

How defining the right problem strengthens learning investment and impact

**A practice-led insights paper from
Melbourne Business School Executive Education
and the Future of Learning Advisory Group**





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This paper is for learning and capability leaders, business sponsors, people and culture executives, organisational development practitioners, and others responsible for commissioning or evaluating significant capability investments.	
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Foreword

At Melbourne Business School, we see every day that organisations are asking more of learning and development.

Capability is expected to support strategy, improve performance, enable transformation and prepare people for work that is changing rapidly. At the same time, leaders are rightly asking for clearer evidence that investments in learning are creating value.

This is not always an easy connection to demonstrate. Learning takes place within complex organisational systems, where performance is also shaped by leadership, culture, incentives, technology, processes and the opportunity people have to apply what they have learned. It is therefore rarely enough to assess a program only after it has been delivered and ask whether it worked.

Starting Upstream explores a simple but important proposition: the credibility of learning impact depends substantially on the quality of the decisions made before a learning solution is designed. What is the business problem? What is causing it? Is learning genuinely part of the answer? What needs to change in the workplace, and what evidence would sponsors and stakeholders recognise as meaningful?

These questions encourage learning teams and business leaders to spend more time defining the problem and agreeing the intended value of an investment before moving to delivery. They also recognise that learning should not automatically be the response to every performance challenge. Sometimes the most useful contribution an L&D team can make is to help an organisation identify that the real constraint sits elsewhere.

This paper reflects Melbourne Business School's commitment to practice-led inquiry. Through the Future of Learning Advisory Group, leaders from different organisations have brought together their experience, tested ideas in live settings and openly shared what worked, what did not and what requires further exploration. The resulting insights are deliberately practical. They are not presented as a definitive formula for calculating financial return, but as a stronger foundation for making capability investment decisions and building credible evidence of value over time.

We are grateful to the members of FLAG for their generosity, curiosity and willingness to experiment. We hope the paper, and particularly the practical diagnostic it introduces, will help learning leaders and business sponsors have better conversations about the problems they are trying to solve, the role learning can play and how success should be understood.



Professor Jenny George
Dean and Director
Melbourne Business School

A handwritten signature in grey ink that reads "Jm George".



Magnus Gittins
Chief Executive Education Officer
Melbourne Business School

A handwritten signature in grey ink that reads "Magnus Gittins".

Foreword

FLAG Chair

One of the privileges of chairing FLAG is seeing the diversity of organisations represented around the table.

While our industries, workforces and business challenges differ, a consistent theme emerged throughout our discussions over the past year: learning and capability have become increasingly important to organisational success.

As learning assumes a more strategic role, so too does the expectation that organisations can understand and demonstrate the value it creates. For learning leaders, business sponsors and executives alike, the conversation has moved beyond whether capability matters to how its contribution can be understood, strengthened and evidenced.

What attracted the group to this topic was not simply the question of how to measure ROI, but whether the conversation about ROI has been focused on the right part of the process. We were struck by the idea that the quality of evaluation may depend less on the measures selected at the end of a program and more on the decisions made before it begins.

The group explored a simple but important proposition: if organisations are not clear about the problem they are trying to solve, the outcomes they hope to achieve, and the role learning is expected to play, demonstrating impact becomes unnecessarily difficult. Conversely, greater clarity at the outset creates a stronger foundation for both learning success and meaningful evaluation.

This thinking became the catalyst for *Start Upstream*. The paper encourages a broader view of learning impact, that begins with defining the right problem before considering how success will be measured.

We hope the ideas presented here stimulate discussion and provide practical guidance for those seeking to strengthen the connection between capability development and organisational outcomes.

If there is one message that emerges from this work, it is that meaningful evidence of impact begins not only with the evaluation plan, but with a clear understanding of the problem we are trying to solve.



Simon Hann

Chair, Future of Learning Advisory Group (FLAG)



Executive Summary and Findings

Executive summary

Organisations are asking learning and development to do more: enable strategy, support transformation, build workforce adaptability and improve performance. At the same time, business leaders want clearer evidence that capability investment is creating value.

The difficulty is not simply that L&D measures too little. Evaluation often begins after a learning solution has been selected-when the business problem, the behaviour or performance shift, and the evidence stakeholders would recognise as meaningful may not have been clearly agreed.

Start Upstream explores a practical proposition: better evidence of learning value begins before design. It begins by defining the business problem, understanding its root causes, testing whether learning is the right lever, agreeing what needs to change in the workplace, and deciding upfront how progress will be recognised. It highlights the critical importance of understanding what L&D can and can't address.

Melbourne Business School and its Future of Learning Advisory Group (FLAG) explored this proposition through six organisational experiments. Three were completed within the project timeframe, covering leadership enablement, strategic dashboard reporting and business-led evaluation. They provide practice-based insight rather than controlled or causal proof.

Starting upstream does not just improve evaluation. It improves the quality of the learning investment decision itself.

