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Top tips from three learning leaders who turned L&D into a force

How they built strategy, influence and results that shape the business

Turning a seat at the table into real influence

At WeLearn, we're big believers in advice that's earned in the real world, based on practice (vs theory!).

So this year we brought three successful learning leaders on stage at TICE — leaders who've done the hard work and turned L&D's 'seat' into genuine pull over what their businesses build, measure, and fund.

Then we sat down with each of them afterwards to capture the detail. We gathered some brilliant advice — and we didn't want to keep it to ourselves. So here it is!

Meet the three

Karen Ganitsky
Global Sales Training Leader, 3M

Originally from Colombia, Karen brings 25+ years across training management, operations, recruiting and hiring, Lean Six Sigma, manufacturing, supply chain and customer service. She has built 3M's global sales training team and made it a genuine partner to the business in barely two years.

Brian Jarvis
Senior Manager, Learning & Development, WM

Over 15+ years at some of the largest companies in the US, Brian has built learning ecosystems that scale. At WM he puts AI at the center of them, tying his work to faster time-to-proficiency and stronger frontline performance.

Valerie Marsh
Senior Director, Learning & Development, Jushi

Across 25+ years in highly regulated industries, Valerie has led training deÂ velopment and LMS implementation start to finish. She now heads L&D at Jushi, a vertically integrated cannabis company, and is an award-winning speaker and CPTM.

It starts with an honest look in the mirror

Before any of our panelists changed how the business saw them, each looked hard at their own function. Not the version leadership pictured. The real one.

Each found something they weren't looking for. Karen couldn't say cleanly what her team owned. Brian, sure he was already strategic, saw he'd gone deep with a few partners and thin with the rest. Valerie got the biggest surprise: her stakeholders rated her team higher than the team rated itself.

Different gaps. The same honesty. A strategy scorecard assessment helped each of them see it — but the tool isn't the point. The willingness to look is. Real strategy starts when the self-deception ends.

Then they got to work. Ten tips came up again and again, in every conversation. Different industries, different sizes — and the same ten practices.

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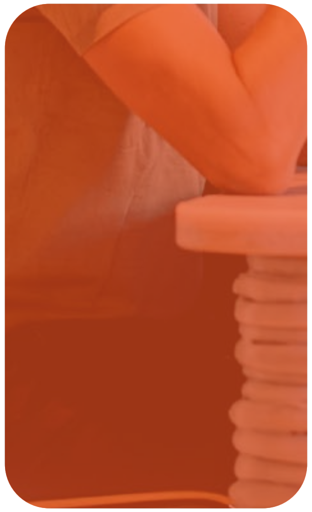
Own your remit



TIP #1

The order is yours to shape, L&D

Every L&D leader has heard the advice: to be strategic, stop being an order taker. This advice is simply wrong. Taking the order is part of the job description. What you can change is what the order is.

That shift happens in the questions asked before the work starts.

- What are we actually solving?
- What does success look like to you?
- Is training even the right fix?

Ask them enough, and the business starts asking for different things.

The strongest leaders treat a request as a starting point. They dig into the problem behind it before committing a single resource — and often find the ask and the need are two different things.

On our panel, Brian described a partner who kept pushing for more training on one issue, sure that was the answer. Brian pulled the call data first. The issue came up too rarely to justify a course; what people needed was a quick reference they could check in the moment. So, L&D addressed the issue, but with a completely different solution.

That's why he holds one question as non-negotiable for everything that reaches his team:

> *"Is this the best use of our capacity?"*

TIP #2

Know when it isn’t training

Some problems can’t be trained away. The real cause could stem from a broken process, a hiring gap, or a system no one has set up properly. Put a course on top of that, and it would fail (while L&D could take the blame).

Knowing when training isn’t the answer comes down to reading the true cause. When it isn’t training, say so — and point to what will actually work to solve the problem.

The best leaders trace a request back to its root before they act. A performance gap can look like a training need on the surface, then turn out to be something structural underneath. Valerie gave an example on the panel. One group came to her certain they needed training on a compliance system. She looked closer. The problem wasn’t knowledge — no one had defined who owned what, so tasks slipped through the gaps. A course would have taught people to run a system that was broken by design. She sent the process back to be fixed first.

Her position is blunt:

> *“This isn’t a training problem. It’s a systems problem, a hiring problem. Until that’s fixed, training won’t help you.”*

TIP #3

Guard your capacity

Every yes costs your team. Time, attention, or a slot that another project could have used. So the answer can't always be yes. Deciding what L&D owns and doesn't is where a lot of the value sits.

