



## Developing Business for a Learning Business

### Leading Learning Podcast Transcript for Episode 401

Celisa Steele: [00:00:00] Many skill sets are needed to create and sustain a successful learning business, and one skill set that may warrant more attention is business development. Having a skilled professional leading business development for you means the chance to improve your reach, revenue, and impact.

Celisa Steele: [00:00:21] I'm Celisa Steele.

Jeff Cobb: [00:00:22] I'm Jeff Cobb, and this is the Leading Learning Podcast.

Celisa Steele: [00:00:31] Many skill sets are needed to create and sustain a successful learning business.

Jeff Cobb: [00:00:36] Yes, there are skills that clearly fall under the learning part of "learning business": instructional design, andragogy, learning science, and so on.

Celisa Steele: [00:00:45] And there are skills that clearly fall under the business part of "learning business." I'm thinking of things like all the financial acumen needed for projections, for profit and loss statements, and so on. I'm thinking also of all the marketing acumen needed for assessing the size and needs of a target market, for identifying products to develop, etcetera.

Jeff Cobb: [00:01:07] Learning businesses almost always see the need for employing or contracting or somehow working with people who understand learning science and instructional design, people who can help with promotion, and people skilled in finance. But, in the business part, one area where we tend to see lack of investment and sometimes a lack of awareness and know-how is business development. So we want to focus this episode on the need for business development for learning businesses.

Celisa Steele: [00:01:39] We'll say up front that that need for business development applies most clearly and most strongly in business-to-business (B2B) situations.

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Jeff Cobb: [00:01:50] That's true. We'll talk about what business development really means. And, certainly, it can play a role in helping to develop and expand your business-to-consumer (B2C), your typical selling to members, selling to customers, individual customers audience. But, if you are only in that B2C world, you really should consider branching out, and business development would be a part of that.

Celisa Steele: [00:02:17] And the reason we say you should consider branching out is that, because we are dealing with an increasingly competitive marketplace where there are so many more options for learners to choose from, it can be difficult for most learning businesses to thrive solely with that business-to-consumer (B2C) sale of their educational products.

Jeff Cobb: [00:02:39] That's right. They're going to need to be able to sell in quantity to other organizations ideally, corporations, to health systems, to government agencies, and, in many instances, they're going to benefit by being able to deliver customized and even premium-priced solutions to those organizations. Doing that requires a level of selling skill and relationship development that most organizations simply don't possess right now.

Celisa Steele: [00:03:09] Another area where this business development role also will clearly play a role is around sponsorships and partnerships. If you think beyond the direct fees you can get from learning products and getting individuals or organizations to underwrite the cost of that, you might also have those sponsorships and partnership dollars coming in to help you deliver what you need to as a learning business. And, again, business development is going to play a big role there.

Jeff Cobb: [00:03:38] We should be clear that we're talking about more than just pure selling here. This isn't just hiring somebody to go out and sell your portfolio to organizations—though that's certainly going to be part of it. But business development in its real sense, in its best sense, goes beyond just selling, though selling is a part of it.

Celisa Steele: [00:03:57] It reminds me of the point around "learning" being this umbrella term with "professional development," "continuing education," those sorts of, flavors of learning being underneath that umbrella. Similarly, I think of "business development" as an umbrella term, and clearly under that umbrella is selling, but there's more under that umbrella as well.

Jeff Cobb: [00:04:17] Right, so we can talk a little bit about what is it that a business development professional—the sort of person you might want to bring into your learning business or develop within your learning business—what does that person need to know and be able to do?

Celisa Steele: [00:04:35] We'll start with the obvious one, which is sell.

Jeff Cobb: [00:04:37] Which we just said that that's not all it is, but that is a big part of it.

Celisa Steele: [00:04:40] That's a big part of it, and so a good business development person will know how to sell. That means they're going to know how to articulate the value of your learning business's products and services. They're going to be able to articulate that value effectively. They're going to be able to convert that value perception into actual purchases, into actual sales and dollars.

