ecosystem, so we partner very closely with our friends in workforce planning, in workforce movement, and talent acquisition, really because this engine should feed the end-to-end employee life cycle.

[00:09:10] **Lawrence Stevens:** Maybe I would add to that. I think skills has been really interesting for us because it's almost acting as this sort of universal currency or a data layer that it's something that cross-functional teams that maybe haven't necessarily worked together before or have sort of bumped into

each other and normally sort of have, why would a talent acquisition team work with a learning team?

[00:09:32] **Lawrence Stevens:** But it's sort of this universal currency that everyone values. It's created this sort of naturally collaborative environment, and I think it works both ways. It's got other teams, they want the skills data, but they also want to partner with us versus just saying, "Give it to us." So it's really, it's kind of promoted lots of cross-team collaboration, and that has then helped us sort of almost been like a rally cry to help us align our strategies and thinkings and timing and sequencing of initiatives.

[00:10:01] **Lawrence Stevens:** So it's been a really good unlock for us to all be working on something that's sort of universal across the teams.

[00:10:08] **Marci Paino:** Yeah, that's one of the things we've found in our research as a benefit of skills is, yes, there's the actually what you do with the data and how you change your approach to people, but even just the alignment across different functions and having clarity on what are we all working towards can be one of the biggest initial wins.

[00:10:29] **Marci Paino:** So it's cool to hear that you're experiencing that at Cisco.

[00:10:32] **Dani Johnson:** I think that the skills initiative started in the learning function, is that correct, within Cisco? It wasn't started by somebody else and then adopted by you necessarily. That initiative was actually being led by L&D.

[00:10:44] **Marci Paino:** Yeah. Cisco has tried in the past to do skills work in other groups.

[00:10:49] **Marci Paino:** We took a fresh, brand-new approach to our engagement, so we really put together a strategy around how do we get skills intelligence in a way that can inform what strategic capabilities we need to build across our organization, so there is a direct tie of taking our learning strategy and the business strategy and making sure they are directly aligned so that we can make sure that we offer people the most important learning that they need to build the skills that are most important to drive our business strategy forward.

[00:11:20] **Dani Johnson:** I think you might have just answered this, Marcie, but what's your philosophy with respect to employee development, especially now that AI is on the scene?

[00:11:28] **Marci Paino:** Yeah. So I think continuous learning is, like, the lifeblood of every workforce, and so when you kind of study high performance cultures and companies, you see those that are embracing that, like, learning every day as part of your job responsibilities as being critical to success.

[00:11:42] **Marci Paino:** I think AI amplifies it, because AI isn't just a new technology to learn. It's actually challenging us to learn new ways of working. And so it really is at the core making us rethink and reimagine how we work, how we collaborate, how we partner. We talk a lot about, like, blurred lines, and how do you work within an ecosystem where that's happening more and more.

[00:12:07] **Marci Paino:** It's really at the heart of all of that, right? And that's part of the reason why we really need to have the skills intelligence to drive what people should be focusing on, right? And I think the big thing that is really important, a lot of people say, like, "Well, I don't have time. I don't have time." But to me, learning is a job requirement.

[00:12:24] **Marci Paino:** It is part of your job description. You have to be continuously learning the skills for your role and your job to make sure that you can be continuously successful. I really see it as being the lifeblood.

[00:12:38] **Lawrence Stevens:** I think it's such an interesting time to be in the learning space, because Obviously, we have to help upskill our employees, and I think the business is asking how do we keep at pace with the innovation.

[00:12:50] **Lawrence Stevens:** We're upskilling for AI, but then we're also able to leverage AI ourselves in our own ecosystem. So it's sort of both sides of the coin. We're building an ecosystem powered by AI while we're helping upskill the employee base in the world of AI. Such a sort of unique time to be here. Given that it's complicated to solve, but you get to sort of shape and steer and be part of all of those conversations, and I think it's actually helped us get closer to the business.

[00:13:13] **Lawrence Stevens:** So you, when you sit around with, uh, learning peers, and we always say, "Hey, let's get really close to the business, and what business problems are we solving?" Versus solving HR's problems or what, what HR thinks the business needs. I think this is the best time ever for us to be in a space where we can be so proximate to the business and really understand them, understand their strategy, and be right there with them, with the data, with the insights.

[00:13:36] **Marci Paino:** I think to Lawrence's point, it is an interesting time for the learning industry because we've been talking about personalization in the flow learning, like for over a decade, right? And we haven't had the ability to actually achieve it, and now with AI, we do. That's the journey that we've embarked on.

[00:13:54] **Marci Paino:** Let's maybe step back to the beginning of that journey or at least Marcie, to your beginning of this journey. And I'd love to know a bit about when you first walked in a few years ago into this role, what did you encounter? So like what was there and where did you start from? And can you also talk a little bit about, you know, why the organization had decided to do this now?

[00:14:17] **Marci Paino:** The why really did stem from wanting to be leaders in the AI space and the ELT recognizing that learning and continuous skilling was at the center of all of that. So that is why they, you know, formed this position and hired me to come in and really reimagine learning. There's a couple core elements when I walked in.

[00:14:35] **Marci Paino:** So the first, I think, is the culture. So our culture when I came in was very much like employee choice without a lot of accountability, right? So there's a lot, a lot of things that our employees could take advantage of, but there was no structure around that. There was no accountability or rally cry from the organization to take advantage of all of it and tie it into your career, your performance, and how you prepare for the future of work, or how you actually shape the future of work.

[00:15:01] **Marci Paino:** That's the first thing. So we thought about that, and we defined new company guiding principles and leadership expectations that really defined the ways of working in the future, and we underpinned those with skills. So that gave us sort of the formula of what we focus in on from a development perspective first.

[00:15:19] **Marci Paino:** The other component was our operating model. So we are a little bit decentralized, and there's a lot of fragmentation around our ecosystem, so there's a lot of disparate-- There was a lot of disparate platforms and just different learning teams across the organization who weren't talking to each other at all.

[00:15:37] **Marci Paino:** And so that was kind of another piece. And then I mentioned the ecosystem. Our tech stack when I walked in was quite dated. So we had a 20-year-old on-prem LMS solution that we actually had a lot of other

apps kind of bolted onto to make it deliver. And so the journey has been kind of reimagining everything from the core infrastructure to our operating model to our culture.

[00:16:00] **Marci Paino:** But then obviously, we also have to drive the experiences across the workforce at scale.

