


Leading the Way: 6 Core Essentials for L&D Leadership Success

Discover **Six** essentials every L&D leader needs to drive impact, inspire teams, and achieve measurable results.



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The leaders in L&D Recruitment



Introduction

First and foremost, this is not about leadership skills and characteristics generally – there thousands of books that you can read about these. As a specialist recruiter within the learning and development (L&D) sector, Blue Eskimo speaks with hundreds of senior learning and talent development professionals every year, whether they're hiring or seeking their next role.

Here we look to highlight the essentials that make these people stand out in the L&D industry and what differentiates a great leader from an average, good, or not so good manager.

Effective leadership within the L&D function is more crucial than ever. The transition to a digital, knowledge-driven economy underscores the critical importance of a dynamic workforce.

We hope you enjoy it,

Nick Bate
Director

Introduction

Blue Eskimo has been a dedicated recruitment specialist in the Learning & Development (L&D) sector for over 22 years. Our mission goes beyond recruitment—we are committed to supporting and enriching the L&D community we proudly serve. By creating content that sparks conversation and inspires new thinking, we aim to contribute meaningfully to the ongoing dialogue within this dynamic field.

While we are not L&D practitioners ourselves, we immerse ourselves in the community to stay informed about the challenges and opportunities faced by L&D and Talent Development professionals. This ongoing engagement ensures that our insights remain relevant and impactful.

This paper is crafted to outline the essentials every L&D leader—or aspiring leader—should know. We extend our heartfelt thanks to the following thought leaders for generously sharing their perspectives, insights, and time:

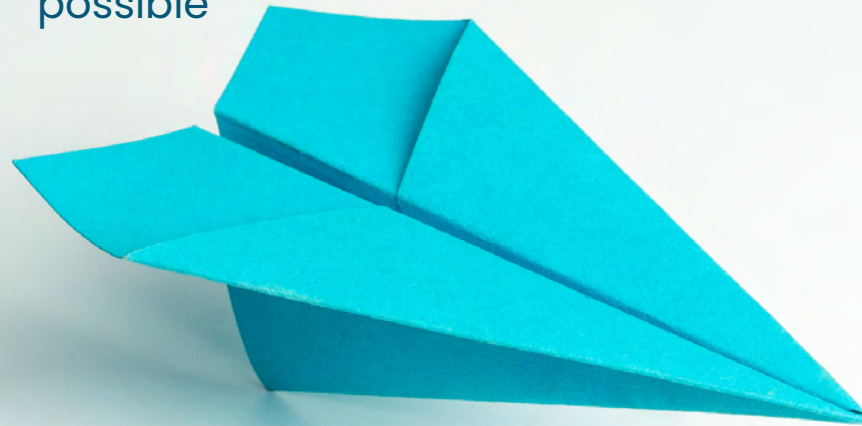
Chara Balasubramaniam – Vice President Future Skills and Learning at bp

Melanie Lepine – Global Head of Talent and E-Learning at CBRE

Ron Edwards – Head of Learning at Entain

Martyn Bullard – Director of Learning and Development at Sage

Their invaluable contributions have made this resource possible



Effective Organisational Engagement –Driving Performance

L&D leaders who adopt a strategic, organisation-wide perspective are best positioned to capitalise on the growing emphasis on capability development. But what does "organisational engagement" truly mean?

Unlike work engagement, which centres on how employees feel about their roles, organisational engagement focuses on employees' involvement and commitment to the company's objectives and mission. A standout L&D leader fosters this engagement and drives performance by:

Aligning initiatives: Ensuring learning and talent development directly supports organisational goals, making it targeted, relevant, and impactful.

Personalising growth: Tailoring learning to employees' career aspirations, fostering a sense of value and commitment beyond point-of-need training.

Challenging the status quo: Acting as a trusted advisor who identifies needs and advocates for meaningful change when necessary.

Building community: Encouraging team-based projects and peer learning to create a sense of shared purpose.

Collaborating effectively: Partnering with HR to provide continuous feedback and celebrate achievements, sustaining motivation and engagement.

However, successful organisational engagement varies across businesses, influenced by factors such as organisational maturity and their stage in the development journey. The key is tailoring approaches to align with the organisation's unique needs while maintaining a clear focus on shared objectives.

