Executive Interview

with **Alex Draper**,
CEO,
DX Learning

Unlocking the Culture Conundrum:
Leadership, Psychological Safety and More

About DX Learning

DX Learning is here to show leaders at all levels how to change the workplace for the better. We're humanizing the workplace. Stripping the bad from bosses clears the way for a corporate culture that cares. We create leaders who put people first and activate the aspired culture.

Bad bosses. Inevitable, but not incurable. You have the power to do something about it and build a great culture with a consistent approach for how your leaders should treat their people. We bring your values to life and ensure every leader becomes a culture champion. Culture is a mirror of leadership.

Recognition

DX Learning won a Gold Award for Best Advance in Leadership Development in the Brandon Hall Group™ 2023 HCM Excellence Awards®.
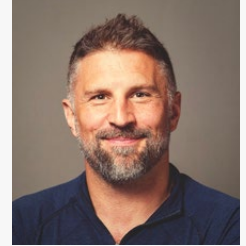
EXCELLENCE IN HCM AWARDS

Leadership Development	**1** Gold Awards

About Alex Draper

Alex Draper is the founder and CEO of DX Learning. Alex started life as a trainee schoolteacher in the UK. In 2002, he moved into adult education, joining a global management training organization. In 2005, he moved to Chicago to build and lead their Americas operation.

In 2015, Alex founded DX Learning with the purpose of wiping out bad leadership to create organizations worth working for. DX is now a partner in progressive leadership training to expose and eliminate bad leadership and prepare leaders to put people first.

For the last five years, Alex and his team have narrowed their focus on operationalizing the theory of psychological safety. He has created a simple framework for how leaders can build habits into the flow of work that focus on the core essentials of psychological safety and is working both on empirically testing the framework and writing a book.

Alex has helped develop and unlock the leadership potential in over 40,000 people with DX's leadership programs all over the world while being a people-first leader himself at work and at home and building a human-centric movement.

About Rachel Cooke

Rachel Cooke is Brandon Hall Group™'s Chief Operating Officer and Principal HCM Analyst. She is responsible for business operations, including client and member advisory services, marketing design, annual awards programs, conferences and the company's project management functions. She also leads Advancing Women in the Workplace and Diversity, Equity and Inclusion initiatives, research and events. Rachel worked in the HCM research industry for 20+ years and held several key management and executive positions within the Talent and Learning Research, and Performance Improvement industries.

Q **RACHEL**

How do you wipe out bad leadership?

A **ALEX**

Tasha Eurich in her book, *Insight: Why We're Not as Self-Aware as We Think, and How Seeing Ourselves Clearly Helps Us Succeed at Work and in Life*, said that 95% of us think that we're self-aware, but actually only 10 to 15% of us are. I think it's lower than that.

Most of us just walk around blinded by the fact that our brains are very much self-preservation machines, but effective leadership is about team preservation. Unintentionally, most of us are bad leaders and that's really where DX Learning's work is. It's working with people to show them their blind spots and that their brains play a counterintuitive role to being an effective leader. The light bulbs go off and they say, "I never knew that."

Q **RACHEL**

Can you share a little bit more about culture and how you're helping companies develop better leaders?

A **ALEX**

First, there are the generational challenges. I'm a 45-year-old guy and grew up in England where my mother taught me to have a stiff upper lip, never be vulnerable and just suck it up and work. So, I did and I'm really good at doing that. It's not right, not wrong — many people in my generation just do it and don't talk about their feelings.

Now you've got Baby Boomers, Generation X, Millennials and Generation Y all in the workplace at the same time. The younger generations have had knowledge at their fingertips. Some of it's right, some of it's wrong. At the end of the day, their view, their lens, how they see the world and their expectations, are very different to ours. What you're seeing right now — and why culture is so important — is why we're going to have to start working together.

Culture for me is a mirror of leadership.

Culture is a living, breathing organism. It evolves and therefore, leadership evolves. A culture is not an organization, it's a group of people. My first boss will dictate the culture. How they treat me and how they treat others consistently are the cultural norms of that team.

(continued)

If you get a group of leaders, if not hundreds of thousands of leaders consistently leading in a certain way, that creates the cultural norms of the organization, which is why values are so important. If one of your values is transparency as an organization, you better hope that your leaders sell people on that when you're hiring people on. If your first boss doesn't tell the truth and is not very transparent, we call that cultural debt and cultural conning.

If you look at all the research, culture is more important to the younger generations than it was to us. What we value is not what they value — and we have to accept that. The whole point of evolving a culture is you evolve to the times. If you think you've got to stay the same for 50 years, you're going to be left in the lurch and it'll be over before you know it. We have to adapt and be cognizant that we have four generations in the workplace. We have to talk about it.

Q **RACHEL**

Psychological safety seems to be gathering steam; what is it and why is it so important?

A **ALEX**

Your organizational culture is hollow without it. Silence kills culture, silence kills leadership and silence kills relationships. If we can't be open and honest with each other, and the opposite of being vulnerable and being transparent is silence, then I can't help people. As a leader, I don't have a magic wand. I can't just magically say, "Here's what you need and here's what I need." I can assume, but we all know what happens when you make assumptions. We've got to rip out silence from our workplace — especially in certain cultures like America and my home country of England, where we're not very vulnerable.

