

**A New**

**Path**



BY BILL FOURNET



Using mission-based teams can result in quickly executing expansive L&D initiatives in a disciplined and planned manner.

**C**onstant change is the new normal—and the demands on the workforce in a 24/7 world are increasing. The old models of efficiency and doing more with less are no longer sufficient when work teams are unable to respond fast enough to the speed of change.

As an L&D professional, how well do you and your teams consistently execute change? Think about that whether the teams are part of the L&D organization or part of a cross-functional work group. Does it feel like a smooth ride or a roller coaster, where you are reacting to issues that could have been prevented? So many organizations struggle to find an approach that enables rapid delivery while providing transparency to leadership.

For the past decade, I have studied how teams proactively navigate constant change. I have found that breaking up long, linear initiatives into smaller efforts, with clear outputs and recommendations, consistently achieves the best results. When clients call me in for coaching after failed projects or initiatives, the team members frequently report that they knew the project was doomed before the first 25 percent of the work was complete. Thus, it makes sense that when teams approach initiatives in smaller chunks, they can stop and course correct sooner—ensuring they spend time and dollars most efficiently.

### Typical approaches

Most companies undertake one of two change strategies. The first goes like this: Large initiatives (for example, implementing a new learning management system) start at point A and proceed from concept to requirements to a request for proposal (RFP) to implementation in a linear (A to B to C, etc.) path. Many of those initiatives are unsuccessful because the value or needs shifted during the effort.

The second strategy is taking an agile approach of sprints with quick, regular releases of change. The challenge with that strategy can be haphazard change (lacking an overarching strategy) where leadership sees a lot of activity but is not sure it is the most valuable.

Mission-based teams offer a revolutionary management approach that marries the strengths from both approaches to create quick, valuable efforts that feature multiple next-step options based on what the effort recommends.

### What is a mission-based team?

Mission-based teams originated in military special operations, which are elite groups that enter dan-

gerous conditions with parameters and clarity of mission. But as soon as they hit the ground, they must make decisions in real time based on the situation and waypoints they encounter.

Using a similar approach will increase your organization's agility while maintaining focus and alignment. Team members learn how to become more agile and adaptive using proven techniques to not only survive but thrive—even in volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous conditions.

A mission-based team is based on four factors.

**It is an elite group of committed individuals from across the entire company.** They come together to unlock strategic, urgent, or complex challenges and opportunities. It is integral that organizational leadership empowers the team to make decisions, because that will reduce the amount of time needed to get approvals in the organizational hierarchy. Doing so will increase speed and agility and decrease decision latency.

**It is self-managing and operates according to a team charter.** The team is under the guidance of a steering committee that helps to navigate iteratively, creatively, innovatively, and quickly toward the mission. Team members determine how they will best operate. Different team compositions will use different tools and have varying locations and cadences for their meetings.

**The team has a lead who ensures it is abiding by the team charter.** There is a difference between a manager and a lead. A manager will be responsible for overseeing the completion of deliverables, while the lead will ensure that the team is not expanding or changing the mission's scope.

**There is a short duration effort (max of 60–90 days) for constant, incremental change.** The short duration reduces scope creep, forces the team to come to consensus quickly, and expedites results. Consequently, team members build momentum for the organization, because they swiftly accomplish work and create a series of small wins. Think of the Desmond Tutu quote, "There is only one way to eat an elephant: a bite at a time." Teams can best accomplish large and daunting projects by tackling a little at a time.