Jeff Cobb: [00:05:01] Yes, that conversion part is important. You have to not just be able to talk about it but get people to take action relative to what you're offering. So selling is a big part of it, but, along with that, really being able to execute on strategy, which, of course, means deeply understanding and appreciating your strategy in the first place, and then being a good steward of the overall business strategy and having the ability to actively cultivate the relationships that are needed for opening new channels and more broadly or deeply reaching the individuals and organizations that are the prospective audience for your learning and education offerings.

Celisa Steele: [00:05:42] And, related to that ability to execute on strategy, ideally they would have a skill set around contributing to strategy. They're going to be really well positioned—anyone working in business development—to potentially help you shape your strategy or refine your strategy because they're going to be having these conversations and exchanges with potential partners, and that's going to give them a lot of insight into what potential changes might need to be made to make the learning business and its products and services be more effective. They might also be able to help identify new opportunities, an idea for a new product line or some sort of new service line that then the learning business could decide to pursue. Again, not just executing on the strategy, but also potentially thinking through where refinements and enhancements to that strategy might be beneficial.

Jeff Cobb: [00:06:32] Yes, I think that's critical in being able to find new opportunities because you understand the sorts of opportunities that are going to be beneficial to the learning business. I hope you're getting the sense this is much more than just the "Here's our portfolio; go out and sell it" sort of thing that we're talking about. Integral to all of this, we've talked

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about executing on strategy, contributing to strategy, and a fundamental part of that is building and maintaining relationships. A good business development person has to be excellent at doing that. And not just personally—they've got a lot of buds at their meeting, at the convention, or whatever it is. They're doing that in a way that actually accrues to the learning business, so they're developing those relationships in a way that is going to have business value.

Celisa Steele: [00:07:16] To your point, Jeff, it's not that someone who has a conversation with you, Jeff, thinks, "Wow, I'd really like to work with Jeff," but then the learning business that you're tied to then wouldn't necessarily be as attractive if you left. And so you want someone who's really building and maintaining relationships for the sake of the learning business, and that it's not just tied to this one individual person, but that they are again clearly articulating the value of the learning business so that those relationships are grounded in that value that the learning business offers, and then the learning business is the one that benefits from those relationships over time.

Jeff Cobb: [00:07:53] And then a further extension of this whole idea of strategy and building and maintaining relationships is an ability to consult. This doesn't mean that you're going to send a business development person in to do consulting projects per se, but they need to be able to have that consultative relationship with the partners, with the organizations that you may be selling to, to really connect the dots between the value that you as a learning business offer and how that value can best manifest to meet the goals, the objectives of whoever that partner or prospective customer is.

Celisa Steele: [00:08:32] Tied to this idea of having some level of consultative approach to business development, also related to this idea of building and maintaining relationships, is the need to listen. It isn't just selling. It isn't—as you said, Jeff—going in with the prospectus. "This is what we have to offer. What do you like?" and pick and choose. But it's really around listening to that potential partner to hear their pain points, their opportunities, and then, like you said, connect those dots with what the learning business either already offers or could offer.

Jeff Cobb: [00:09:09] At Tagoras, we're experts in the global business of lifelong learning, and we use our expertise to help clients better understand their markets, connect with new customers, make the right investment decisions, and grow their learning businesses. We achieve these goals through expert market assessment, strategy formulation, and platform selection services. If you're looking for a partner to help your learning business achieve greater reach, revenue, and impact, learn more at [tagoras.com/services](https://tagoras.com/services).

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Jeff Cobb: [00:09:39] We've talked about those skills that the optimal business development person should have, and we've seen numerous situations in which this level of skill is necessary and would certainly be beneficial to learning businesses.

Celisa Steele: [00:09:54] We can talk through some of these types of relationships that often make sense for learning businesses, and this is where a business development professional would help that learning business. Academic relationships is one big area. You can think about academic partners both as potential sources for content and for delivery of content, and again thinking about what is that right relationship, and could you be bringing content to the academic partner? Could the academic partner be helping you with content? There are a lot of different ways that it can work, but clearly you have academic programs that are focused on usually whatever field or profession your learning business is also serving, and then those people that get that start in an academic program need to continue to learn. So there's a lot of natural continuation between an academic program and what a learning business might provide.