[00:16:06] **Dani Johnson:** So I'm interested in your vision. You walked into this situation that wasn't necessarily the way that you thought it would be. How did you come up with a vision for where you are now and where you think you can take this?

[00:16:18] **Marci Paino:** So the vision work started with a current state analysis, so really understanding, partnering with key cross-functional groups like procurement, so we could understand what is our spend on learning, what are the vendors that we partner with, analyzing our portfolio of offerings, and really understanding what do we have on the truck today and how is that actually helping us to achieve the business strategy, looking at that, the operating model and all the disparate learning teams, and then looking at the platform ecosystem.

[00:16:49] **Marci Paino:** And so those were sort of the first things that we looked at and just got a lay of the land current state. And then we did a lot of external benchmarking, and so pulled in a lot of data and insights, and then crafted kind of this vision around, you know, our North Star is how do we make sure that we are preparing our workforce for the future of work.

[00:17:07] **Marci Paino:** And so we broke that vision down into three strategic pillars. The first being around strategic capabilities, and that really is us defining what skills do we need to build in order to drive our business strategy forward. The second was around always on modern learning, and so really thinking about how do we drive much more experiential learning in the flow of work, and what do those learning experiences look like when they are AI powered, right?

[00:17:35] **Marci Paino:** And so really getting that, the tools in the fingertips of our workforce. And then the third piece is a unified skilling environment. And that is our kind of thinking about where people go to do their skilling and giving them one place to do that. And so we took out the old platform. We brought in one new unified tech stack with our skills intelligence at the core of it, which now gives us the foundation for us to drive towards that personalization in the flow type of learning

[00:18:06] **Dani Johnson:** How did you determine which skills to focus on?

[00:18:08] **Dani Johnson:** You mentioned that one of the first big parts was deciding where the organization is going and what skills the workforce needed in order to get them there. But how did you do that part? Where did you find information for those skills?

[00:18:20] **Marci Paino:** Yeah. So we started with the culture c- piece, and so we worked with the ELT to define new guiding principles for our company.

[00:18:29] **Marci Paino:** And so we did, again, external benchmark, internal listening, and then I sat down, I interviewed every single one of our ELT members around how they saw their organizations and our company as a whole evolving and how we needed to work together differently. And so we took all that insights, and then we were able to...

[00:18:47] **Marci Paino:** Actually, Lawrence and, uh, one of our AI engineers used AI to synthesize everything. And so what we came up with were three new guiding principles, and there were behavior statements that described what those guiding principles were. And then we took that, and then we went and we defined what skills do you need to demonstrate or develop to actually be showing those behaviors in your day-to-day work.

[00:19:08] **Marci Paino:** So we started there, and that was sort of company-wide, and we knew that that would be kind of our first step into that skills-first approach. The second was around AI. So we knew that the company, the workforce needed to learn how to use AI. And so we aligned with our cross-functional partners in workforce planning and talent acquisition, and we defined personas so that we used the same language across all of our organizations.

[00:19:35] **Marci Paino:** And then those personas had skills mapped to them. So based off of you being an everyday user that's more on the non-technical side of the spectrum, these are the skills you need to build. And then we built that all the way out to the, those that are the more technical experts and what skills do they need to build out.

[00:19:52] **Marci Paino:** And then that gives us the blueprint of what learning we need to create in order for them to build those skills. So those were the first couple of steps. And then in parallel to that, Lawrence and team were working with the business to take our job architecture and map it to skills and have the

business validate it so that we could start to build out that skills intelligence engine that we've talked about.

[00:20:13] **Lawrence Stevens:** One of the things I'll add to that, and hopefully this is helpful for people listening, you know, one of the big tensions everyone tackling skills has, it takes time, and you often don't have time, and the business is not patient enough to wait for months or quarters of mapping. So getting those first skills Hooked up and linked up to both the guiding principles, which are kind of our version of the enterprise skills, and then for flagship programming, a big focus there on AI, almost bought us time and credibility to then go, "Okay, you guys can all consume this.

[00:20:45] **Lawrence Stevens:** You can link programs and enterprise-wide messaging to that, get traction. We're busy over here now doing the next wave of this." We sort of got us out of this risk of like, "Come back in a year and we'll have all the skills mapped." So it was super helpful, and I know when I talk to a lot of peers and they're like, "Where do we start?"

[00:21:02] **Lawrence Stevens:** And, "We have enough time," and, "We're supposed to deliver this by tomorrow," you know, it's, it's just, I think it was really helpful for us to go that, in that sequence.

[00:21:10] **Marci Paino:** Yeah. I think that's a really important call-out. Demonstrating sort of like what does it mean to be a skills first culture was really important to us, and it's sort of like how can you show progress in that space while you're doing some of the under the hood work that doesn't have necessarily something to show the ELT?

[00:21:28] **Marci Paino:** We also had alignment from our ELT around what roles to prioritize in that mapping exercise, and so we had their buy-in from the get-go around kind of this approach and making sure that we were prioritizing what they wanted us to. And that g- gave us that inlet into, like, the business. Now that we have that engine built out, now we can take the business strategies from each of the ELT members, combine that with our skills intelligence, and then define strategic capabilities.

[00:21:56] **Marci Paino:** And so those are the groups of skills that each gr- each function needs to develop. And so we are moving from having sort of leadership type of skills, which we will continue to build, but being able to also have the more technical, functional, business driven skills and getting very refined around how we define them.

[00:22:18] **Marci Paino:** And again, then we make sure that we have the right learning to build those skills, which is why that strategy is so important. It's completely integrated.

[00:22:27] **Marci Paino:** Marcia, I wanna understand how you got to the decision of prioritizing in that way, because I... We've probably done, I don't know, many tens of interviews on skills, and I don't know that I've heard anybody who's done it in quite that approach of kind of enterprise skills/behaviors/whatever you wanna call it, and then kind of cascading down from there.

[00:22:53] **Marci Paino:** So was it an intention, like, hey, we're gonna need to b- buy some time to be able to do that? I know that was an output, but was that, like, from the beginning? Like, what was kind of that scope and purpose, like you, Lawrence, if you think about our model around this, what was the scope and purpose from the beginning, and then how did that translate into this actual approach?

[00:23:13] **Marci Paino:** It was intentional because, you know, based off of my experience and research of other companies, you can't drive transformation at scale if you don't have the culture matching it. And so we knew we needed to start with culture. So it wasn't a buy us time, it was, we have to make sure that the ELT is defining the new ways of working, and they're bought into it.