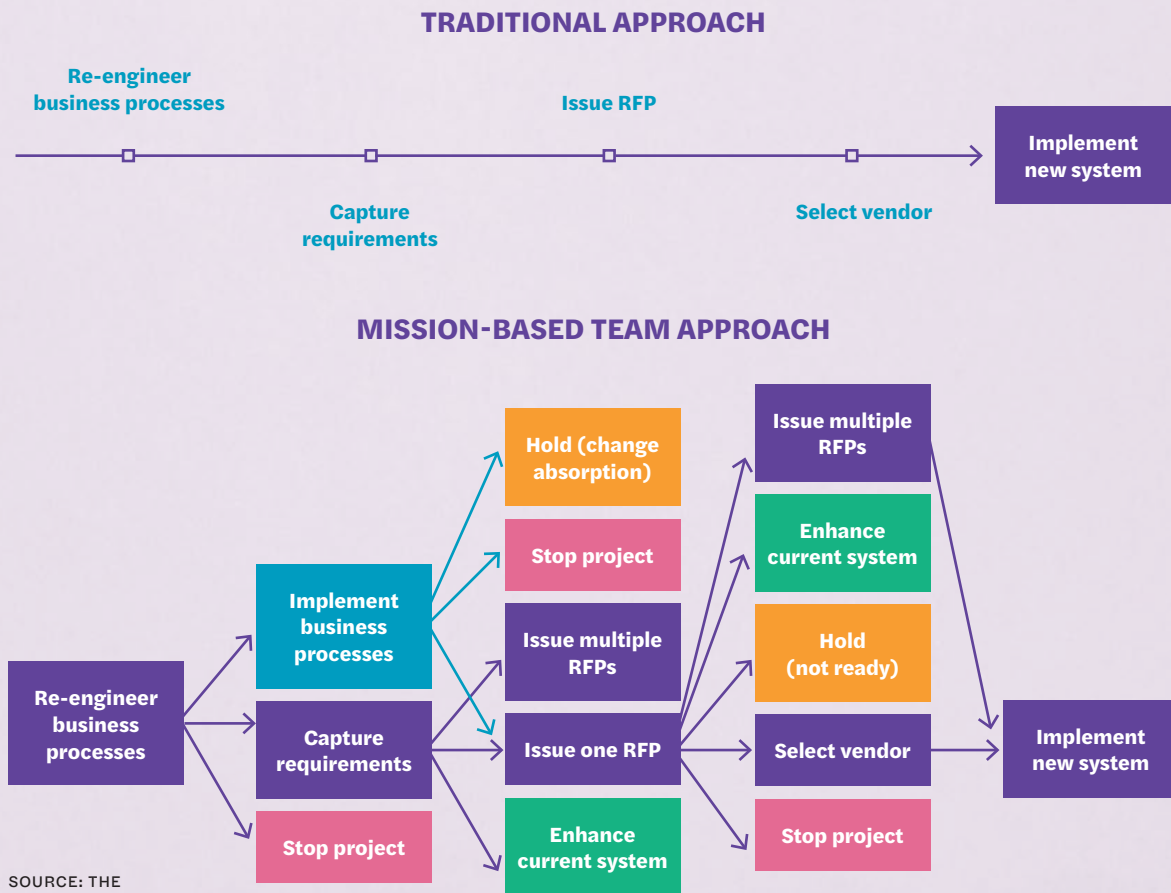
### Team components

Each mission-based team has five components that define how it works.

**Mission.** What is the team's ultimate outcome or future state? Example: We will have leaders ready to step into the next level of leadership by the end of 2022.

**Objectives.** What outputs or results will the team create? Example: Determine the participants for a leadership development program, establish the leadership program design of classes and other elements, and create the content for that program.

**Figure 1. Traditional vs. Mission-Based Team Approach for an LMS Implementation Project**



**Structure.** Who is on the team, and what roles do they play? Example: One of the L&D specialists is the team lead. Team members include key senior leaders, instructional design specialists, and HR business partners.

**Parameters.** What are the team’s boundaries? Example: By December 21, have the program defined and ready to launch, but do not engage potential participants yet. Another possible parameter would be that the program cannot have a budget exceeding \$50,000 in its first year.

**Cadence.** How often will the team meet, and what tools will it use? Example: Meet on Fridays from 11 to 11:30 a.m. on Microsoft Teams.

**Using mission-based teams in L&D**

Let’s break down how you can implement mission-based teams in your organization and incorporate them into L&D projects.