Jeff Cobb: [00:10:46] And that's, of course, talking about learning businesses that're outside of the academic setting. The reverse also applies if you are in that academic setting. If you're a continuing education unit at an academic institution, then somebody who can develop relationships with, say, the association world [is helpful]. We talk a lot about academic and association relationships. We don't really see a lot of activity, a lot of action there. It's a really fertile ground for both of those types of learning businesses to look at how do we develop relationships across those aisles?

Celisa Steele: [00:11:20] It's been a while, but you had a conversation with NIGP's CEO Rick Grimm a while ago, specifically focused on this idea of academic relationships between an association and then that academic partner.

Jeff Cobb: [00:11:31] That's right. That's something that NIGP had looked at. And we even convened a group a while back to talk about association-academic relationships, something we need to come back to and probably do more formally again. But just some very fertile ground there, doing things like embedding certifications into degree programs, which is something that NIGP was doing at that point. And we know a number of other organizations that do that sort of thing—sharing content as part of a curriculum, sharing subject matter experts across both the association and the academic audience. So there are a lot of opportunities there.

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Celisa Steele: [00:12:05] This is the kind of thing that a business development professional can help you see as opportunities and then figure out how to structure it—what makes the most sense given all the parties involved.

Jeff Cobb: [00:12:16] How to orchestrate all of that. So that's that relationship across different types of learning businesses—talking here about associations and academics in particular. Another big area where business development is really needed is workforce development. Truly having an impact on workforce development in whatever field or industry you're serving almost always means forging the sorts of relationships that we just talked about, but it also means developing corporate and government relationships and, in general, facilitating an optimal network for connecting new and prospective employees in your industry with your learning experiences, which then, of course, are going to benefit the employers in that industry.

Celisa Steele: [00:13:00] Workforce development has become increasingly important, increasingly an area of focus—this whole idea of upskilling and reskilling as professions change so quickly. Things like generative AI changed what it means to do a particular job or serve a particular function. All of these things mean having a clear bead on what those employers in your field or industry need and mapping that to what you offer so that you know what you have in your portfolio really is valued because the employers are going to value it, which means it's going to be valuable to your learners. We have a number of past episodes where we talk about workforce development, some aspect of workforce development, so be sure to check out the show notes for links to some of those. For example, we talked with Scott Wiley about the Ohio Society of CPAs.

Jeff Cobb: [00:13:56] That's right.

Celisa Steele: [00:13:57] He talked about their workforce development needs. And we've talked with a number of other organizations and individuals about workforce development and what it means to map what you're offering to that. Again, this is where a business development professional can help you structure what this looks like, help you do some of that legwork to forge those partnerships that are going to give you that insight into what is it that the workforce needs and, therefore, what should you be offering?

Jeff Cobb: [00:14:24] Yes, and we've been using those words—"structure," "coordinate," "orchestrate"—a lot because that is so integral to all of this. It's not just about making a transaction happen. Ultimately, there's probably going to be a transaction that happens, but it's really being able to step back and saying, "How do I take these pieces and make them into a

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whole that's greater than the sum of the parts?" That's something a good business development person is uniquely capable of doing. So we just talked about workforce development. A specific area where workforce development, partnerships, and relationships can really benefit from business development is in health markets.

Jeff Cobb: [00:15:03] Obviously, not everybody listening will be in a healthcare profession, but a lot of people are, and what we're saying here would probably apply to many different professions. Health just jumps out because, when you're in the healthcare profession, most organizations are selling to doctors, nurses, and allied health professionals, and they'd benefit from developing relationships with a range of institutions that employ these people. Most of these institutions have that need for educational content for their employees, and working with them, those institutions, is typically a much more rapid path to reaching and impacting an organization's target audience than trying to sell one nurse by one nurse, one doctor by one doctor, though, obviously, that can still be a part of your strategy.

Celisa Steele: [00:15:50] We have an episode going way back, number 32, with Dana Woods talking about the success of nurses and reaching out for some of that partnering with employers.