Across the three experiments, five practical insights emerged:

-  The experiments suggested that L&D was perceived as more strategically relevant when it connected learning investment to priority business problems.
-  The upstream approach was consistent, but useful measures were specific to the problem.
-  Stakeholder co-design moved the value conversation from retrospective proof to upfront agreement.
-  Learning became one possible lever-not the default response to every performance problem.
-  Strategic learning investments warranted deeper evaluation; routine learning did not.

The practical implication is straightforward. For significant capability investments, do not begin with a course brief or wait until delivery ends to ask whether the investment worked. Begin with four conversations: the problem, the lever, the value and the evidence.

Authors and Contributors

We thank the members of the Future of Learning Advisory Group (FLAG) and the workshop delegates whose expertise, challenge and generosity helped shape the research frame for this paper. We are particularly grateful to those who designed, commenced and completed organisational experiments, and who contributed the evidence, reflections and write-ups that informed the findings. Their work represents a significant contribution to a complex and persistent challenge for organisations: how to define, measure and demonstrate the value of learning and capability investment.

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About this paper: ethics, data and scope

This project was conducted as a practice-led insight and evaluation activity rather than as a human research study. FLAG members defined and conducted experiments within their own organisations and retained responsibility for collecting, managing and interpreting any evidence generated through those experiments.

Melbourne Business School did not collect primary data from employees or participants, administer surveys or interviews within member organisations, access raw organisational datasets, or receive identifiable individual-level data. MBS's role was to convene the shared research frame, facilitate reflection, and synthesise anonymised evidence and insights provided by FLAG members.

This paper consolidates de-identified organisational insights with the intention of helping inform future practice. It draws on a broad body of research and practice-based insights. References supporting the concepts and claims discussed are provided in the Appendix to maintain readability.

The findings should therefore be read as exploratory, practice-based insights rather than independently validated causal evidence. Differences in organisational context, method, scale and available data also limit direct comparison across the completed experiments.

Why learning value needs to start upstream

The shape of organisations - and their problems - is changing

Organisations are navigating rapid shifts in technology, workforce expectations, demography, economic conditions and the transition to more sustainable forms of work. Structures are becoming more networked, roles are changing faster, and strategic priorities increasingly cut across traditional functional boundaries. The performance problems organisations need to solve are therefore less likely to sit neatly within one team or have one obvious cause.

This changes what is expected of L&D. Capability is no longer viewed only as a development benefit. It is expected to support strategy, enable transformation, reduce risk, lift performance and help people adapt as work changes. Facilitating organisational learning is emerging as a critical capability for leaders. That greater strategic importance brings greater scrutiny: leaders want to know what a learning investment is intended to change, whether it is working and whether it was the right investment in the first place.

For many L&D teams, the response has been to add more measures. Attendance, completion, satisfaction, confidence, knowledge checks and financial estimates can all contribute useful evidence. But more measurement does not automatically create a more credible account of value. If the original problem is vague, the solution has already been fixed or stakeholders have not agreed what success means, evaluation is being asked to reconstruct a value story that was never designed.

Evaluation models help - but they cannot define value for us

Evaluation practice has evolved in response to these expectations. Kirkpatrick¹ helped organisations distinguish reaction, learning, behaviour and results. Phillips² brought financial accountability into the conversation. Theory-driven logic evaluations³ involving articulating theories of change and associated program logics make explicit how an intervention is expected to create change and how that changed will be assessed. Measurement strategy asks organisations to match the depth of evaluation to the importance of the decision. More recently, the Learning Transfer Evaluation Model (LTEM)⁴ has sharpened the distinction between participation, learner perceptions, capability, transfer and the effects of transfer.

These approaches are useful, but no single model provides a universal measure of learning value. Completion and satisfaction can tell us about participation and experience. Confidence and readiness may be useful leading indicators. Behavioural and in-role evidence can show whether learning is transferring into work. Business measures may show whether performance is shifting. The right evidence depends on the problem, the intended change and the decisions stakeholders need to make.

1. Kirkpatrick (1959)

2. Phillips (1998) Thalheimer

(2024) 3. Rogers (2014)

