

Successfully Build an Essential L&D Department

David Macon



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AUTHOR

David Macon

David Macon, CPTD, is founder of trainleadgrow.com and host of the *Train, Lead, Grow* podcast. During his career, he has gained extensive experience launching and scaling L&D teams within a variety of organizations. From a department of one to leading large-scale learning departments, Macon has learned what it takes to create a thriving L&D team on any budget.

Content Manager, Managing the Learning Function

Eliza Blanchard, APTD

Editor, *TD at Work*

Patty Gaul

Managing Editor

Joy Metcalf

Senior Graphic Designer

Shirley E.M. Raybuck

New is exciting. From new shoes to trying a different dish at your favorite restaurant, the unparalleled allure of something new is universal. Fresh experiences have the power to transform our perspective and enrich our lives. Novel ideas and achievements advance the world and inspire future generations. Creating something original is both thrilling and challenging, often pushing us to grow in unique and different ways.

For many talent development professionals, the thought of launching a new department is incredibly exciting. For some, that represents seemingly endless opportunities for creativity and experimentation. For others, it is a chance to test their skills and abilities.

Some TD professionals wait their entire careers for a shot at building a department from scratch. Conversely, it is not uncommon for leaders without a training background to be suddenly tasked with training an entire organization. How individuals arrive

at the precipice of starting a new department is less important than what they do with the opportunity.

Launching a department is thrilling, but it is also a ton of work. Navigating the hurdles, setbacks, and resistance can be physically, mentally, and emotionally draining. The excitement of leading the endeavor can quickly diminish if you are not constantly refocusing on the big picture and celebrating victories along the way. You may be wondering whether it is worth all the blood, sweat, and tears. In my experience, it is.

Some of my most cherished personal and professional experiences have occurred while I was setting up and scaling new L&D departments. I have learned over the years that starting strong, planning effectively, and building relationships are critical to launching successfully.

In this issue of *TD at Work*, I will:

- Identify internal and external factors to consider as you plan for the department.
- Outline an approach for starting the department with short-, medium-, and long-term objectives in mind.
- Share recommendations for establishing and leveraging strategic partnerships.
- Describe methods to increase efficiency and maximize impact.
- Review when and how to adjust your growth strategy to meet changing business needs.

Assess Internal and External Factors

A variety of factors will influence department growth. Before you go wild developing content and rolling out new training courses, evaluate the internal and external landscape surrounding your new department. Bypassing or rushing an external and internal assessment is a recipe for frustration.

Internal Analysis

With so many factors to assess, where do you begin? In many cases, it is imperative to quickly demonstrate value to stakeholders. Start by reviewing various aspects within the company. You do not need to investigate every tiny detail to be successful. Instead, start by evaluating the following key elements.

The Organization

When considering the internal landscape, first gain a clear understanding of current organizational objectives. In many cases, the company approved this new department with specific goals and objectives in mind. Failing to understand how your team is expected to contribute to those objectives can create immediate friction and raise concerns about the department's necessity. Furthermore, seeking additional funding and personnel will be nearly impossible if it is not clear how your team will contribute to the company objectives.

In contrast, immediately rolling out learning initiatives that align with business objectives will garner positive attention. If you can highlight each initiative's tangible impact, you will be able to make a persuasive argument for expanding your staff.

The Team

Define who will be a part of your team before, during, and after the department launch. This is particularly relevant if you need to make immediate hiring decisions. If you are fortunate enough to obtain approval to hire additional trainers, instructional designers, or other TD personnel, prioritize that immediately. Quickly hiring talented team members will help minimize your workload and increase diversity of thought, which will enhance your other efforts.

However, while hiring speed is important, quality is more so. Avoid rushing to fill your roster if you aren't finding quality talent. The right staff may be worth the wait.

When building from the ground up, think about the different skill sets you'll require. For example, if the department will be producing an array of e-learning content, recruit personnel with backgrounds in instructional design, microlearning, and gamification. However, if the department will focus on a narrow course offering with multiple trainers and training sessions, look for individuals skilled in classroom facilitation, learning management system administration, training coordination, or similar experience.

With the growing emphasis on data in training and development, you may want personnel with strong backgrounds in reporting, data analysis, or evaluating learning impact. If you have a smaller L&D team, it may be prudent

to hire a generalist who can develop, deliver, and evaluate content rather than hiring multiple specialists. Organizational and department needs likely will heavily influence your recruiting strategy.

I have always been a proponent of hiring my own team, but it is a common practice for companies to select the team based on the skill sets of employees in other departments. Perhaps leadership has been planning for the L&D department and has already identified staff members and their specific roles and responsibilities. In that scenario, meet one-on-one with each team member to assess their strengths and abilities. Although it can be frustrating to have your team picked for you, this approach has advantages.

For example, you can now use the time that you would have spent screening, interviewing, and onboarding to instead develop effective team dynamics and strengthen each team member's skills. Additionally, established employees often have a working knowledge of the company, existing relationships, and beneficial insights.

Finally, some employers will allocate personnel on a short-term basis to help launch new departments. That can help as your team gets started, but plan for sustaining the department after that help is gone.

Many times throughout my career, I alone was the new department. If you find yourself in a similar scenario, the assessment phase is straightforward. However, leading a department of one does not necessarily mean doing everything alone. You may have room in your budget to contract a freelance instructional designer or outsource graphic design work to an agency. Additionally, the rise of the gig economy has led to massive growth in online labor markets, where you can find affordable, high-quality freelancers for short-term engagements.

The Political Landscape

Organizations are full of individuals who have their own goals and agendas, which may diverge or even conflict with organizational or department goals. In many companies, coalitions form and dissolve naturally around compatible goals and aspirations. Remember that when

Build, Buy, and Borrow Talent

Within talent development and HR circles, you will often hear about three prominent people-growth strategies: build, buy, and borrow. Assessing each strategy is important, and your preferred strategy may change as your department grows.

Build. This strategy refers to developing talent internally. The benefits include greater insights into an employee's past performance, pre-established relationships, and a greater understanding of your organization's culture. Additionally, building talent is generally more cost-effective. Drawbacks include a greater time investment, less experience up front, and fewer specialized skills. Organizations with high turnover or unstable workforces may encounter significant challenges when building talent.

Buy. This strategy refers to hiring skilled individuals from outside the company. The benefits include finding individuals more experienced for the roles, greater specialization, and less employee development time.

Drawbacks, though, include increased labor cost, individuals having less familiarity with the organization or its culture, and fewer opportunities to evaluate applicants prior to hiring. Buying talent can be a great way to inject fresh ideas into your department or enhance the team's overall capabilities.

Borrow. This strategy refers to leveraging freelancers, contractors, or consultants. It can be a great short-term solution to use while developing talent. It can also be useful if you need highly specialized skills for a brief amount of time. The drawbacks are similar to those of the buy strategy—borrowed talent will have limited insight into your organization and will require more direction to deliver an end product that meets your needs. It can also be expensive to hire freelance specialists, or they may have limited availability to assist with your project. However, the added cost will only be for as long as you need the individuals, which is typically brief.