Jeff Cobb: [00:16:00] Yes. Dana, CEO of the American Association of Critical Care Nurses. They had a lot of success with their ECCO (Essentials of Critical Care Orientation) program into hospitals and health systems.

Celisa Steele: [00:16:10] Another area where a business development professional could help your learning business is in international expansion. This is something that's become much easier to do in the past couple of decades, as so much has gone online, as there's more asynchronous learning, as there's more ability to globalize and localize content efficiently. This idea of expanding beyond a narrower geographic focus has become much more of a real possibility.

Jeff Cobb: [00:16:40] We've said before that, at this point, every organization should think of themselves as potentially an international organization because of what technology has made possible. It still tends to be true, particularly if you're a U.S.-based organization. In a lot of places in the world, people are looking for U.S.-based credentials and content, and that's attractive. But you've got to be able to form the right relationships, typically, to make that happen, the right sorts of partnerships, and, once again, having a business development person who has the right skill set, the right acumen for doing that, is critical.

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Celisa Steele: [00:17:14] Then another area is what we would put under the term of “organizational alliances.” In many ways, what we’ve been talking about all along is organizational alliances, but this is a little bit more of a taking-it-from-a-partnership approach. If you think about the area that you operate in, you’re probably not the only organization that is serving learners in that area. So you want to be thinking about what other organizations do your learners look to for support, for content, for help? And those might be places where you could form alliances. So, rather than competing, you figure out how to work together around some shared goal or goals.

Jeff Cobb: [00:17:55] This can of course be tricky territory because you often do have some overlapping with those other organizations. You have to think about the competitive aspects of it. A lot of times organizations won’t even look at this because it does require some careful thought. It is pretty challenging to figure out, even if there are potentially substantial opportunities there. But this is just the sort of challenge that a good business development person relishes to figure out.

Celisa Steele: [00:18:21] I think of the term “other people’s networks.” There’s also a spectrum along which you could form an alliance with other organizations. It could be at the more casual end, where part of what you’re doing is making sure that you get in front of another organization’s or another potential alliance person’s networks.

Jeff Cobb: [00:18:44] These days being able to leverage other people’s networks, other organizations’ networks is one of the most impactful and critical things you can do in terms of expanding your business. And, again, having somebody who’s in charge of making that happen is just so helpful. We’ll finish off the list here by mentioning, once again, partners and sponsorships. We brought that up early on. Certainly, it’s an area that benefits from going beyond a selling perspective and thinking about those relationships as not just a way to get some cash into your organization, getting the typical bronze-, silver-, gold-level sponsor for your annual event, but actually forging relationships that create value for you, your sponsors, and your partners. And, of course, it ultimately creates a value for your learners as well and attract more learners to you.

Celisa Steele: [00:19:38] That’s right—looking for that proverbial win-win-win, where everyone involved really is benefiting. But I do think, to your point, Jeff, that often we can think reductively about sponsors, about the cash that they can bring to the learning business. But, to your point, and what we were just talking about with other people’s networks, other

organizations' networks, those sponsors can help you get in front of people who would benefit from your learning products and services. So there is that potential value there that a business development professional can help you see, execute on, and realize.

Jeff Cobb: [00:20:13] So those are just a few of the key areas in which a good business development person or, if you happen to be a large organization, maybe even a business development team can really generate some significant value. Hopefully, one or more, if not all of those, are resonating with you as you listen to this discussion about business development for learning businesses.

Celisa Steele: [00:20:38] But that brings us to the "but," which is that all of this may sound great, but typically we hear two objections around this. First, can we afford a business development person? And then, second, for people who've come to grips with "Yes, okay, we'll figure out how to afford that business development person," how do we find such a person?

Jeff Cobb: [00:21:01] So let's tackle each of those. First, there's that cost perspective—can we afford it? I'm always tempted to say, "Can you afford not to have that business development person?" But we realize that the budget for adding a business development person can be a big item, and the good ones definitely don't come cheap. But, if you're thinking longer term, we'd argue that most learning businesses that want to thrive over that longer term want to grow, achieve new levels of maturity, substantially contribute to their field, they're going to do themselves more harm than good by not having someone on staff who can devote most of their time to business development.