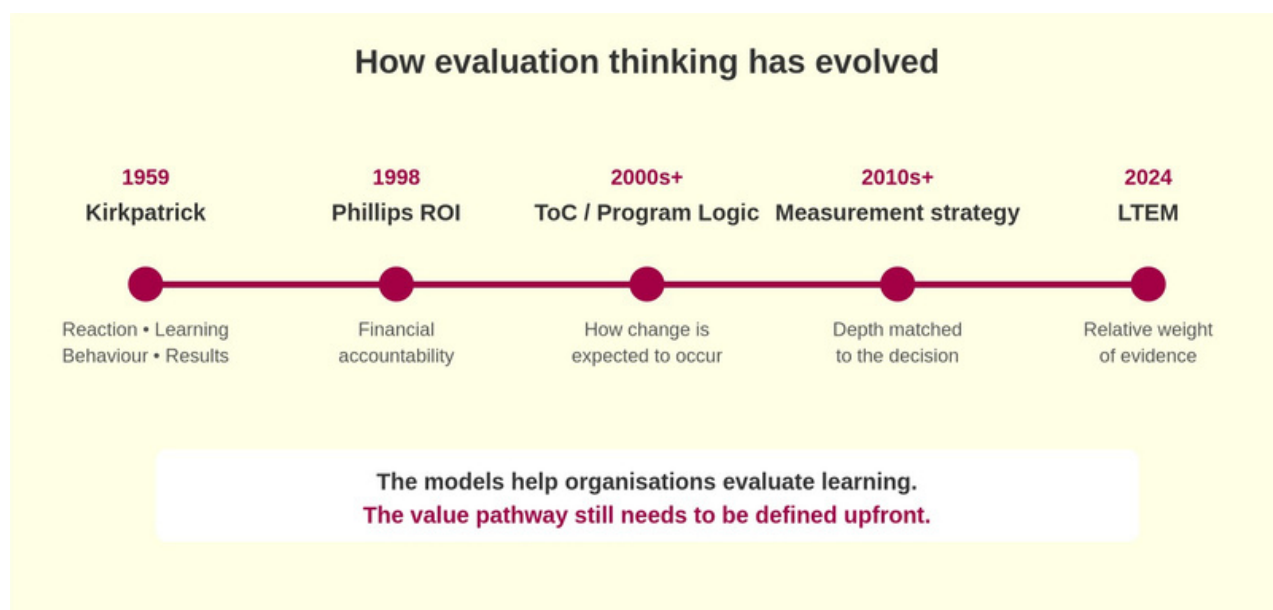
4. Thalheimer (2024)



The evolution of these models also shows how the evidence conversation has changed. Early approaches helped L&D move beyond attendance and satisfaction by distinguishing learning from, behaviour change and results. Financial ROI responded to legitimate demands for accountability, but can imply a precision that is difficult to achieve when performance is shaped by leadership, culture, systems, incentives and market conditions as well as learning. Transfer-focused approaches give greater weight to whether people can apply learning in their work and whether the environment enables them to do so.

Theory-driven evaluations add a different contribution. Rather than prescribing a standard set of learning measures, they ask teams to make the value pathway explicit: what is expected to change, why an intervention should contribute, what assumptions sit beneath that logic and what conditions must be present. This is particularly useful for significant capability investments, where the relevant evidence may emerge at different points and from several sources.

The broader evidence base also cautions against evaluating every learning activity to the same depth. Routine or compliance learning may require reliable foundation measures. A strategically important intervention - particularly one that is costly, visible or connected to material organisational risk-warrants deeper diagnosis, baseline evidence and follow-up. Evaluation strategy is therefore a resource-allocation decision as well as a measurement decision.



The practical weakness is therefore not the absence of another evaluation framework. It is the downstream habit of asking about value after the need has been translated into a learning request and the response has been designed.

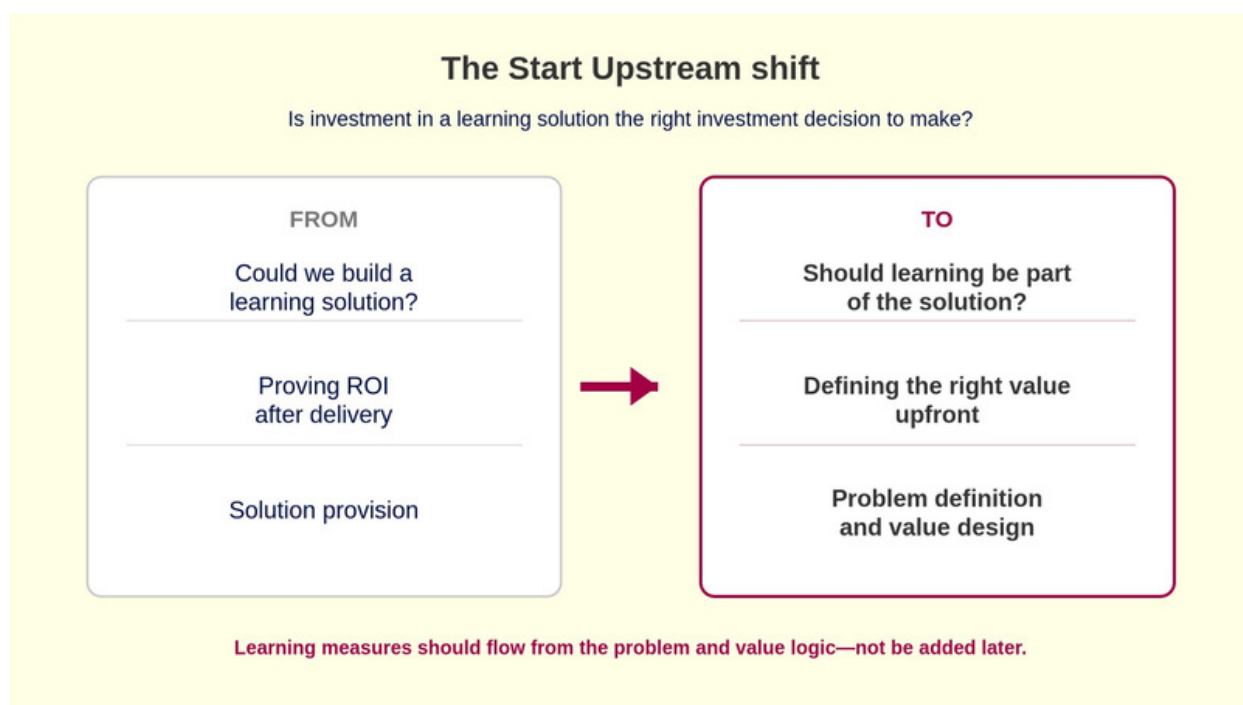
| The value pathway needs to be defined before the learning solution is built.

