



FROM Order-Takers TO Advisors

A Practical Guide to Building Influence Muscles in the L&D Function

When execution alone no longer defines L&D's value, these four influence muscles offer strength and strategy.

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Introduction

01

We Are Standing At The End Of An Era

For decades, L&D added value by designing programs, building content, and delivering solutions on demand. That model worked when access to expertise was scarce, and learning creation required specialized teams.

Today, that reality has changed. AI is rapidly automating much of what once defined traditional L&D solutioning, including content creation, personalization, curation, and even elements of instructional design. What used to take months can now happen in days. What once differentiated teams is quickly becoming a baseline expectation.

In this new era, execution alone is no longer enough. The organizations that will continue to invest in L&D aren't looking for teams that can simply *build learning*. They're looking for partners who can help them think, decide, and act differently in a world of constant change.

The examples that follow are drawn from composite scenarios based on common challenges we see across organizations.

You know the pattern. A department head emails with a request: *"We need training on time management. Can you build something by next quarter?"* Your L&D team springs into action. They conduct a needs analysis, design engaging modules, and launch the program on schedule. Completion rates are decent. Satisfaction scores are fine.

But six months later, nothing has changed. Meetings still run over. Deadlines are still missed. The department head is disappointed, your team is frustrated, and the cycle repeats, this time with a request for a *communication skills* course.

This is the **order-taker trap**, and it's the single biggest reason L&D functions struggle to drive business impact. You're executing requests, not solving problems. You're a service provider, not a strategic partner. The way out isn't better instructional design.

It's a fundamental shift in operating mode: **from order-taker to trusted advisor**.

The Core Problem:

02

The Influence Gap

Most L&D professionals are highly skilled in adult learning theory, experience design, facilitation, and technology. What they're rarely trained in are organizational dynamics, stakeholder influence, and business decision-making.

This creates an **influence gap** that can be defined as the space between L&D's technical expertise and its ability to shape priorities, challenge assumptions, and ensure learning actually changes performance.

One global services organization learned this the hard way. Their L&D team launched a leadership program that executives publicly praised. Yet six months later, funding quietly dried up. Why? Because while the program was well-designed, no one could clearly articulate the business problem it solved, who owned the outcome, or how success would be measured beyond satisfaction scores. Bridging the influence gap isn't a soft skill. It's a strategic imperative.

The Advisor Mindset: Solving Problems, Not Filling Orders

Trusted advisors don't wait to be told what to build. They diagnose before they prescribe. They reframe requests into business conversations. And they accept accountability for outcomes and not just delivery. Through our work with L&D teams across industries, we've identified four influence muscles that enable this shift. This isn't advice. It's a system.

The Four Influence Muscles of a Trusted L&D Advisor

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Influence Muscle 1: Business Translation

Advisors speak the language of *results*, not learning objectives.

The order-taker says: "We'll deliver a four-module leadership program with an 85% satisfaction score."

The advisor says: "We'll co-create a solution that increases internal promotion readiness by 25%, reducing external hiring costs within 18 months."

Example: A manufacturing company asked L&D for a *first-time manager program*. Instead of accepting the request at face value, the learning strategist asked what prompted it. The real issue wasn't capability; it was retention. Newly promoted managers were leaving within a year, driving up replacement costs. The learning strategist reframed the initiative around manager effectiveness tied to attrition data and partnered with HR to track outcomes.

Result: The initiative showed early indicators of positive change, giving leaders greater confidence in the approach and strengthening the case for continued focus on the underlying business issue.

Your move: In stakeholder meetings, replace learning objectives with business outcomes. Use the *therefore-so-that* chain: *We will do X, therefore achieve Y, so that we can impact Z's business goal.*

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Influence Muscle 2: Stakeholder Influence

Advisors don't rely on authority; they build coalitions. Order-takers respond to the loudest voice or the highest title. Advisors map the political landscape before designing a solution.

Example: A healthcare organization launched a cross-functional training initiative that stalled after rollout. Managers deprioritized it, and adoption flatlined. When L&D revisited the effort using a power-commitment map, they realized the biggest influencer, a respected operations director, had never been engaged. The learning strategist repositioned the initiative as a pilot with the director team, incorporated their feedback, and invited them to share results with peers.