In fact, machoism and heroism are revered and we tell people not to speak up, but that's a hollow culture. It's not a culture that helps human beings be their best and do their best. For me, the definition of psychological safety is where I can come to an organization, I can be my best self, I can be my true authentic self, I can do my best work and I can speak up about what matters to me. In terms of creating a high-performing culture, nothing matters more.

If we're not talking to each other about the values and what we've stated as our cultural north stars, then there is no culture. It just becomes a writing on the wall in some fancy spreadsheet at HQ in the ivory tower. That's not culture. Culture is table tennis and beer at the places. It's not unlimited PTO. Culture is a mirror of the leaders and the leaders in the business. They need to know what they're doing right and what they're doing wrong. We've got to take out silence.

(continued)

Every human being requires clarity, autonomy, relationships and equity at varying levels. Give them what they need. Their brain sparks up, they're at cognitive ease and they're more likely to speak up. Those are the leading indicators and they're all very difficult because leaders suck at all of them. If you wonder why there's no psychological safety out there, it's because we're not giving the ingredients for our people to win. That's why we have what we call "care to win." Care for each other through clarity, autonomy, relationships and equity, and you will win through psychological safety to achieve higher performance. But that's easier said than done.

Q RACHEL

What is your "playbook"?

A ALEX

DX Learning's playbook goes to that notion of "care to win." We need some consistency. Subcultures should be accepted. At the end of the day, the culture is a mirror of leadership. How my team looks to me, what I do, the examples that I set and how I hold people accountable become a culture of that particular team. My job is to hold people accountable and not tolerate bad behavior.

The culture of a company or a team is actually the worst behavior that you're willing to tolerate. That weed in the team that you've allowed to manifest itself suddenly spreads, and all of a sudden, you've taken a high-performing team to a low-performing team because you couldn't hold that toxic employee accountable to the values of your team.

Our playbook is, "Can we just keep it really simple?" and "How do we take science and the fact that human beings crave four things — clarity, autonomy, relationships and equity — and make those the necessary ingredients?" We need varying preferences of those ingredients, but we need them and to hard wire those into the way that our leaders lead. That's the bare minimum — our leaders are giving the team members the basic requirements for survival so that they speak up. We don't have to call it clarity; you can call it something else. We call it smart working. Some others call it other things like integrity.

Q RACHEL

What is a cultural champion?

ALEX

We should all be culture champions at the end of the day because we should all reduce our ability to want to have status and be the center of attention. I made the mistake this year of not being a culture champion for my team and worrying too much about the balance sheet and making culture a byproduct versus a primary product and part of the process. But actually, we're all culture champions. Whether you're an individual contributor, a CEO or a VP of Talent Development, we all can either set the right examples or ask for the right examples. I call it the pincer approach. We're either setting the right examples and giving and doing the right things, or we're asking for the things that we're not getting. Therefore, we can all hold ourselves accountable to the north star of our business.

And it's really important that values are now front and center. The next frontier of building a sustainable organization is culture and values. Having core values that are believed in and a set of behaviors that sit underneath them and we can hold people accountable to, is so important. We all need to hold ourselves accountable to those behaviors, call out the bad behaviors and call out the good behaviors. But we've all got to be culture champions. We've all got to hold ourselves accountable and we've got to hold our teams accountable to a higher standard. That's what our culture champion is.

Here are some ways to listen to the interview on Brandon Hall Group's Excellence at Work Podcast:

iTunes   Spotify   YouTube

Brandon Hall Group
EXCELLENCE AT WORK

About Brandon Hall Group™

With more than 10,000 clients globally and 30 years of delivering world-class research and advisory services, Brandon Hall Group™ is focused on developing research that drives performance in emerging and large organizations, and provides strategic insights for executives and practitioners responsible for growth and business results.

SOME WAYS WE CAN HELP

Membership
Individual and Enterprise Membership Options: Includes research assets, advisory support, a client success plan and more.

Professional Certifications
Self-paced certification programs. Virtual group sessions for companies. In-person conferences and summits.

Advisory Offerings
Custom Research Projects, including surveys, focus group interviews and Organization Needs Assessment for Transformation, Technology Selection and Strategy.

Excellence Awards
Three annual programs recognize the best organizations that have successfully deployed programs to achieve measurable results.

ORGANIZATIONAL EXCELLENCE CERTIFICATION PROGRAM
recognizes world-class HCM programs that transform their organization and achieve breakthrough results. This designation is the next step beyond the HCM Excellence Awards, which focus on a single program, and looks at the department as a whole.

SMARTCHOICE® PREFERRED PROVIDER PROGRAM
uniquely places HCM service and technology companies at the top of organizations' consideration list of vendors. It adds an unmatched level of credibility based on BHG's twenty-eight-plus years of experience in evaluating and selecting the best solution providers for leading organizations around the world.