The Start Upstream shift

Start Upstream reframes the central question. Instead of asking only, “What was the ROI of this learning solution?”, it asks earlier: “Is investment in learning the right investment decision - and, if it is, what value should it reasonably create?”

That requires L&D and business stakeholders to move from solution provision to problem definition and value design; from asking whether a course can be built to asking whether learning should be part of the response; and from retrospective proof to upfront agreement about value.

This does not reject ROI or lower the standard of evidence. It creates stronger conditions for meaningful evaluation by clarifying what problem is being addressed, what learning can influence, what else must change, and what evidence would be credible.



The practical weakness is therefore not the absence of another evaluation framework. It is the downstream habit of asking about value after the need has been translated into a learning request and the response has been designed.

The value pathway needs to be defined before the learning solution is built.

What FLAG tested

From an ROI question to a learning investment question

The Future of Learning Advisory Group began with a familiar challenge: how might organisations develop better ways to measure the long-term return on investment from L&D? An initial workshop produced 11 shared insights, six opportunity areas and 21 possible research questions.

The discussion quickly moved beyond measurement. FLAG members described value as multidirectional, learning solutions as difficult to change once commissioned, measures as indirect or poorly defined, and L&D credibility as increasingly under pressure. One idea became central: “fall in love with the problem.” The phrase challenged a common pattern in which a business issue becomes a learning request, L&D builds a response, and only then is asked to prove value.

The group reframed its inquiry around one provocation:

What if we pushed learning up the value chain - so that L&D and its stakeholders are clear about the problem learning can solve and the distinctive value it can deliver?

A practice led inquiry

FLAG members designed six experiments within their own organisational settings. The experiments tested three working propositions: upstream clarity creates clearer measures; stakeholder co-design changes expectations of value; and rigorous problem framing strengthens L&D credibility.

Three experiments were completed within the project timeframe and form the practical evidence base for this paper. Experiment leads supplied synthesised and anonymised reports covering rationale, method, results and implications. MBS compared the reports to identify recurring patterns. MBS did not collect primary participant data or independently verify the underlying organisational datasets.

The remaining three experiments did not reach a completed evidence stage within the project timeframe because implementation timing, organisational priorities or access to evidence changed. They are therefore not included in the findings.

The work should therefore be read as practice-led inquiry, not controlled research or proof of causal or financial ROI. Its value lies in what the experiments reveal about how earlier problem definition and stakeholder co-design can improve learning investment, measurement and business conversations.

What the experiments showed

Experiment 1: Do leaders really need another training program?

The first experiment began with a familiar challenge: Team Leaders needed support to step into people leadership roles, but help was not always timely, easy to find or connected to the moments in which they needed to lead. A conventional response might have been to commission more leadership training.

Upstream exploration revealed a more complex problem. Team Leaders were learning through trial and error, relying heavily on peers and ad hoc advice, and were not always clear about what the role required. The question shifted from “How do we deliver more leadership development?” to “What support do Team Leaders need, at the moments that matter, to lead effectively in the flow of work?”

Experiment at a glance	
Original request	Provide more leadership development for Team Leaders.
Upstream shift	Design practical, moment-based support while also addressing role clarity, expectations, motivation and leadership culture.
Evidence generated	68 learners across operational intent to apply 4.27/5; 561 unique hub users and 2,263 early visits.
Important limitation	The evidence shows use and sustained behaviour change or business impact.

Five small tests explored masterclasses, buddy guides, existing pathways, a redesigned SharePoint hub, coaching circles, operational drop-ins and peer sessions. The stronger signals came from practical, moment-based support. Operational drop-ins reached 68 learners across three sessions, with average satisfaction of 7.45 out of 10 and average intent to apply of 4.27 out of 5. The Team Leader hub recorded 561 unique viewers and 2,263 visits in its early launch period.

Those figures indicate use and perceived relevance, not behaviour change or business impact. More importantly, the experiment surfaced a deeper persistent question - ‘why would I want to be a Team Leader’. Success in the role depended not only on capability, but also on role clarity, motivation, expectations and leadership culture. The better response was not simply more content. It was a mix of practical tools, clearer expectations, timely support and attention to the conditions surrounding the role.