Result: The initiative showed early indicators of positive change, giving leaders greater confidence in the approach and strengthening the case for continued focus on the underlying business issue.

Your move: Before any major initiative, answer the following questions:

- Who is our champion?
- Who is our biggest skeptic?
- What would move each one to active support?

The Four Influence Muscles of a Trusted L&D Advisor

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Influence Muscle 3: Evidence & Credibility

Advisors build credibility with evidence, not enthusiasm. Order-takers report activity metrics: completions, attendance, and time spent. Advisors tell a performance story using three types of data:

- **Leading indicators:** pilots, skill assessments, behavior observations
- **Lagging indicators:** performance metrics, promotion rates, quality scores
- **Human data:** real stories that show behavior change

Example: An L&D team supporting a sales enablement initiative stopped reporting course completions and instead tracked deal-cycle time and manager coaching behaviors. They paired the data with a short story from a sales manager who changed how they prepared reps for customer conversations.

Result: The initiative showed early indicators of positive change, giving leaders greater confidence in the approach and strengthening the case for continued focus on the underlying business issue.

Your move: Create a one-page business case for every initiative that is framed like an investment proposal, not a course description.

The Four Influence Muscles of a Trusted L&D Advisor

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Influence Muscle 4: Diagnostic Consulting

Advisors diagnose before they prescribe.

Order-takers ask: "What training do you want?"

Advisors ask:

- "What problem are you trying to solve?"
- "What happens if it isn't solved?"
- "What have you already tried?"

Example: A technology team requested a communication workshop. Through deeper inquiry, L&D discovered the real issue was decision ambiguity; roles and authority were unclear. Training alone wouldn't fix it. L&D partnered with leadership to clarify decision rights, then supported the change with targeted learning.

Result: The initiative showed early indicators of positive change, giving leaders greater confidence in the approach and strengthening the case for continued focus on the underlying business issue.

Your move: Train your team in humble inquiry. The first meeting should be 80% listening, 20% talking.

The Advisor Engagement Model 04

(What Changes in Practice)

Every request moves through four deliberate stages: diagnose, align, design, and prove. This operating rhythm turns influence from an individual skill into a team capability.

01

Diagnose

Clarify the business problem, risks, and success measures

02

Align

Map stakeholders, secure a champion, surface objections

03

Design

Co-create solutions tied to measurable outcomes

04

Prove

Pilot, measure impact, and tell the story

The Advisor Engagement Model

(What Changes in Practice)

04

Two Tactical Plays You Can Start Next Week

1. The Diagnostic Pre-Mortem

Before your next kickoff, ask stakeholders: “Imagine it’s one year from now and this initiative has failed. What went wrong?” This surfaces risks early, builds shared ownership, and positions L&D as a facilitator of success.

2. The Pilot Partnership

Stop asking for organization-wide buy-in. Start with one supportive leader. “Let’s run a focused pilot with your team, measure outcomes, and use your success story as proof.” Pilots reduce risk and create internal advocates.

The Advisor Engagement Model 04

(What Changes in Practice)

When an External Partner Makes Sense

Shifting from order-taker to advisor is hard, especially when old expectations are deeply ingrained. External partners often help by:

- Coaching L&D teams in real time on influence skills
- Co-designing early advisor-mode initiatives
- Providing external credibility with senior leadership
- The goal isn't dependency, it's acceleration.

Self-Assessment

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Auditing influence gaps can go a long way to finding a long-term, sustainable solution for persistent challenges. Below is a short self-assessment designed to help you reflect on how your L&D function shows up today, not in theory, but in day-to-day practice.

Most L&D teams are strong in one or two muscles and exposed in the others. Their influence doesn't consistently match the value they deliver. Use the statements below to reflect honestly on how your function operates today. For each one, mark the option that best reflects your current reality.

There are no right or wrong answers. The goal is to identify where influence consistently works and where it breaks down under pressure. Answer each statement based on what typically happens, not what you intend or aspire to do.

Patterns matter more than scores. This isn't about being "good" or "bad." It's about understanding where influence is strong and where it breaks down.

Self-Assessment

05

Influence Muscle 1: Business Translation

What Your Responses Likely Mean

If most of your responses here are “Sometimes” or “Rarely,” your L&D function is likely delivering quality work but struggling to clearly connect it to business results. Leaders may appreciate the effort, but still question the impact.