Quotes

"we have to be a critical friend and trusted partner, not just give people what they want for the sake of it. Then we can drive performance without the need to change what is a good working culture at the moment" **Martyn bullard**

"It's an environment where learning options are at their fingertips - simple, intuitive, customised and adaptable throughout their journey, dependent on the changes that happen both within the business and their lives." **Melanie Lepine**

"Think about the moving parts in the organisation and the ripple effect that L&D changes will have, before embarking on them." **Chara Balasubramaniam**

Demonstrating Value – Elevating L&D to a strategic Priority

L&D's ability to secure its place 'at the table' hinges on proving its worth through measurable outcomes. The best leaders turn this challenge into an opportunity to showcase their indispensable role in driving business success.

For L&D to thrive it must be seen as a strategic partner, not a cost centre. Without this recognition the function will struggle to secure necessary investment. Demonstrating return on investment (ROI) is critical to ensure ongoing support and funding.

ROI remains a top challenge for L&D leaders, as highlighted by the **Learning and Performance Institute's** annual reports. Many leaders grapple with quantifying financial benefits, aligning learning initiatives with business objectives and justifying budgets in a way that resonates with the C-suite.

Demonstrating value is not a 'one size fits all' task. In some cases, such as sales or customer service training, ROI can be straightforward to measure – increased revenues, fewer customer complaints. For initiatives like leadership development, proving impact can feel less tangible, so identify meaningful criteria for success such as reduced management turnover or improved employee engagement is essential.

Begin with the end in mind, defining what success looks like before the initiative launches. Identify metrics that don't just measure success but also prove it convincingly.

L&D budgets often face cuts when economic pressures arise. Demonstrate resilience and value by optimising resources, embracing innovative solutions and focusing on initiatives with measurable impact.

Quotes

"we have to be creative with what we have, as often it's not possible to go out and purchase what we want in an ideal world. For example, we look to get maximum value out of Microsoft Teams, using it's full functionality to the best effect." **Ron Edwards**

"ROI can be measured in a number of different ways, data from exit surveys, pulses, engagement surveys plus consumption and engagement with the talent marketplace, mentors and of course, your learning platforms." **Melanie Lepine**

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Harnessing and Using data: Going beyond the basics

Most L&D departments today use some form of learning analytics – tracking metrics like course completions, assessment scores, and participation rates. But these statistics alone aren't enough to prove the true value of a learning intervention.

Exceptional L&D leaders understand the power of meaningful data. They know that data must go beyond basic metrics to produce insights that matter, particularly to the C-suite. To secure buy-in and demonstrate impact these insights must connect to tangible outcomes, such as saving money or driving revenue growth.

Begin by defining what data is meaningful to your organisation. Which insights will drive positive business change? This clarity ensures that data collection is purposeful and aligned with strategic goals. Work to make key data accessible, not siloed in the IT department, while respecting security protocols.

When used effectively, learning data can uncover powerful insights, from identifying employee learning preferences to tracking skills gaps and improving performance. It can elevate the role of L&D Business Partners in performance consulting and help design personalised development plans that foster a culture of continuous learning.

By harnessing the right data, L&D leaders position themselves as strategic enablers, using analytics to create measurable, impactful change. Promoting the effective use of meaningful data is essential for L&D teams aiming to drive organisational success.

Quotes

“We get Net Promoter Scores that provide feedback and data on learning programmes and courses undertaken. We ensure that answers provided are used to good effect when it comes to informing next actions.” **Ron Edwards**

“I think it's critical to ensure that our L&D Goals are aligned to our business goals. The most effective way to do that is to partner really closely with our Data & Analytics Team and get real clarity about what the business is trying to drive – measuring what is most important.” **Melanie Lepine**

“We developed a successful series of internal webinars about ‘Why data is critical to inform strategic decisions’. This was delivered to the Global People Team (of 300) by the Head of Finance at Sage, to achieve maximum impact.” **Martyn Bullard**

Defining, communicating and celebrating success,

Success in L&D begins with a clear vision: defining what success looks like for each initiative. Great L&D leaders see this as an opportunity to shift perceptions of L&D from a cost centre to a profit-driving, value-adding function. By proactively defining metrics, tracking ROI, and showcasing measurable results, they demonstrate the strategic impact of their work.

But it doesn't stop at measurement. Exceptional L&D leaders amplify these achievements by creating learning success stories that resonate across the organisation. These stories, backed by data, illustrate how L&D drives profits, reduces costs and enhances performance. By "banging the drum" for their team and function, they ensure that the value of learning initiatives are not just understood but celebrated.

Success stories can be communicated effectively through internal channels like company intranets, newsletters, or social media – highlighting both individual and team accomplishments. This approach boosts morale, recognises effort and demonstrates that L&D is an integral part of the organisation's success. Celebrating success creates a ripple effect, inspiring others to engage with L&D programmes. When employees see tangible results and recognition for their peers, they're more likely to view learning as a pathway to their own growth and success.

