



Elevating Learning and Development Strategies

Transforming L&D from Reactive to Proactive

Playbook 1: Move L&D Upstream

From Training Requests to Earlier Capability Conversations

Series Overview

L&D at the Table: From Training Requests to Capability Partnership

Companion to Article 1

Why L&D Needs to Move Upstream

Playbook Purpose

This playbook guides Learning and Development (L&D) leaders and practitioners in transitioning from merely responding to training requests to participating earlier in business conversations. It is designed for scenarios where you want to explore changes in work, identify emerging capability needs, and proactively partner with leaders before formal learning requests arise. The aim is not to embark on a large discovery project but to gather sufficient insight to enable meaningful dialogue, uncover early opportunities for L&D value creation, and support leaders in enhancing team performance amid workplace changes.

Why This Playbook Matters

In today's dynamic environment, L&D must engage with business challenges earlier, especially when budgets are tight, AI is reshaping roles, and leaders face competing priorities. L&D's value lies in collaborating with leaders by offering perspectives, structures, and actionable recommendations, rather than assuming the leaders' role. While AI can aid in organizing insights, identifying patterns, and generating options, the essence of L&D lies in fostering trust and credibility through conversations, not outsourcing thinking.

When to Use This Playbook

Use this playbook when:

- A business area faces change, pressure, or uncertainty.

- A leader hints at future training needs but lacks a defined problem.
 - A training request surfaces, but the issue may extend beyond knowledge or skill.
 - AI, new tools, processes, or role changes impact work.
 - Leaders seek performance, adoption, speed, consistency, or confidence without specifying shifts in capability.
 - L&D aims to strengthen its relationship with a business unit before urgent requests arise.
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What This Playbook Will Help You Produce

By the end of this playbook, you should have:

- A clearer view of business outcomes or pressures.
- An understanding of changes in work.
- A summary of insights from leaders, managers, employees, and high performers.
- Early capability signals and possible performance barriers.
- An identification of where L&D may be entering too late.
- A practical recommendation for L&D's upstream movement.
- A 30-day action plan to enhance business partnerships.

The Playbook Flow

Use this simple flow:

Collect → Interview → Synthesize → Analyze → Validate → Recommend

Step-by-Step Guide

Step 1: Collect Existing Business Signals

Before conducting interviews, review existing information to avoid assumptions and redundant questions. Gather insights on business goals, performance metrics, strategic plans, role expectations, onboarding data, performance trends, employee feedback, existing learning data, manager feedback, and upcoming changes in AI, tools, systems, or processes.

Reflection Before You Interview:

- What changes are occurring in the business?
- Where might performance be at risk?
- Which roles or teams are most affected?
- What do you still need to hear directly from those doing or leading the work?

Step 2: Identify whom to Involve

To gain a comprehensive view, involve multiple stakeholders, including business sponsors, people managers, high performers, newer employees, frontline employees, HR or talent partners, operations or process owners, and data or reporting partners.

Recommended Interview Mix:

- 1 business sponsor or senior stakeholder
- 2–3 managers
- 2–3 employees doing the work
- 1–2 high performers
- 1 HR, operations, or data partner as relevant

Step 3: Conduct Short Discovery Interviews

Conduct focused, respectful 20–30 minute interviews to identify useful signals. Obtain permission before recording, adhere to privacy policies, and anonymize transcripts.

Suggested Interview Opening:

“Thank you for speaking with me. I’m exploring what capability, support, or reinforcement may be needed as work changes. This is not about assuming training is the answer. I aim to understand business outcomes, work dynamics, and what support would enhance clarity and confidence in performance.”

Step 4: Ask the Right Questions

Choose questions that uncover the strongest signals based on the interviewee, whether business leaders, managers, employees, or high performers. Focus on business outcomes, changes in work, capabilities and proficiency, leadership support, and evidence of impact.

Step 5: Pull Patterns From Notes or Transcripts

Review interview notes for patterns across voices. Identify recurring themes, contradictions, and signals that need validation. Extract insights on business outcomes, performance pressure, behaviour expectations, common barriers, confidence gaps, workflow friction, manager support needs, high performer behaviours, role changes, and success indicators.

Step 6: Prepare Transcript Notes for AI

Summarize transcripts into clean, anonymized inputs for AI analysis, focusing on business context, audience, changes, insights from leaders and managers, employee experiences, high performer behaviours, current support, early hypotheses, and unanswered questions.

Step 7: Analyze Transcript Themes With AI

Use AI to identify patterns from transcripts, focusing on business outcomes, performance pressures, behaviour changes, barriers, role changes, confidence gaps, manager needs, high performer behaviours, non-training factors, and evidence of improvement. Provide a summary of themes, capability signals, performance barriers, and questions for validation.

Step 8: Validate Before Recommending

Validate AI findings with stakeholders to build trust and avoid basing recommendations on unchecked assumptions. Confirm accuracy, identify missing elements, and prioritize solutions.

Step 9: Use the AI Thinking Partner Prompt

Engage AI as a strategy thinking partner to reflect on L&D's partnership with the business, identify upstream opportunities, and recommend practical strategies for proactive engagement.

Step 10: Build Your Upstream Action Plan

Using AI outputs and personal judgment, create a 30-day action plan that focuses on upstream opportunities, initiates capability conversations, and delivers useful recommendations to the business.

Playbook Close

L&D's journey upstream is not about self-declaration as strategic but about becoming useful earlier. By asking better questions, building relationships, and providing insights, L&D helps leaders clarify team needs and design support, respecting the work and its human element. This is the essence of a capability partnership—a win for the business, leader, and team. And it feels good.