The experimentation process generated a further lesson for L&D practice. Small tests made it possible to learn before committing to a single large solution. They also challenged the pressure to prove success too early. Over time, the team came to define success less as validating an initial idea and more as staying with the problem longer, resisting premature solutioning and recognising that a learning intervention is not always the right answer. In this sense, the experiment modelled a different way of working for L&D

A next stage would require stronger evidence of workplace application: whether leaders returned to the resources at relevant moments, whether managers observed different leadership behaviour, and whether role clarity or confidence was sustained over time. Even without that longer - term evidence, the experiment demonstrated how better diagnosis can change the intervention before evaluation begins.

Experiment 2: Which measures make dashboards more meaningful?

The second experiment began with a reporting challenge. Learning dashboards were capturing attendance, completion, satisfaction and survey responses, but were not always helping stakeholders connect learning activity to the business problem it was intended to address.

Two dashboard approaches were compared. The first summarised existing post-workshop survey data. The second added a clear statement of the business problem and two learner signals: confidence and readiness to apply. The versions were discussed with two representatives from one client organisation.

Experiment at a glance	
Original request	Improve a dashboard centred on attendance, completion, satisfaction and survey activity.
Upstream shift	Make the business problem visible and add early learner signals-confidence and readiness to apply-to support a more strategic conversation.
Evidence generated	Two dashboard approaches were discussed with two representatives from one client organisation; feedback was directional and positive.
Important limitation	Very small sample and self-reported signals; no evidence yet of transfer, decisions or business outcomes.

The client representatives considered the additional framing useful for a more strategic discussion about value, accountability and application. The evidence is directional and based on a very small sample. Confidence and readiness are also self-reported signals, not proof of transfer or business impact.

The useful lesson was nevertheless clear: the dashboard became more relevant not because it contained more data, but because the information was anchored to the business problem and the conversation stakeholders needed to have.

This distinction is important. A dashboard can easily create an appearance of precision while reporting measures that sit a long way from organisational value. Confidence and readiness do not solve that problem, but they can provide more useful leading signals than participation data alone when they are connected to a clearly stated problem and followed by evidence of application.

The experiment also illustrated the value of changing reporting language. By making the business problem visible, the dashboard invited stakeholders to discuss whether the intervention remained relevant and what should happen next. Further testing across more clients would be needed to determine whether this produces better decisions, stronger sponsor engagement or more consistent follow-through.

Experiment 3: What’s the real business problem?

The third experiment tested an approach that began with the business problem rather than the course. L&D professionals and related stakeholders from eight public-sector clients were consulted, and three organisations applied or tested the approach on targeted capability priorities. Consolidated, de-identified outcomes were available for two pilots.

The approach asked clients to define the business opportunity or problem, the behaviour shift required, the capabilities to develop, the learning experience and the data sources and timing needed to evaluate what mattered.

Experiment at a glance	
Original request	Evaluate courses after delivery.
Upstream shift	Agree the business problem, behaviour shift, learning’s role, value pathway, data and timing before delivery.
Evidence generated	Eight public-sector clients were consulted; three organisations applied or tested the approach; consolidated outcomes were available for two pilots.
Important limitation	Synthesised, de-identified evidence with variable baselines and data access; no causal or financial attribution.

Behaviour change emerged as the most practical bridge between learning activity and later business outcomes. Engagement and skill development remained useful evidence, but were not sufficient for significant investments. Immediate business or financial results were often too complex or premature to attribute credibly.

The approach worked best where the issue was sponsored and high priority, business ownership was clear, relevant data were available and managers could support application. It was less feasible for reactive work, fragmented systems or poorly sponsored requests. This reinforced an important limit: deeper upstream evaluation should be used selectively, where the importance of the learning investment warrants it.

The consultations also surfaced practical barriers: inconsistent baseline data, fragmented systems, competing business priorities, attribution challenges and variable manager follow-through. These constraints did not invalidate the upstream approach. They clarified what credible evaluation would require and where claims about impact needed to be moderated.