[00:23:39] **Marci Paino:** And that actually is a, you know, that's a lesson that I've learned throughout my career in previous organizations. So took a very similar approach in my Western Digital days to define our leadership capability framework there, but we interviewed every ELT member and made sure that they felt like they were a part of building it, because then they can talk the talk and walk the walk.

[00:24:00] **Marci Paino:** And so every company all-hands, they're talking about the guiding principles. They're highlighting how they're seeing them demonstrated in the day-to-day. And so they have an ownership over them, and we knew in order for us to drive that culture transformation, it needed to start with the top. So we established cross-functional partnerships from the get-go.

[00:24:16] **Marci Paino:** The definition of the guiding principles and the leadership expectations was something that, that I did in partnership with AP, who oversees talent management. And so the learning performance combo, which is talent management, talent development, w- was an intentional partnership from the very first day.

[00:24:33] **Marci Paino:** That was kind of the first, and then the partnership with workforce planning and talent acquisition was also a very important one that we had because of thinking about AI. And so we saw this opportunity of saying, "Hey, we know the workforce has to evolve, and we know that we play a critical role in that."

[00:24:51] **Marci Paino:** Right? Like, we're at the core of everything. Like, we have to teach everyone new ways of working, collaborating, you know, working with new tools. And so we knew we were at the core of that, but we knew we weren't the only one who was gonna actually be able to deliver it. And so we worked across the functions, and a lot of the kind of early days of defining that vision and that strategy involved me doing a lot of listening with my partners in those spaces.

[00:25:15] **Marci Paino:** So it was not something that was solely driven by the learning function on our own. We have been partnering cross-functionally since the get-go.

[00:25:24] **Lawrence Stevens:** But I, I will add, if you were to ask what one of Marci's superpowers is, she is very good at sort of cross-functional partnering. And I, I do think to your credit, like, there's the opportunity, but then there's the ability to do it really successful.

[00:25:37] **Lawrence Stevens:** And I think that's also down to you building great credibility, listening, partnering, factoring in other teams' ideas, and sort of like co-ownership. So I, I think that's also part of the reason why it's been successful for us

[00:25:49] **Marci Paino:** I wanna ask a question that's kind of underneath all of this, which is around data.

[00:25:55] **Marci Paino:** Data's essential to all of this, right? So what I'd love to understand is what did you build? What was kind of the plumbing? You mentioned that, you know, the, probably the biggest part of this was in phase three, which is all of this plumbing, to feed all of this on the more technical side. So can you share with us how you approached that?

[00:26:15] **Marci Paino:** Where'd you get the data? How do you make sure it's valid? How'd you integrate it? How'd you push it? Like, all my data questions. All of them. All the good stuff.

[00:26:26] **Marci Paino:** Yeah. And then take it in as many pieces as you want. Let me, uh, start, and then I'll pass it over to Lawrence to get into the methodology stuff. But

[00:26:33] **Marci Paino:** you asked me the question about, like, you know, when I walked in a couple years ago, what was the environment like? And I kind of talked a bit about, like, disparate platforms.

[00:26:42] **Marci Paino:** Like, we did that analysis, and we have, like, actual numbers. I think, Lawrence, there was, like, 17 different platforms that we found at the time. Just learning

[00:26:50] **Marci Paino:** platforms?

[00:26:51] **Marci Paino:** And then when we looked at our content portfolio, we calculated over 220,000 learning activities, and we get subscription libraries, right?

[00:27:02] **Marci Paino:** So we get Udemy and LinkedIn, et cetera. And so every one of those had a different language by way of data. So the metadata across our ecosystem was completely fragmented when we started, and so we knew we needed to do a complete cleanse of our taxonomy and come up with what that standard was and then start to govern it.

[00:27:26] **Marci Paino:** So that was just a big undertaking in and of itself, and a lot of it got cleaned up through our platform implementation. But aside from sort of the basic, you know, metadata across the learning ecosystem, building the skills intelligence was an intentional methodology that Lawrence and team led forward.

[00:27:47] **Lawrence Stevens:** I'll also cast back a little bit to when I was starting. I originally joined Cisco primarily just to lead the skills strategy, and as you do your sort of classic listening tour and try and understand

[00:28:03] **Lawrence Stevens:** big problems, it became really clear really quickly that, one, the problem was bigger than just skills. It, it was more around, like, we just didn't really understand our employees from, like, a data perspective. So understand them from, like- I know all these bits and pieces of data around you, and it flows into the right part of the ecosystem.

[00:28:18] **Lawrence Stevens:** That's kind of what I mean by that. And so then you think about what Marcia was saying, and then we have this horribly

fragmented ecosystem. So like what little profile information you do have is like scattered across the entire ecosystem. You're doing things over here and the, the activity's not being reflected in a different part.

[00:28:37] **Lawrence Stevens:** So instead of start of thinking, okay, one, how do we improve that? So started thinking towards one, obviously, if we begin to think about consolidating the learning platform, that helps get-- begin to get data into one place. Skills data is not the only data as well. That's really important to sort of... It's a really key part of, quote unquote, 'a profile around someone.'

[00:28:57] **Lawrence Stevens:** What skills do you have? What aspirations do you have? What skills are you trying to build? Those types of things. But there's also sort of everyday data that's helpful like, are you a manager? Where are you located? What learning have you done in the past? So begin to think like it's skills, but it's skills plus.

[00:29:14] **Lawrence Stevens:** And then one, how do you think about Building an ecosystem that begins to bring that into a place where that data begins to serve a better experience. And then secondly, sort of the hypothesis, well, i- if we're moving towards a place where we understand our employees better, isn't that profile, isn't that data helpful for other teams as well?

[00:29:37] **Lawrence Stevens:** So it was just beginning... That was sort of the beginning of like, if we partner together, we can work towards the concept of like sort of, quote-unquote, a universal profile. We're not all bumping into each other trying to build systems of record or data of record. So I think, like, that's kind of been the thinking, the approach.

[00:29:53] **Lawrence Stevens:** And I'll be fully clear, we are not at the end of our journey yet. Like we're in the middle of our journey. We're still building. But I think what's really interesting for us is as AI is evolving in front of us and what become important, and I think the season now is more about how do we power agentic experiences, the concept of getting access to data or sort of data being in one place, and I say that being mindful of privacy and efficacy of which data you use, but assuming that you're also having those conversations as well, if you've got data in an accessible place, you're gonna be much better positioned to sort of build these agentic experiences, whether that is personalized learning, the ability to take your content development to the next level, or slice and dice and modularize learning content and pull it out of the old-fashioned sort of score packages and serve it up on demand.