Defining, communicating and celebrating success is not just about proving ROI – it's about building a culture where L&D is recognised as a strategic force that drives business excellence.

Quotes

"If our Net Promoter Scores are high then we publicise this success, proactively using these people as advocates, to spread the word and foster a culture of learning." **Ron Edwards**

"Our teams get heard. We provide opportunities to get involved in stretch projects where they can lead on or get involved in activity that allows them to experience new parts of the business, or to build skills that they need for future work."
Melanie Lepine

Commercial Acumen: Speaking the Language of Business

L&D leaders with strong commercial acumen understand the importance of positioning the function as a business enabler, not just a training provider. They actively engage with the C-suite, speaking their language and aligning learning initiatives with broader business objectives.

Before launching any learning initiative, whether tactical or strategic, these leaders ensure they have a clear understanding of both the objectives and the costs involved.

They evaluate critical questions:

Will the benefits outweigh the investment?

Which projects should we prioritise for maximum impact?

How can we ensure these initiatives align with and drive business success?

By framing L&D projects in terms of ROI and business outcomes, they gain buy-in and demonstrate that the function is a key driver of organisational value.

Commercially astute L&D leaders don't just deliver training—they strategically target efforts where they will deliver the greatest return, ensuring that every initiative contributes to the organisation's bottom line. This approach not only builds credibility but should also secure the ongoing support and investment necessary for L&D to thrive.

"Our business needs to understand our approach, so we use 'business language' rather than 'HR language'." Our learning initiatives stem from business needs because we're very close to the business, joining their meetings regularly to understand their strategy, where they see success and opportunity -and use this as our basis for growth." **Melanie Lepine**

"L&D is always being scrutinised from a cost perspective, so it's critical to be commercially savvy. Don't focus on volume, instead focus on satisfying business need." **Chara Balasubramaniam**

"I meet with the Finance Managers and Directors in the business. Their terminology is different than most, but I use their language. My reporting aligns to what the Board wants, not what I want. They don't care and I don't care about what percentage of employees are using our learning platforms, it's about what they are learning and the impact this is having on the business." **Ron Edwards**

Collaborating and Relationship: Building

Strong collaboration skills are essential for every great L&D leader. These skills enable them to:

Drive team-based projects, interactive learning and peer-to-peer development.

Work effectively with senior leadership to align L&D strategies with business goals.

Build commercially beneficial partnerships with external suppliers.

Develop alliances beyond the immediate scope of L&D to bring fresh perspectives.

Collaboration and relationship building are fundamental for success, both within the team and across the organisation. Great leaders proactively grow their networks with internal stakeholders, external peers and suppliers, ensuring they remain connected to broader industry trends.

In today's virtual working environment, maintaining collaboration is even more critical. Exceptional L&D leaders adapt to virtual team dynamics, ensuring the essence of teamwork is preserved. They also engage actively in professional communities and join relevant bodies to expand their networks and expertise.

Thinking beyond traditional boundaries, they identify broader innovations and initiatives outside the L&D arena that can be successfully adapted to enhance learning programmes, driving innovation and strategic impact.

Quotes

"Reach out beyond L&D. I have joined several steering groups on the broader use of GenAI. This is helping me pave the way on how AI will be used for almost everything, helping to steer the boat but also win hearts and minds when it comes to things like replacing the need for formal training with AI." **Ron Edwards**

"I consciously attend more industry events and join panel discussions when the opportunity arises." **Martyn Bullard**

"By fully understanding what our suppliers offer, I can highlight the nuances that might be useful to the C-Suite. Where suppliers are succeeding in other organisations and how we can replicate this." **Ron Edwards**

Conclusion

Great L&D leaders possess a vast array of qualities, but we've distilled our focus to six essential attributes that truly stand out:

- Effective Organisational Development
- Demonstrating Value
- Harnessing and Using Data
- Defining, Communicating, and Celebrating Success
- Commercial Acumen
- Collaborating and Building Relationships

These aren't just buzzwords—they're the core elements that empower L&D leaders to drive impact, create value, and foster growth. While strategic thinking, agility, adaptability, and leveraging technology were contenders, we honed in on qualities that align most closely with real-world scenarios in L&D.

This focus reflects wisdom from seasoned L&D leaders we've been fortunate to know and work alongside. Their insights remind us that exceptional leadership isn't about checking boxes; it's about mastering what truly matters and making it count.

With thanks to

Martyn Bullard
Ron Edwards
Chara Balasubramaniam
Melanie Lepine



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