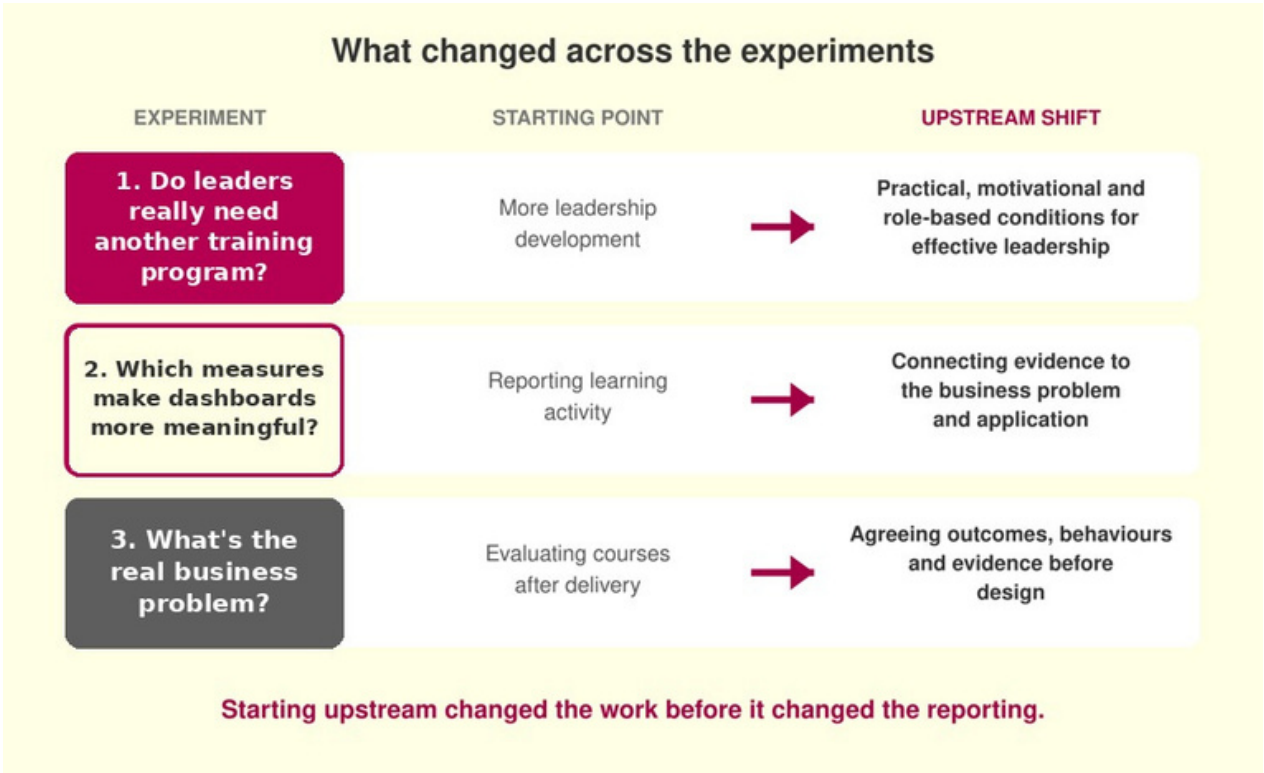
Where the approach worked well, it improved more than the evaluation plan. It reduced “nice-to-have” content, sharpened the connection between capability and performance, and brought business stakeholders into decisions about measures and transfer conditions. It also made non-learning root causes more visible before an intervention was commissioned.

A similar pattern emerged across the experiments

The three experiments differed in context, scale and method, but the same pattern appeared in different forms: starting upstream changed the work before it changed the reporting.

Leadership enablement moved from delivering more development to understanding the practical and organisational conditions Team Leaders needed. Dashboard reporting moved from activity metrics to a conversation about the business problem and early signs of application. Business-led evaluation moved from post-program measurement to upfront agreement about outcomes, behaviours and evidence.

The experiments did not produce one universal ROI measure. They produced measures appropriate to different problems: usage, repeat access, intent to apply, confidence, readiness, manager observation, behaviour change, in-role evidence and selected business indicators.



Five practical insights

1. Seek involvement in defining the problem

Across the experiments, L&D appeared more strategically relevant when it connected learning investment to priority business problems. That relevance did not come from delivering or measuring more. It came from entering the conversation while the problem was still being defined.

When L&D enters after the solution is fixed, it is positioned primarily as a provider. When it participates in problem definition, it can help the organisation clarify what needs to change, test whether learning is part of the answer and shape the pathway to value.

This pattern appeared across all three experiments. The leadership work expanded from training provision to role enablement; the strategic dashboard created a stronger connection to the client's business priorities; and the business-led evaluation pilots repositioned L&D conversations around outcomes and target behaviours rather than courses.

Practical implication

Reframe significant requests before accepting a solution brief. Ask what business or performance problem sits behind the request, why it matters now and what has already been tried.

2. Identify measures specific to the problem

The upstream approach was consistent across the experiments: define the problem, understand what is driving it, clarify learning's role and agree what success looks like. The measures were not consistent-and should not have been. They changed with the problem.

A theory of change or simpler value pathway can help stakeholders explain how learning is expected to contribute to change. Program Logic can then translate that pathway into activities, early signals, behaviour or performance shifts, transfer conditions and relevant business evidence. These are useful disciplines, not ends in themselves.

The experiments illustrated why standard measures are insufficient. Usage and repeat access were relevant to moment-of-need support. Confidence and readiness helped frame an early value conversation. Behaviour change, manager observation and in-role evidence were more relevant to business-led evaluation. Each measure carried a different evidentiary weight and answered a different question.

Practical implication

Do not begin by selecting an evaluation model or a standard metric. Begin by asking: "Given this problem, what evidence would show that the right thing is changing?"



3. Agree on what value looks like upfront

The experiments suggested that value conversations became more credible when business stakeholders and L&D defined value together before delivery. This shifted the conversation from proving ROI after the event to agreeing what the investment should change, why the proposed intervention could contribute and what evidence stakeholders would trust.

Return on Expectation can support this agreement. It should not be treated as a softer substitute for ROI. Used well, it makes later evaluation more credible by establishing explicit expectations and success criteria at the outset.

In the dashboard and business-led evaluation experiments, participants described the conversation as more credible when stakeholders could see the business problem and participate in defining success. Behaviour change appeared particularly useful as an intermediate point: more meaningful than participation or satisfaction, but often more observable and attributable than an immediate financial result.