[00:30:44] **Lawrence Stevens:** Or take your skills intelligence data and serve that up to a workforce planning team. So if you can bring that data into one place, modularize it... And again, like we're not there yet, but that's directionally sort of how we're thinking and,

[00:30:58] **Marci Paino:** and where we want to take this. Sorry, where are you now then? Just 'cause that's a beautiful arc.

[00:31:02] **Marci Paino:** Just to give people a sense of like how much you can do at what point on the data arc- Yeah ... is what I'm trying to get to.

[00:31:07] **Lawrence Stevens:** Yeah, it's a good question. Plus or minus, if I was to... Marcia, keep me honest here. If we were to say, "Hey, roughly this is a three-year journey," I'd say we're sort of halfway through a three-year journey.

[00:31:18] **Lawrence Stevens:** We've got our learning platform in one place now. So you- when you're building your profile, you are starting to go to the same consistent place to declare your skills and sort of begin to declare the skills you wanna develop. We're also beginning to build the first version of what we call sort of a universal profile.

[00:31:37] **Lawrence Stevens:** So a profile that you show up as the same person in more than one system, if that makes sense. If you update over here... And our first partnership is with the Join and Connect, what we call Join and Connect, which is our talent acquisition team. So our first partnership is if you go update your profile in the talent acquisition platform, it gets automatically reflected over in the learning side, as, and vice versa.

[00:32:00] **Lawrence Stevens:** So that's sort of the first piloting of that. And then the idea is we build on that, and that kind of scales out to other platforms as well.

[00:32:08] **Dani Johnson:** Is there like a system of record and then it feeds the others? How is that actually working?

[00:32:13] **Lawrence Stevens:** That's a good question. So yes, there's a l- a even more complexity than I was anticipating to actually get that working.

[00:32:21] **Lawrence Stevens:** But at a very high level, sort of Workday for us, which is our sort of HR system, right? Acts as the middle broker, but it's not the platform that you go do the editing and you experience some things, but it sort

of shuttles the information back and forth. Without going into the weeds, the complexity of the connectors between them is hard.

[00:32:41] **Lawrence Stevens:** It's a really big collaboration between IT, other folks in HR, and things like that. But, but yes, that's kind of how it sort of-

[00:32:48] **Marci Paino:** Yeah, there's the system of record versus the system of engagement. And then how we've been thinking about it is building out basically a knowledge graph that can pull in data across our different workforce insights from a variety of platforms.

[00:33:03] **Marci Paino:** And so there's kind of a broader HR-wide initiative to build out kind of that layer of intelligence by feeding from all of the platforms. So the recruiting platform is different than the system of record, than the learning, right, and performance. They're bringing that all together into one knowledge graph.

[00:33:23] **Marci Paino:** The other thing I wanted to highlight on kind of our transformation journey is, so we do have a unified platform or tech stack now, and the skills intelligence is sort of at the center of all of that. We also took all of our subscription content and integrated it on the back end. So from a data perspective, everything is in one spot for us.

[00:33:45] **Marci Paino:** And so that's a huge win in and of itself. And then the other thing I wanted to talk about, just while we're talking about data, is one of the biggest things that you need data for is for measurement. And so a big part of reimagining learning here has been focused on what are we measuring? And so how do we show our impact and our value, and how do we move from, you know, sort of just basic attendance type of information to actually showing skill proficiency build?

[00:34:16] **Marci Paino:** And so that is a journey that we continue to be on as well as we're thinking about, you know, a lot of the measurement when I came in the door was around how much money the learning organization was making off of our learning content. And it wasn't anchored around how is the learning actually helping the company deliver its strategy.

[00:34:39] **Marci Paino:** So I just wanna point out, just to connect some of what you're sharing with some of our research. So we did a study that we released earlier this year on skills data architecture, and what you're talking about, you called it a knowledge graph or whatever. We called that the semantic

layer, where all these data come together, and then you do your integration, your harmonization, and your orchestration governance.

[00:35:01] **Marci Paino:** And I just wanna kinda share for folks who are listening, kind of the journey that you're on of bringing stuff together in bits and pieces, then deciding that a lot of that could get run through the HCM, and then eventually deciding to put that into kind of some bigger layer. That is a very typical path that we see in terms of skills data architecture

[00:35:22] **Lawrence Stevens:** There's a lot of conversations.

[00:35:24] **Lawrence Stevens:** It's interesting, so I've been fortunate enough to have a lot of peer conversations, and, and you and I have talked a little bit about this. The term knowledge graph, semantic layer, markdown files, every new function they have a new... They weren't sort of common terminology, but now it's sort of, I think it's key to getting the core data to the agentic experiences, and it sort of inserts this layer in the middle that makes sense of the data and organizes the data and triangulates and builds connections.

[00:35:54] **Lawrence Stevens:** And then that's what the agents need to understand which data do I need. I don't need all the data at any one time. What parts of data, what rules do I follow? What policies do I follow? And then what do you have access to as well, so.

[00:36:07] **Marci Paino:** One other thing I would just call out as well on the data front, if it's useful for you to include, is data governance has been its own challenge for us.

[00:36:16] **Marci Paino:** And so I just wanna point out for those listening that the companies typically have their own data governance policies, but then operate within these ecosystems where you have to negotiate with works council around what you can and cannot do. And so one of the biggest challenges we've had has been around influencing shifts or kind of revisions to our own company policy around data governance, and also working very closely with the works council so that we can collect and capture the skills information that we need from our workforce.

[00:36:51] **Marci Paino:** And so that is one of the most complex pieces of this entire journey.

[00:36:57] **Dani Johnson:** Okay. Let's go ahead and move to the lightning round and get to know you all a little bit better, maybe on a personal level. We

have three questions here. The first one is, what was your dream job as a kid? And we'll go to Marcia first.

[00:37:09] **Marci Paino:** Marine biologist.

[00:37:10] **Dani Johnson:** I mean, you're talking to two people that understand that. I have a master's degree in mechanical engineering- ... and Stacia has a master's degree in history, so we totally get it.

[00:37:18] **Marci Paino:** I actually went to college for politics with a math minor.