Celisa Steele: [00:21:41] In the list of areas that we talked about where a business development professional could focus time and energy, those were not easy things.

Jeff Cobb: [00:21:50] No.

Celisa Steele: [00:21:50] All of those will take a lot of legwork to figure out exactly what they look like, what makes sense, to structure and orchestrate—to use those words again. And so it can be hard to make progress in any of those areas if you don't have someone who's focused on that. And the silver lining is that a good business development person should be able to and should be expected to—and should expect themselves to—return many multiples of whatever their salary is or whatever their costs are, by bringing in additional revenue to the learning business. It may be an investment up front, but the goal is that it will more than pay for itself

over time. Once you really have that business development professional engaged, fully devoted, and focused, they'll be bringing in more than they cost.

Jeff Cobb: [00:22:38] Yes, they should represent adding a multiplier to your current assets and activities. But that leads to the second objection, which, for me, is the bigger one because we know this from our own efforts that finding someone who can do this, finding someone who is a truly excellent business development person is not easy.

Celisa Steele: [00:23:01] In our experience, you tend to get one or the other, meaning you tend to get industry experience—so, whatever your field or profession, whatever your focus is, they might be knowledgeable in that. Or you're going to get someone who's a dyed-in-the-wool business development professional. They're going to really have that skill set, but they'll be lacking on your specifics, on your industry.

Jeff Cobb: [00:23:27] Depending on which of those you get, you're going to need to invest in learning to bring the person up to speed on the others. Your industry experts are going to have to get those business development skills. Business development persons are going to have to get those industry skills. I'll say my bias is to go with the business development person and then train them on your field or industry, but I know others will have different perspectives on that.

Celisa Steele: [00:23:50] Even if you do manage to get both, if you manage to get that unicorn that has both industry experience and business development experience, even then it will take that person time to get up to speed on exactly your specific learning business, your specific products and services, your strategy, to begin having those conversations and building those relationships. All of that's going to take time before it translates into any dollars. So this is a bit of a long game to play with business development.

Jeff Cobb: [00:24:20] As you consider and re-evaluate your strategy, we hope you'll be sure to give some thought to the role that business development might play in increasing your overall capacity and contributing to your marketing efforts, both of which are domains within the Learning Business Maturity Model.

Celisa Steele: [00:24:38] That's right. Capacity and marketing, those are two of the domains that we talk about in the Learning Business Maturity Model. Both of those are arguably cost centers. Capacity has to do with your human resources and your technology. Marketing has to do with that big-picture view of marketing—not just promotion but product development and all of that. Those things are typically cost centers, but they're also absolutely integral to what a

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learning business has to do, so they are not costs where you want to try to go cheaply. Our main takeaway is that business development is very likely an area that your learning business could use some initial or additional investment in.

Celisa Steele: [00:25:27] Many skill sets are needed to create and sustain a successful learning business, and one skill set that may warrant more attention is business development. Having a skilled professional leading business development for you means the chance to improve your reach, revenue, and impact.

Jeff Cobb: [00:25:44] At [leadinglearning.com/episode401](https://leadinglearning.com/episode401), you'll find show notes, a transcript, and options for subscribing to the podcast. And, if you haven't yet, please do subscribe.

Celisa Steele: [00:25:55] We'd be grateful if you would also take a minute to rate us on Apple Podcasts or wherever you listen, especially if you enjoy the show. Jeff and I personally appreciate your reviews and ratings, and they help the podcast show up when others search for content on leading a learning business.

Jeff Cobb: [00:26:11] And please spread the word about Leading Learning. You can do that in a one-on-one note or conversation with a colleague, or you can do it through social media. In the show notes at [leadinglearning.com/episode401](https://leadinglearning.com/episode401), you'll find links to connect with us on X, LinkedIn, and Facebook.

Celisa Steele: [00:26:28] Thanks again, and see you next time on the Leading Learning Podcast.

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