One Behavior to Practice

Commit to this for the next 60–90 days: Before designing any solution, clearly define the business problem you are trying to solve and the business outcome that needs to change.

Example

Instead of starting with, “We need a leadership program,” start with, “We are trying to reduce first-year manager turnover.”

Statement	Consistently True	Sometimes True	Rarely True
We routinely reframe training requests into clearly defined business problems before designing solutions.			
For major initiatives, we can articulate which business metrics are intended to change and why.			
Our success measures go beyond satisfaction and completion data.			
Stakeholders can easily explain the business value of our work in their own words.			

Self-Assessment

05

Influence Muscle 2: Stakeholder Influence

What Your Responses Likely Mean

If several responses here are “Rarely,” influence may depend on individual relationships rather than a consistent approach. Initiatives may stall after launch because the right people weren’t fully engaged early on.

One Behavior to Practice

Commit to this for the next 60–90 days: For every major initiative, intentionally identify one champion and one potential skeptic and engage both early.

Example

Before design begins, ask: “Who needs to actively support this for it to succeed, and who might quietly resist it?”

Statement	Consistently True	Sometimes True	Rarely True
We proactively identify executive champions for strategic initiatives.			
We anticipate resistance and address it early rather than reacting after rollout.			
We understand which voices truly influence decisions, regardless of title.			
We engage stakeholders as partners in shaping solutions, not just approving them.			

Self-Assessment

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Influence Muscle 3: Evidence & Credibility

What Your Responses Likely Mean

If your answers lean toward “Sometimes,” your team may be reporting activity rather than impact. Leaders may see effort, but not enough evidence to guide future decisions.

One Behavior to Practice

Commit to this for the next 60–90 days: Report outcomes in a way that helps leaders decide what to continue, change, or stop.

Example

Instead of only sharing completion rates, share one business-relevant metric and one real example of behavior change.

Statement	Consistently True	Sometimes True	Rarely True
We tell a clear performance story using leading indicators, lagging indicators, and real examples.			
We report outcomes in language leaders recognize as decision-relevant.			
We use pilots or experiments to reduce risk before scaling initiatives.			
Our data helps leaders decide what to do next, not just what already happened.			

Self-Assessment

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Influence Muscle 4: Diagnostic Consulting

What Your Responses Likely Mean

If many responses here are “Rarely,” L&D may be brought in after decisions have already been made, which often results in well-designed solutions that don’t address the real problem.

One Behavior to Practice

Commit to this for the next 60–90 days: In your first meeting with stakeholders, focus on understanding the problem before discussing solutions.

Example

Spend the first half of the conversation asking questions like:

- “What’s happening now?”
- “What happens if this doesn’t change?”
- “What have you already tried?”

Statement	Consistently True	Sometimes True	Rarely True
Our first conversation focuses on understanding the problem, not defining the solution.			
We ask questions that surface root causes, not just symptoms.			
We challenge assumptions respectfully when training is not the right answer.			
We are invited into conversations early (before decisions are already made).			

Important: If this section is mostly “Rarely,” strengthening the other influence muscles will be difficult. Diagnostic consulting is foundational.

Self-Assessment

05

Interpreting Your Results: Where to Start

Use these simple guidelines to decide which influence muscle to focus on first:

- If your responses were “Rarely” in the **diagnostic consulting** section, strengthen that muscle first.
- If your responses in the **business translation** section were weak, expect ongoing credibility challenges.
- If your responses in the **evidence & credibility** were lacking, influence will fade after rollout.
- If your responses in the **stakeholder influence** section are inconsistent, adoption will be uneven.

Do not try to fix everything at once. Choose one influence muscle to deliberately strengthen this quarter before moving on to another.

Consider Partnership

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Influence doesn't improve through effort or good intentions alone. It improves when L&D teams adopt shared language, consistent engagement goals, and operating rhythms that support advisory work.

External partnerships often accelerate **progress** by helping teams translate insight into repeatable practices and **measurable** outcomes.

If your L&D function is ready to move beyond order-taking and start influencing real business outcomes, this is exactly the kind of shift ELB Learning® helps organizations make. Our consultants partner with L&D leaders to build advisory capability, redesign operating models, and co-create initiatives that withstand executive scrutiny and move the needle.

To explore how this kind of consultancy could support your team, request a call with our strategists.