

Strategic learning & development - aligning growth with goals

Anton Visser | Group COO | SA Business School | antonv@alefbetlearning.com |

An effective learning and development (L&D) program is not just about checking compliance boxes. It's about aligning learning initiatives with both corporate strategic goals and the career ambitions of employees.

A well-designed L&D program offers a clear vision of its expected impact on both individual performance and overall business growth. Yet, too often, L&D initiatives fail to meet strategic business objectives, wasting valuable resources and leaving employees feeling uninspired and disengaged.

Why L&D programs fail to take off

Many corporate L&D programs fall short due to several common pitfalls:

■ Misalignment with business goals

When training is not linked to the specific skills needed to achieve business outcomes, its relevance and impact are diluted, often leading to minimal results.

■ Low engagement and relevance

Generic or uninspiring training fails to capture employee interest, resulting in poor information retention and application. Training that doesn't address real, on-the-job needs will have little lasting impact.

■ Lack of support for skill application

Without reinforcement and follow-up, new skills learned often fade away as employees revert to old habits, missing the opportunity for long-term behavioural change.

■ Weak measurement and evaluation

Too often, L&D lacks clear metrics for assessing impact. Without a way to measure return on investment, it's impossible to gauge whether the program supports business objectives or needs adjustment.

■ Cultural and leadership gaps

A supportive culture and leadership buy-in are critical. Without these, employees may struggle to prioritise learning, viewing it as a low priority, forced initiative instead of an investment in their future.

■ One-size-fits-all approach

Standardised programs that ignore individual learning styles and expertise levels can alienate participants, limiting the program's overall effectiveness.



■ Lack of flexibility and adaptability

As business environments evolve, so too must L&D. Programs that remain static and outdated quickly lose relevance and fail to meet emerging needs.

Building a learning culture

For a truly strategic L&D program, organisations must embed learning within their culture. A strong L&D strategy requires an understanding of the business's short, medium, and long-term objectives, as well as alignment with each team's role in achieving these goals.

Establishing a clear continuum for learning over the coming years, tied to business strategy, can foster greater employee engagement and support, helping people see how their development ties directly into the broader mission.

Bridging the gap in L&D investment

Often, companies invest heavily in leadership development while neglecting entry-level training. This leads to a disparity between customised programs for senior leaders and generic, off-the-shelf courses for lower-level employees.

Both ends of the spectrum are critical - a tailored approach across all levels ensures that each employee feels valued and sees their role in the business's success.

Designing an intentional learning pathway

Our intentional approach to L&D emphasises relevance, alignment and impact:

■ Strategic justification

Every L&D program should have a clear, business-aligned purpose. Randomly selecting training programs in the hope something "sticks" is ineffective and costly.

■ Human-centred learning

Training must cater to both individual career aspirations and organisational capability needs, balancing personal

growth with business transformation.

■ Focus on change and stretch

Learning should be transformative, providing the right level of challenge to promote growth without overwhelming participants.

■ Action-oriented design

Learning should be activity-driven and applicable on the job, empowering employees to apply new skills immediately.

■ A journey, not an event

Agile learning design with participant feedback ensures accountability and program relevance. Employees become active participants in their development.

■ Stakeholder integration

L&D works best with buy-in from all stakeholders - learners, managers, HR, and facilitators - ensuring the training is relevant and supported throughout.

■ Impact-driven metrics

Using business-relevant metrics to assess L&D outcomes demonstrates clear value, linking learning achievements directly to business performance.

Turning learning into competitive advantage

Aligning L&D with business strategy ensures a higher return on investment. Employees who see their training's relevance are more engaged and willing to take ownership of their growth, supported by line managers and leaders who are actively involved in the process.

This approach transforms "what is learned" into "what is applied," positioning the business and its people for a competitive edge in a rapidly changing landscape and world of work. ■