[00:37:21] **Lawrence Stevens:** I think as a kid, as a version of me, I was thinking about being a rally car driver.

[00:37:27] **Lawrence Stevens:** So if you're sort of from Europe, you know those kind of crazy cars driving through the forest and skidding around corners. And so in some multiverse version of me, it's often living that dream somewhere.

[00:37:37] **Dani Johnson:** That does not surprise me for some reason.

[00:37:40] **Marci Paino:** All right. Back to you, Marcia. What was your last Netflix binge?

[00:37:45] **Marci Paino:** Off campus

[00:37:46] **Dani Johnson:** Oh.

[00:37:48] **Marci Paino:** Okay. Lawrence?

[00:37:50] **Lawrence Stevens:** Technically not Netflix, but it is a binge, so hopefully that counts. My oldest daughter, who's 13, is really into sort of anime and manga, and she has kind of gotten me into that as well. So we've been watching this show called Jujutsu Kaisen, and she has, uh, Stockholm syndromed me into three seasons of Jujutsu Kaisen.

[00:38:12] **Lawrence Stevens:** So I don't know how many hours that is, but it's a lot. It's probably 24 hours of nonstop watching. So- Wow ... and her gift after completing it is, "Daddy, are you ready for the next show? And we'll watch the next set of seasons."

[00:38:24] **Marci Paino:** She's a teenager, and she wants to do something with you, so I call

[00:38:27] **Lawrence Stevens:** it a win. Exact- it's been, it's been a good bonding experience for us as well.

[00:38:30] **Lawrence Stevens:** So, yeah. And now it's- Yeah ... my life's gotten a lot longer.

[00:38:33] **Dani Johnson:** Final lightning round question for both of you. What is your go-to karaoke song? And we'll start with Marci.

[00:38:39] **Marci Paino:** Hold On by Wilson Phillips Oh, nice. That's a good one

[00:38:46] **Lawrence Stevens:** Oh my gosh. I don't know if I'm ready for this one, but it's maybe not exactly the song, but probably like a Robbie Williams song or something like that.

[00:38:52] **Lawrence Stevens:** Or, which I know is not as big in the US, but he's the guy that did like Let Me Entertain You or Angels or something like that. So I don't know why, but

[00:39:01] **Marci Paino:** I- Angels is one of my favorite songs ... put these songs in

[00:39:03] **Lawrence Stevens:** the car and it drives my, my kids nuts, so.

[00:39:05] **Marci Paino:** I love Angel. Like I... That song, oh, so good. So good.

[00:39:12] **Dani Johnson:** So talk to me about technology for just a second, because the thing that you've described both in this conversation and in other conversations I've had with you is definitely not off the shelf.

[00:39:22] **Dani Johnson:** So can you walk us through how you developed it, what you did internally versus the pieces that you used from an external vendor, that kind of thing? And do you wanna take the lead, Lawrence?

[00:39:32] **Lawrence Stevens:** Yeah, yeah, I'll take the lead. I'm just having a moment, like, where do I start on that? It's such a huge question.

[00:39:37] **Marci Paino:** If you want, I can start, Lawrence.

[00:39:39] **Marci Paino:** So, so no, it's not completely off the shelf. I think that being Cisco, we are unique because

[00:39:45] **Marci Paino:** we have engineers in IT and the ability to build. That being said, we did embark on a strategic partnership with Cornerstone as a co-innovator with them. And so if there is off-the-shelf LMS type of capabilities, and then that skills intelligence is something that we've been co-developing with them based off of their SkyHive platform.

[00:40:06] **Marci Paino:** And so there we were very intentional in kind of who we were partnering with and having a seat at the table to co-innovate, and that's been a really important part of our strategy because we've been able to work directly with the learning tech companies that have the expertise, but we have a little bit more say around kind of what the requirements are, what the business challenges we're tackling, and can help shape what the actual solution is, and that's been that partnership.

[00:40:36] **Lawrence Stevens:** What I would add to that is I would also say it's, we think about it as a journey, like in phases as well. So why do I say it that way? Because a lot of people think, "Oh, let's replace the LMS," and like, "That's it. Okay, we're done. Make it do all the things." And for us it's like, it was a way to get out of a legacy system that wasn't working for us, so we picked the right partner.

[00:40:59] **Lawrence Stevens:** And for me, picking the partner is just as much, just as important as picking the platform, and they have really been a great partner with us It's been challenging to get things working properly, and they've stood by us the whole time. So we've built like a really solid foundation platform. You would say LMS, but for us it is a core part of the ecosystem.

[00:41:20] **Lawrence Stevens:** It works with our skills intelligence. It delivers our learning. We can count on it. We can trust it. We've now, since we've gone live, we've done company-wide rollouts, basically error-free, trouble-free, which we've not had in the past. So we have a solid foundation that gives us, and the business confidence in us, that we can now build on top of it, deliver on top of it, build experiences on top of it.

[00:41:44] **Lawrence Stevens:** When we also went live, I think, and Marcia keep me honest here, but as I think about other companies doing this and, and doing tech transformations, we were very intentional about defining what we

called our MLP at the time, sort of our minimum level product, meaning that we're gonna put a line in the sand.

[00:42:01] **Lawrence Stevens:** We're gonna be very clear about what this is and what it isn't when it goes live. But when it goes live, we're not done. We're, we keep building and expanding on top of it from capabilities on the back end that people don't see, but also those sort of front-end experiences that people do see. And for us internally, kind of always balancing how much do we customize, how much don't we customize?

[00:42:21] **Lawrence Stevens:** How much do we get internal IT to build or work on for us? How much do we lean in with sort of our partner with Cornerstone? And it's actually introduced a sort of a little bit of a new way of working because we've almost got this triangle partnership now where it's us as the business lead, and we're co-innovating both internally with IT, but also externally with Cornerstone, and obviously doing our best to make sure that that doesn't bump into each other as well, and trying to get the best out of both sides to ultimately create the sort of most innovative ecosystem we can and, and ready for these agentic experiences with credible data and personalized learning.

[00:42:57] **Marci Paino:** The partnership with IT, I have found in my career has been absolutely instrumental in being successful. The thing that has been very successful here at Cisco is that we're the product owners, right? We understand the challenges that we're trying to solve, so we drive kind of our product roadmap, but we have that close partnership with IT so that they are helping to prioritize what's most important to us and helping us to actually execute on those priorities.