Practical implication

Design the value story with the people who will sponsor, enable and judge the investment. Record both the expected value and the evidence they would recognise as meaningful.

4. Consider other levers of change, beyond learning

Starting upstream slowed the move from problem to learning solution. It prompted teams to ask whether the issue was primarily one of capability, motivation, role clarity, process, systems, technology, culture, incentives, leadership expectations or some combination of these.

This matters because learning can contribute to performance only when people can apply it and the surrounding environment supports the intended behaviour. Learning should not be held accountable for outcomes that depend on constraints it cannot address.

The Team Leader experiment surfaced role clarity, motivation and leadership culture alongside capability. The business-led evaluation pilots surfaced systems, data, management and process constraints. In both cases, starting with the problem revealed a wider set of possible levers and a more honest account of learning's contribution.

Practical implication

State explicitly what learning can influence, what it cannot solve and what complementary action is required from the business.

5. Match the level of evaluation rigour to the importance of the investment

The experiments showed that deeper upstream work is neither necessary nor feasible for every learning activity. Routine or low-risk learning may need foundation measures such as participation, satisfaction and immediate learning checks. Important capability programs may warrant evidence of readiness, application, manager feedback and behaviour. Strategic, high-cost or high-risk investments warrant deeper problem definition, stakeholder co-design, baseline evidence and selected business measures.

This prevents Start Upstream from becoming another burdensome process. The depth of diagnosis and evaluation should be proportionate to the importance, complexity, risk and visibility of the investment.

The public-sector pilots appeared most feasible where a capability issue was sponsored, strategically important and supported by data and manager follow-through. That is a useful selection principle. Deep evaluation should be concentrated where the organisation genuinely needs stronger evidence to make, continue, adapt or stop an investment.

Practical implication

Decide the evaluation tier to be addressed when the investment is commissioned-not after delivery.

Evaluation tier	Use when	Expected discipline and evidence
1. Routine / foundation	Mandatory, repeatable or relatively low-risk learning.	Clear purpose; participation, completion, satisfaction and immediate learning checks where relevant.
2. Important capability	The capability matters to performance and warrants follow-through.	Problem definition, readiness to apply, manager support, application evidence and selected behaviour measures.
3. Strategic / high-risk	High-cost, visible, enterprise-critical or materially connected to risk and performance.	Sponsor co-design, root-cause analysis, baseline evidence, value pathway, transfer conditions, behaviour or performance evidence and selected business measures.

Start Upstream is not a call to measure everything. It is a discipline for measuring the right things, for the right problem, with the right stakeholders.



Implications for practice

For organisations: redesign the commissioning conversation

Significant learning investments should not begin with a predetermined solution. Commissioning should begin with a shared account of the business or performance problem, evidence that it exists, what has already been tried and what may be driving it. This changes the initial question from “What program should we build?” to “What needs to change, what role can learning play and what other action is required?” Stakeholders may need reminding that L&D can only address skills and knowledge, and that performance issues may be due to other factors.

Governance should also reflect the level of investment. Strategic capability initiatives should have a named business sponsor, explicit success criteria, agreed transfer conditions and access to relevant business evidence. These are not evaluation add-ons; they are part of responsible investment design.

For evaluation practice: strengthen evidence over time

The FLAG experiments provide exploratory signals rather than definitive causal proof. Future work can strengthen the evidence through clearer baselines, three- and six-month follow-up, manager observations, usage analytics, in-role evidence and selected operational indicators. Comparison groups may be appropriate in some settings, but should not become a requirement for every capability investment.

The aim is not to force every intervention into a financial ROI calculation. It is to build meaningful evidence proportionate to the decision: enough to determine whether an investment should proceed, continue, adapt or stop, and honest about what can and cannot be attributed to learning.

For L&D teams: build upstream capability

Starting upstream requires L&D teams to strengthen capability in performance consulting, problem framing, stakeholder facilitation and evidence planning. The role is not only to design effective learning. It is to help the organisation decide whether learning is the right response, what it can reasonably influence and how its contribution should be tested.

This may also require L&D to challenge or redirect requests, become comfortable not being part of the solution and recognise that working upstream is as much an identity shift as it is a capability shift.

This may require L&D to challenge or redirect requests, become comfortable not being part of the solution and recognise that working upstream is as much an identity shift as it is a capability shift. Saying “learning is only part of the answer” is more credible when it is supported by evidence, a clear root-cause analysis and constructive alternatives such as workflow support, manager enablement, system change or process redesign.