This gets harder when the work looks helpful. When a partner needs a hand and your team can deliver, it's hard to say no. The problem is, if you step in for additional work too often, that becomes the job and your team ends up defined by that versus what it set out to do.

The strongest leaders protect the line at both ends: what they take on, and what they turn down. Brian draws it in writing. When his team steps outside its lane to help, he records it as exactly that — a one-off, not the new normal. Otherwise the stretch becomes the expecÂ tation. Karen screens requests as they arrive. When one isn't training, she says so, and points to another way to reach the goal:

> *"Flat out, I tell them that's not training — and I give them an alternative."*

The alternative is what makes it work. A no with a better path will always build trust.

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Speak their language

TIP #4

Speak the business's language

We all know leadership isn't interested in completions and satisfaction scores. It's all about revenue, retention, lower costs, and less risk — and talking to leaders in their terms so they lean in.

This means dropping the L&D vocabulary. Retention curves, andragogy, learning objectives — none of it means anything outside our function. Worse, it can signal that L&D lives in its own world, apart from the business.

Top leaders find the words the business already uses and frame their work in those. Valerie for example made this her rule. She stopped talking about learning theory and started talking about attrition rates, ramp time, and the cost of replacing a badged employee. The business heard her differently at once. Brian described matching the word to the role of the person he was addressing. A sales leader hears about revenue and deals closed. An operations leader hears about proficiency and time to competence. The thinking behind it is that you're modifying your language to resonate with the person you're speaking to and what matters to them.

During the panel, Karen summed it up:

> *Put the data in their language, and tie it back to their strategy.*

Sometimes one word does the work. On the panel, Karen deÂscribed renaming "soft skills" as "power skills." In a traditional, industrial sales culture, "soft skills" made people tune out. "Power skills" got them to listen.

TIP #5

Put your impact in money

Speaking the business's language has a final step. Put the impact in money. Leaders pay attention to a dollar figure. And a dollar figure gets reinforced and repeated in budget meetings and strategy reviews,so it's an opportunity to really influence.

Most learning teams report what's easy to count and leave the financial case unmade. The leaders who earn influence have very different practices. Brian, for example, makes a habit of it. When his redesign cut ramp time by sixteen days, he didn't stop at the days. He worked out what those days were worth — the salary cost, the earlier productivity — and put an actual number on it. That figure funded a new role on his team.

Valerie does the same with cost. She switched a training vendor and saved the business thousands, then made sure the saving was seen. Karen reaches for revenue when she can get it, working with marketing to put a dollar value on sales won post-training.

To do this, L&D doesn't need to be a financial wiz. What sets these leaders apart is the discipline to do the research and investigate the math every time.

Prove it

TIP #6

Measure the value, not the learning itself

We have no shortage of ways to measure learning. Kirkpatrick, Phillips, LTEM — sixty years of models. Nearly all of them answer the same question: did the learning work? Whereas leadership is always asking a different one. Was it worth it, and what was the true impact?

Proving people learned something is not the same as showing what it was worth to the business. One satisfies L&D. The other earns investment and budget.

L&D that succeeds today decides what to measure up front. These teams pick the business outcome they want to move, find the person who owns that number, and agree to track it together.

Once that's in place, 'proof' takes care of itself.

Valerie gave an example of this. Before her team builds anything, she asks what the business is trying to move, then goes looking for the starting number — the current attrition rate, the ramp time, the cost of a bad hire. Brian will set a baseline on day one and check it again at forty-five days, so he can see how people are performing once they're back in the job. Karen has a different method. She brings a recognized framework to her stakeholders and agrees with them where the team stands and where it's heading, so the measure is always one they've agreed to.

For all three, the goal is the same: pick a KPI (key performance indicator) that matters, agree on it with whoever owns it, and start measuring from day one.

TIP #7

The best proof lives outside the LMS

The LMS knows who completed what. It knows almost nothing about whether the work changed afterwards. The numbers that prove L&D's value live in the systems the business already runs on — the CRM, the sales dashboard, the attrition and ramp-time reports.

And that's where top leaders go looking. Karen, for example, ran a program for sales managers and measured it carefully — completions, post-program assessments, all the standard metrics L&D owns. Then the real proof turned up somewhere else. Someone outside L&D pulled a CRM report and found sales activity had jumped significantly year on year. Her team hadn't set out to move that number, but the CRM was what showed them they had.

Karen puts it plainly:

> *"The best data I ever got never came from an LMS."*

If access to these systems is a problem, Brian had a suggestion: build the proof yourself rather than go without. When a business partner wouldn't release the numbers he needed, he measured what he could reach — the salary cost of a role, the days of ramp time his program saved — and turned that into a figure the business couldn't argue with.