[00:43:25] **Marci Paino:** And so we've been very clear since the get-go around kind of roles and responsibilities within our team versus their team, and there's never been any friction because we were very clear from the get-go that you have to drive the vision and the strategy, but we need them, to your point. Like, they're the ones who do the back u- the hooking everything up on the back end, right, and making sure everything's working within our bigger ecosystem, and they have insight into where the IT roadmap is going so that we can better understand and align our roadmap to

[00:43:54] **Lawrence Stevens:** that.

[00:43:54] **Lawrence Stevens:** I mean, the only thing I'd really add to that is small plug for our IT team. Of all the companies I've been at, and, and I essentially always work with HR IT in all my previous roles

[00:44:04] **Intro:** This has been the strongest partnership I've ever had with

[00:44:06] **Lawrence Stevens:** a company, and I honestly think it's a hard partnership because sometimes you trip over each other and do you have the right requirements?

[00:44:15] **Lawrence Stevens:** Do you not? Like, are we defining the requirements? Are you telling us what you think we need? And I think one of the keys to the success is, one, we're two in a box and we respect each other and we make time for each other. But two, even if we have sort of tripped up a little bit or bumped into requirements or not had the right level of requirements, we've just worked through it, and we sat down and been patient with each other and sort of haven't got frustrated with each other.

[00:44:40] **Lawrence Stevens:** So I think it's, the success is just as much a testament to the relationship as it is to the work that we're undertaking.

[00:44:46] **Marci Paino:** So the last time... Actually, I think the only time I've met you in person, Marcie, was at the, uh, Cornerstone event that Danny and I both went to back in May, and I had the opportunity to facilitate this other session on CIOs and CHROs working together.

[00:45:04] **Marci Paino:** And one of the underlying findings from that session, or at least aha moments for me anyway, was that a lot of the friction comes around the data piece. Who owns the data? When can it get used? As you're thinking about, like, all these different potential use cases, what can go where, and who can see it and all that sort of stuff.

[00:45:26] **Marci Paino:** So can you talk a little bit about how, specifically in this context of working with IT, you all were able to make that work around data?

[00:45:37] **Marci Paino:** Yeah. This goes back to what I mentioned before around data governance and policy. So there's sort of like a company-wide policy that we adhere to, and I think that we recognize, like, we are one data point or set of data points in the overarching HR ecosystem.

[00:45:55] **Marci Paino:** You know, we are... It-- From my perspective, we're very clear on kind of, like, what we own versus how we feed into the ecosystem, and we very much take a systems approach to that.

[00:46:05] **Lawrence Stevens:** I think sort of data privacy, governance, efficacy, it's a really critical conversation to have. Ultimately, it's what's gonna drive some of the ability to have these agent experiences.

[00:46:15] **Lawrence Stevens:** Because, as an example, if you need to power an agent with, let's say, seven data sets and you can't because of some privacy, then you can't build the experience. So it's front and... It's like really, these conversations are really important. I think for us- And building along what Marcia's said is there's sort of two tracks of work.

[00:46:36] **Lawrence Stevens:** There's the strategic side where we know we're gonna have to reimagine data policy for us to really reach some of these North Star visions and experiences that we wanna do. Everyone always goes, "Well, what if people... What if we use the data for the wrong thing?" And so we're just gonna... It's hard to navigate through this.

[00:46:55] **Lawrence Stevens:** Cisco's data policy, I'm sure like many other companies, was built before AI existed and things like that, and it may have had some nip tuck, but it-- I think there's a general sentiment internally that we really have to rethink it in this new world But that's a long play conversation. So there's like, how do you work with what you've got right now?

[00:47:14] **Lawrence Stevens:** So there's a lot of like making the best of what we have, navigating within the constraints of things like work council, maybe doing some experiments on the side. Also putting things like disclaimers and acknowledgments, like when people go in and, and first build their skills profile, they have to acknowledge a disclaimer because we have to put that stuff in front of there to sort of opt in.

[00:47:37] **Lawrence Stevens:** I'm very pro opt-in anyways. It's not like we're gonna sneakily take a, an approach where we don't do opt-in, but just even some of those policies aren't even mindful of opt-in because those types of things didn't exist, you know, five, six, seven years ago. So it's complicated. A long play is a much broader cross-functional effort.

[00:47:56] **Lawrence Stevens:** There's all these tentacles. It's not gonna move at such a fast pace, but I never thought I'd be part of data privacy stuff probably, neither.

[00:48:03] **Marci Paino:** Yeah. But I think you maybe undersell what you guys already had. Big part of Cisco is having data security policies, and not every organization has that. You know, I think back to five, seven years ago when we

were starting to really get going on people analytics tech, and we were telling people to create data governance council, and they're like, "What are you talking about?"

[00:48:23] **Marci Paino:** Like, "Why do we need that?" I mean, so I think that is a part of the culture that reinforced your ability to do some of this, 'cause there's already an expectation around that. So that does bring us though to a really good point around skills is cross-functional. It's hard, it's complicated, lots of different perspectives, and I know that Marcia's superpower is getting folks on the same page, but one, not everybody has that, and two, they're also...

[00:48:53] **Marci Paino:** it can't just all be persuasion. So what were some of the tactical things that you all did to get buy-in from some of these other parts of the organization, and also the larger org? I know you've got the ELT, and the ELT is great and wonderful, but we all know about the messy middle who's like, "Not gonna do that.

[00:49:09] **Marci Paino:** We're gonna wait for this corporate initiative to blow over." So what'd you do?

[00:49:14] **Marci Paino:** For me, I started kinda small, to be honest with you, and I, I've actually talked a lot with my partner in crime who runs talent management. She's the one that I kind of established that relationship with early, and spent a lot of time with her around sort of market insight and how things need to evolve, and just sharing a lot of the research across our two dimensions.

[00:49:35] **Marci Paino:** But a big thing that we've talked about is that we role modeled for our teams what it meant to collaborate Right? Like, we walked the walk, we talked the talk, you know? Like, we didn't say, "Hey, you go off and collaborate, and we're gonna go do whatever we want." We set the mandate. Like, we basically said, like, "We expect you to work together in a dynamic team to accomplish XYZ."

[00:49:55] **Marci Paino:** And so I think that that was really important. I think there's also, also other key relationships. Like, if I think just about kind of my experience, the HR business partners and those that kind of, like, lead that function, it is very important to get... build those relationships because they have the voice of the business.