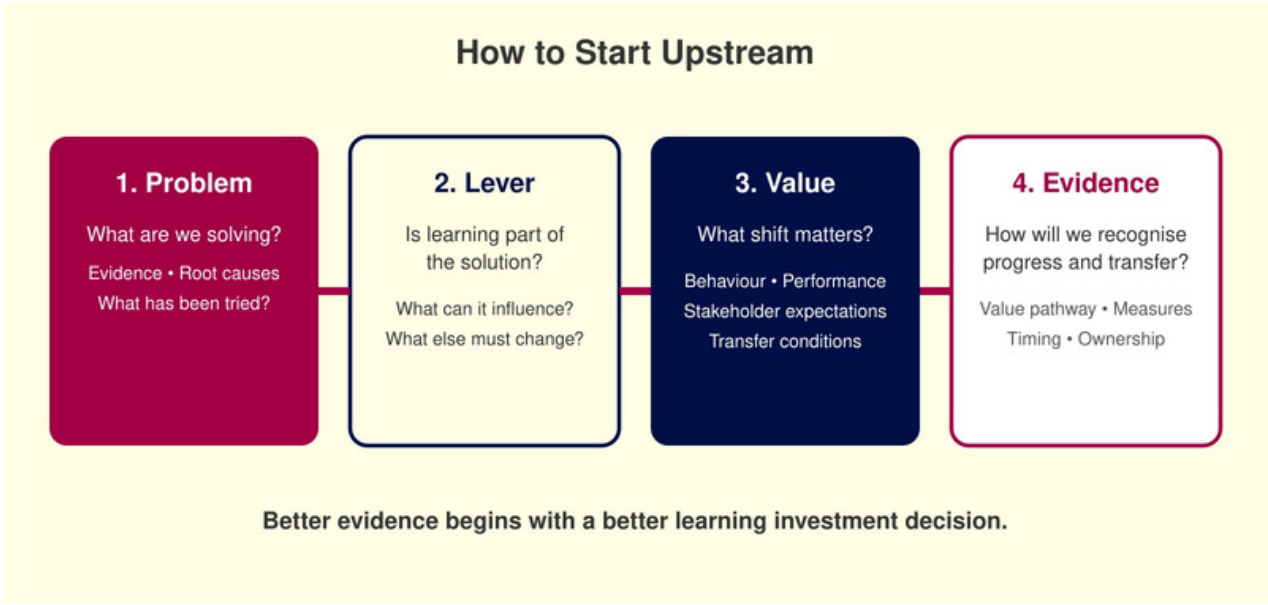
For business sponsors: co-own the value logic

Sponsors cannot reasonably ask for credible evidence only after delivery. They need to help define why the problem matters, what success looks like, what behaviours or performance outcomes should change and what evidence they would trust. They also influence whether people have the opportunity, support and incentives to apply what they learn.

Forecasting return on expectation is useful here because it makes expectations explicit before making the investment. It does not remove accountability. It establishes the basis on which later evidence-including financial evidence where appropriate-will be interpreted.

The Start Upstream Diagnostic

The diagnostic is designed for significant learning and capability investments before a solution is approved or built. It can be used as a 60 to 90 minute commissioning conversation involving the business sponsor, L&D, relevant managers and, where helpful, people analytics or organisational development.



Worked example

Worked example: reframing a leadership request	
Initial request	Deliver more leadership training to Team Leaders.
Underlying problem	Support was not always timely or easy to find; role expectations were unclear; capability was one constraint alongside motivation, expectations and leadership culture.
Learning's role	Provide practical, moment-based tools and targeted development, supported by clearer role expectations and complementary business action.
Intended shift	Team Leaders use relevant support at moments of need and demonstrate clearer, more consistent leadership behaviour.
Evidence	Access and repeat use, readiness or intent to apply, manager observation, and changes in role clarity or confidence over time.
Decision	Test a mix of resources, operational drop-ins and peer support before scaling; add longer-term transfer evidence.

Problem - What are we solving?

Define the business, performance or organisational problem. Establish what evidence shows it exists, what has already been tried and what the likely root causes are. Separate observable facts from assumptions.

Lever - Is learning part of the solution?

Identify what people need to know or do differently, and test whether capability is genuinely constraining performance. Clarify what learning can reasonably influence, what sits outside its control, and what business action must accompany it. If it's not a skill and/or knowledge deficit, investing in L&D won't help.

Value - What shift matters?

Agree what sponsors, managers, learners and other affected stakeholders would recognise as value. Define the intended behaviour or performance shift and the conditions required for it to show up in work.

Evidence - How will we recognise progress and transfer?

Map the value pathway from intervention to capability, behaviour, performance and organisational value. Select a proportionate mix of early signals, transfer evidence and existing business measures. Decide what will be collected, when and by whom.

Before moving to design or acquisition

A significant learning investment should not proceed until the sponsor and L&D can answer four questions with reasonable confidence:

1. **What problem are we solving?**
2. **Why is learning an appropriate lever-and what else needs to change?**
3. **What value do we expect, and for whom?**
4. **What evidence would credibly show progress?**

At the end of the conversation, agree one decision: proceed, redesign, pursue a non-learning response, run a small-scale test, or stop.

The detailed canvas in Appendix B provides a fuller set of prompts, measures and transfer conditions for teams that need to document the investment logic or prepare a small-scale experiment before committing to full delivery.

Closing thought

Organisations do not need more learning activity alone. They need better learning investment decisions. Starting upstream helps leaders and L&D teams make those decisions together-before the solution is fixed and before evaluation is left to explain value after the fact.



Appendix A: References

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