TIP #8

Get the data owner on your side

Tip 7 showed where the best proof lives: in the business's existing systems (definitely not the LMS!). But, as many of us know, just knowing where the data sits doesn't mean you can reach it.

Someone in sales, finance, or marketing usually owns those systems, and the data inside them. Accessing it comes down to influence — you have to bring the owner on side.

The best leaders in L&D do that by making the case that measuring it serves the owner too.

Take Karen. She never saw the sales figures behind her external training, because marketing owned them. So she convinced marketing that tracking the return on that training mattered to them as much as to her. Now that team pulls the numbers, interprets them, and sends her the result — sales won, in dollars. She influenced the people who could act, and they acted.

Valerie is more direct. When she needs a figure the business holds — a turnover rate, a hiring cost — she asks the owner for it, framed around a problem they both want solved. More often than not they hand it over. Sometimes they realize they should have been tracking it all along.

The same approach works whoever owns the number. Find them. Show them why measuring it matters to them. Partner with them to track it.

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Build lasting influence

TIP #9

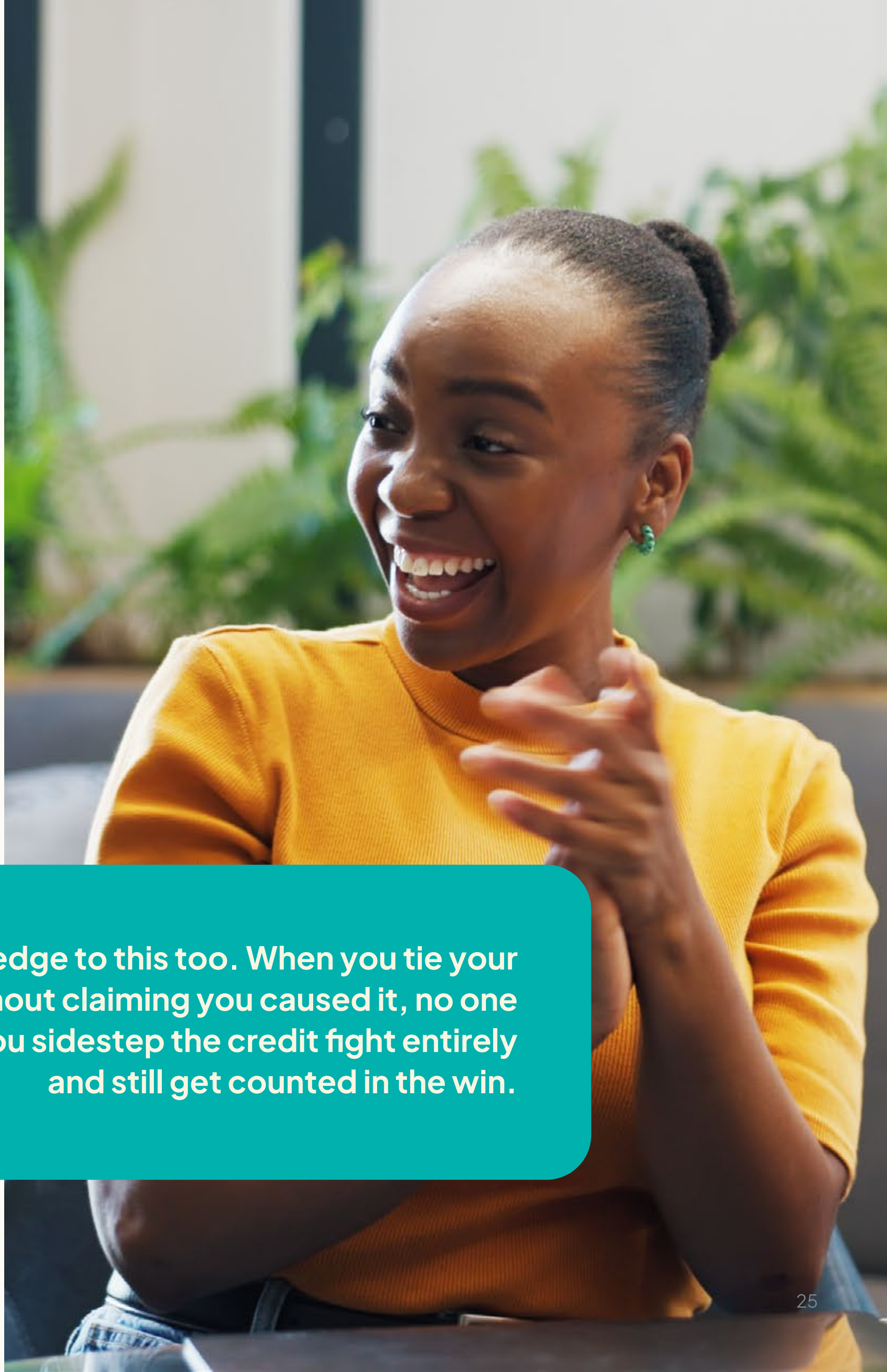
Share the credit

A business result almost never has a single cause. Attrition drops, and training helped, but so did a pay change, a better hiring process, and two weak managers moving on. L&D that claims the whole win looks naive, and the claim invites someone to pull it apart.

The leaders who keep their influence do the exact opposite. They show what their work contributed and emphasize the shared credit. It reads as honest, and honesty in the long run earns greater trust.

Here's what that looks like in practice. Valerie saw a big drop in turnover after a new onboarding program. She could have owned it. Instead she pointed out that HR was restructuring at the same time, and poor managers were being moved out. Her take was that the team made it happen together. That candor is exactly why the business believes her when she does claim an impact.

Karen frames L&D as an agent of change rather than the source of it. Her team helps a result along and makes it hold. She never pretends they delivered it single-handed, so her stakeholders trust the numbers she brings.



There's a strategic edge to this too. When you tie your work to an outcome without claiming you caused it, no one can argue you didn't. You sidestep the credit fight entirely and still get counted in the win.

TIP #10

Patience is the strategy

None of this happens fast. Reshaping how a business sees L&D takes years. You don't transform a learning function in twelve months!

We love Karen's take on this. She lives by three words, each starting with P: passion, persistence, patience.

Passion is the fuel. Leading L&D often means working against the current, with progress slow and resistance steady. The drive to keep going is what gets you through it.

Persistence is refusing to give up. Every stakeholder who says no is a reason to come back with a sharper case, not a reason to walk away.