[00:50:14] **Marci Paino:** They understand what challenges the business is facing, and they can give you those critical insights that would help shape and inform your strategy, and that's where you get the credibility behind it, right?

And then also, we've mentioned already kind of the tight partnership with workforce planning and talent acquisition, and so really being very intentional about kind of how do we create those relationships and partnerships in a way where we can lean into our collective strengths and know that we all have something different to bring to the table, and it is the diversity of thought coming together that is gonna allow us to drive innovation.

[00:50:50] **Marci Paino:** We talk a lot about we don't ship our org chart. Our employee shouldn't, shouldn't know when something's coming from our organization, or talent management, or talent acquisition, or et cetera, et cetera, et cetera, and that has just been a working philosophy that we have implemented since the get-go.

[00:51:08] **Marci Paino:** You've mentioned workforce planning a number of times, but I haven't explicitly heard people analytics called out.

[00:51:12] **Marci Paino:** Is people analytics part of that, or have they been part of this effort at all?

[00:51:16] **Marci Paino:** Yeah. People analytics is part of the core HR group that we partner with, and so they do help us think about how we can measure our impact more broadly across our people initiatives, right? So they're very, very strategic, and they study how do all these thing, component parts come together to drive, you know, business results and culture transformation.

[00:51:39] **Marci Paino:** So they're always kind of looking at the people and the business, and how do all of the data insights that we have across our people programs feed into our storytelling across those two dimensions. You're right, that is a key partnership that we should definitely spotlight.

[00:51:53] **Lawrence Stevens:** Maybe to add to that as well, and is I think in all honesty, if I think back to how humbly sort of how have we been able to make the progress we have over the last sort of year and a half or so, and I think it's no one thing, but I do think it's a combination of a little bit of, you know, great collaboration, partnering with the right teams, a little bit of luck and timing, and, you know, things like the need to do guiding principles was at the right time for us to establish the sort of Chronicle enterprise level skills, which then was a great kickoff to getting the skills work done.

[00:52:31] **Lawrence Stevens:** And also just- At the time, everyone was going after skills outside of Cisco as well. There was just this appetite of receptivity. It's like, great, if someone is gonna need this for us, we need it. Great. How do

we partner? What can we do to help you? I think that was the right timing, the right place at the right time.

[00:52:48] **Lawrence Stevens:** And we also had, and now a couple of years ago, this initiative called an AI talent strategy independently of skills, but was naturally bringing lots of cross-functional teams together to work on our talent strategy for AI and hiring. And very quickly, one of the early things that everyone sort of agreed on was if we had the skills data to help us understand the challenges ahead, how do we hire through that and make the right decisions, that again, sort of helped bring us together.

[00:53:15] **Lawrence Stevens:** So we sort of had this, like, things just came together at the right time, the right people, the right initiatives, the right appetite for collaborating, and then we were also just able to start delivering so people could see that we were actually doing the work. And I just think it sort of snowballed. So it was really helpful.

[00:53:32] **Lawrence Stevens:** But it was just like I said, it was just really multiple things all happening at the same time.

[00:53:35] **Dani Johnson:** So we wanna end with maybe three quick questions, and the first one is, if you had to identify what the key factors of success were, what would they be? So basically just sum up the last three years in, I don't know, 10 to 12 words.

[00:53:49] **Marci Paino:** These don't have to be quick. They can be a little longer.

[00:53:52] **Marci Paino:** I think understanding the business and where the business wants to go and anchoring your strategy into that is critical to success. We've talked about this extensively, but building the right partnerships is critical to success. This is not work that we do in a silo.

[00:54:11] **Marci Paino:** It just is not, and it will not be successful in that way. I think that using an agile approach, Lawrence mentioned the concept of an MLP, a minimal lovable product, and embracing that approach has been, for some of our team members, kind of a stark change of working, right? Because they're so accustomed to waiting until you have the product perfect before you ship it.

[00:54:38] **Marci Paino:** And so embracing progress over perfection has been critical to our success because we can get something out, and then we can collect feedback. And then I would end on listening. So, like listening to your

stakeholders, to the business, to your employees, but always be listening and always be using that as critical data that helps to inform and shape where you go next.

[00:55:03] **Lawrence Stevens:** I'll build on this. Does that mean I have six because I say yes to Marcia? Plus I add three more. I actually had

[00:55:09] **Dani Johnson:** four, Lawrence. I had

[00:55:10] **Marci Paino:** four, just

[00:55:10] **Lawrence Stevens:** FYI. Oh, okay. So now I mean, I agree 100% with what Marcia was saying. I think if I was to just add some additional flavor in there, I think we play this role in the middle, right?

[00:55:23] **Lawrence Stevens:** We partner with the business. We understand what the business needs, but we're also not, in my case from the tech stack and the data architecture, I'm not actually building it. I'm not coding it. So I'm dependent. So we're in the middle. We're sort of the business orchestrator, the business strategy. So we're this really unique position, but educating yourself so you have enough understanding To relate to the business, but also enough understanding to really know what's going on to bring this to life, I think is really critical.

[00:55:52] **Lawrence Stevens:** I would also say I've become a big fan of this concept recently as I've been sort of listening to other podcasts and things, like s- sorting signal from noise. And I think in this case, there are so many things to go after. There's so many needs and asks, and can I get this data? And if no one came knocking at your door, you would be busy for the next two years kind of thing.

[00:56:11] **Lawrence Stevens:** So like staying disciplined and focused no matter kind of what's going on or what new things come your way, stay focused on the mission and what are most important things to do are so that you can deliver what you've been promising to the business, I think is really important. It's so easy to get distracted or taken down rabbit holes or getting complicated architecture planning conversations that go nowhere or over-rotating on the sort of efficacy of an assessment or something like that, and I think that's really important.

[00:56:41] **Lawrence Stevens:** And then just, I mean, maybe lean in more on Marcie's one, you've just gotta collaborate and just, you can't bring this to life

yourself. Even if you have your own team, you still are so wholly dependent on all these other partner teams and just be a good collaborator and open-minded

[00:56:56] **Dani Johnson:** Second question: What should people who are on this journey avoid?

[00:57:01] **Marci Paino:** Or what mistakes have you made? I know we wouldn't characterize them as mistakes. What things have you learned along the way that you would ideally not repeat if you were to do this again?

[00:57:11] **Marci Paino:** I do so, I think Lawrence has a point around kind of what we call ruthless prioritization and making sure you have alignment around that with your partner organizations, 'cause if you're prioritizing things different than them, then you won't get anything done.

[00:57:26] **Marci Paino:** So I think that kind of prioritization and alignment is a key lesson learned because we did hit times where it was like what they wanna do and what we wanna do isn't the same, and so how do we come together and agree on what we do and what, and in what order? So I do think that's one big lesson learned.

[00:57:41] **Marci Paino:** I think leaning on, like, market research is really important.

[00:57:45] **Marci Paino:** Yes.

[00:57:45] **Marci Paino:** Uh, because- Us too.

[00:57:49] **Dani Johnson:** That was an unintentional plug, but it gives you credibility, right? And I think that,

[00:57:54] **Marci Paino:** you know, one of my biggest lessons through all of this is that I feel like I have to be, like, reading and learning every single day. So I start and end my days learning, and it is studying what's happening in the market.

[00:58:05] **Marci Paino:** It's studying all of the research that's out there and really trying to leverage all of that to think about what's around the corner, and so I think that that's been a big lesson learned. It wasn't... It's not a lesson learned by mistake, but just by, out of a nature of how quickly things are evolving and how do we keep pace.

[00:58:23] **Lawrence Stevens:** I think the lesson learned, and I, this is a lesson learned even though I've tried to be mindful through my whole journey about this, but just not overcomplicating things. And what do I mean by that? Because the world of skills mapping, hooking up the right data, trusting the data when you're trying to make everyone happy is hard.

[00:58:43] **Lawrence Stevens:** You'll go have some alignment conversations as an example with the workforce planning team and you say, "Great. This is what we're gonna do." And then you'll go meet with talent acquisition, like, "Well, we don't think of it that way." Now you have to go change everything. So then you always get ground to a halt because, well, how do I balance their needs versus this team's needs?

[00:58:58] **Lawrence Stevens:** And you wind up building this overcomplicated solution that just grinds to a halt. So the challenge is, like, not overcomplicating, but still being thorough and, like, intentional about your design and your methodology, and that's really hard. And even though I've tried to do that all the way through, it's still hard.

[00:59:17] **Lawrence Stevens:** So I'm sure I could go back and, and adjust the way of doing that. And then also as you build your solutions, for example, as you're mapping and validating skills across the organization There's a huge difference between the work it takes to do something for a pilot when you're just working with three or four people to scaling that.

[00:59:35] **Lawrence Stevens:** What you design with your hands-on tons of conversations through the week with one person or three people doesn't mean it scales at 100X. So just like keep scaling in mind, you have to sustain and scale and maintain this, you know, at 10X, at 100X. So as you're doing, as you're thinking, as you're solutioning, always ask yourself, is the way I'm doing this now gonna work at 10X, 100X?

[00:59:57] **Lawrence Stevens:** Is it gonna work if I step back and let an agent do it, or someone who's not as senior as me, or something like that, so.

[01:00:03] **Marci Paino:** One thing I would add too from, like, an executive management perspective, I think that it's been really important for us to tell our story and to continuously update that story. And so there's been kind of moments in time where we're doing this behi- under the hood type of work, right?

[01:00:21] **Marci Paino:** That isn't directly visible to, you know, our senior leadership. And so it may come across as though we're not making progress. And so I think being able to tell the story of the progress that we're making has been really important for us. And so I'd say don't lose sight of making sure if you are sort of the executive leader, that you are making sure that you are telling that story up to your senior leadership as you make progress along the way, because they may not have visibility into the work that's happening.

[01:00:49] **Marci Paino:** Marcia, Lawrence, we are at the end, sadly. We could pepper you with many more questions, but we're so appreciative you've spent some time with us. We end every podcast with a final question, which we call the purpose question, and that is, why do you do the work that you do? Marcia, let's go to you first.

[01:01:10] **Marci Paino:** I think that being in the learning and skills space is some of the most meaningful work that you can do for the world.

[01:01:17] **Marci Paino:** I really do. I think that the world continues to evolve and change, and at the center of that is our ability to adapt and learn and grow, and we're powering that.

[01:01:28] **Marci Paino:** That's amazing. Lawrence?

[01:01:30] **Lawrence Stevens:** Well, I'm not sure how to top that, but coming in in second place, I'm really passionate about helping people grow and helping them have amazing experiences, and I'm also passionate about technology.

[01:01:42] **Lawrence Stevens:** I'm a massive geek outside of sort of this box that you see me in, and, and so I just think the ability to be touching and shaping and steering the technology that gives people these amazing experiences to grow is just... It's like, where else do I wanna be? Like, that's the place I wanna be. And if I get the privilege of shaping and steering and influencing it and, and things

[01:02:05] **Marci Paino:** And sometimes you find a magical partnership where you both are geeks and you love to geek out together.

[01:02:12] **Lawrence Stevens:** We do. We do. And

[01:02:13] **Marci Paino:** that is Lawrence and me.

[01:02:15] **Lawrence Stevens:** We were very lucky. Yeah. I was gonna say this earlier, that Marcia and I weren't originally in the same team when we joined, 'cause we joined RedThread sort of a month or two of each other. Marcia, keep me honest, say your feelings here, but when, I think when we first started meeting, we sort of were like, "Kind of need to be on the same team" type thing.

[01:02:29] **Lawrence Stevens:** So that was the beginning of sort of our partnership.

[01:02:31] **Marci Paino:** It's a beautiful friendship.

[01:02:33] **Dani Johnson:** That's awesome. Thank you. Thank you both for being with us.

[01:02:37] **Lawrence Stevens:** Thanks. Thank you. It's

[01:02:37] **Marci Paino:** been fun. Thank you.

[01:02:38] **Dani Johnson:** Thanks

[01:02:39] **Dani Johnson:** for listening. If this podcast got you thinking differently about how work happens, that's what we're here for.

[01:02:44] **Dani Johnson:** We dig into these topics every week in our research and in the RedThread community.

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[01:03:07] **Dani Johnson:** For professional tier, for listeners, you can use the promotional code STORIES, S-T-O-R-I-E-S, for a 10% discount. And if you're a tech provider trying to make sense of this space, our tech consortium is where smart vendors are coming together to learn from each other and from the market. You'll find everything at redthreadresearch.com.

[01:03:29] **Dani Johnson:** I'm Dani Johnson. Thanks for listening and for caring about making work better.

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