Patience is the one leaders lose first. The business expects a fast fix, when the real proof takes months to show. You hold your nerve while the numbers catch up.

Passion and persistence come fairly naturally. Patience is harder to sustain, and it carries a function through the long haul.

One more thing runs through every conversation we had: none of these leaders did it alone. Karen credits her team for the real work, while she sets the direction. Each leader here rebuilt their team to get where they are — hiring for the gaps, moving people into roles that suited them, giving those with potential room to grow. Good strategy still needs the people to deliver it.

That's the work. Slow, shared, and worth it for the leaders who see it through.

A note on AI

We asked each leader where AI fits into their work.

Here's the honest state of things. AI is already changing how learning gets made. It can draft a course in minutes, translate it across languages, and give a learner somewhere to practice with instant feedback. What it can't do is read your culture, weigh context, or hold the trust a person builds over time. So the real question for L&D isn't whether to use AI. It's which parts of the work you hand to it, and which parts stay with people.

Here are three very different takes from our panel:

Karen puts AI to work across her team's output. She uses it to build courses far faster than her team could by hand, translate them into dozens of languages, and run roleplay sessions where reps practice a sales conversation and get immediate feedback. For a small team serving a global business, this is how the work scales.

Brian keeps AI in a well-defined lane. He sees L&D's role as building people's confidence and skill to use it well, and he stops there on purpose. When the business asks L&D to own AI workflows and answer for the results, his advice is to politely refuse. Own something you can't control, he says, and you'll carry the blame when it breaks. Decisions about AI processes belong with the team responsible for AI governance, not L&D.

Valerie starts from how people learn, and works back to the tools. Her attention stays on the practice and feedback that helps a skill take hold, and she brings AI in where it serves that, not ahead of it. Tools change often. The fundamentals of learning underneath them don't.

Whichever way you go, make it a deliberate choice. Decide which parts of the work AI should touch, and stand by that when the business pushes for more.

So there you have it

Ten tips from three leaders who've earned real influence by shaping what their businesses ask for, proving the worth of their work in numbers that leadership trusts, and keeping their strategy tied to what the business is trying to achieve.

Each one of these leaders started in the same place: an honest look at where their function actually stood. That look in the mirror gave them a roadmap — a clear read on what was working, what was falling short, and where to push next.

The great news is you can start there too!

The WeLearn Learning Strategy Scorecard measures your function across six dimensions of L&D maturity and shows you exactly where you stand.

Because influence is earned through relevance, and demonstrated through results.

Take the scorecard on the QR code

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