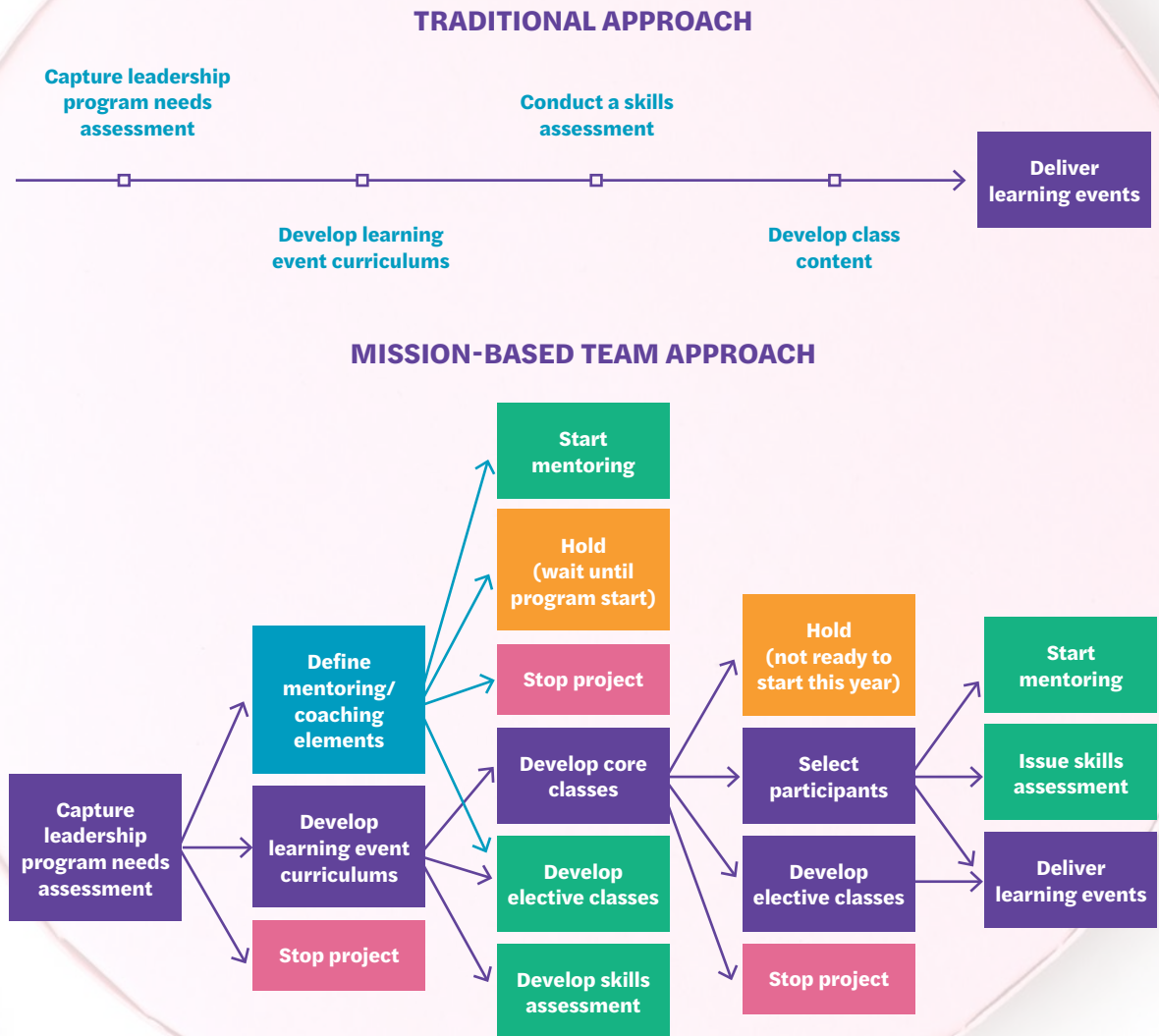
These teams create quick, valuable efforts that contain multiple next-step options based on what the effort recommends. They are light in terms of documentation, because what drives agility is speed as well as having the right empowered people on the team.

Company leadership should define the mission and parameters and then provide the expectations for objectives and structure. The team then validates and refines its objectives, structure, and cadence.

The key is to break the effort into smaller chunks that could follow different next-step paths depending on the team’s findings. Think of missions as waypoints toward a strategic outcome. In traditional, large, linear initiatives, the path is predetermined.

Conversely, a mission-based team uses options in its path. One way to think of it is like a video game. The game’s objective may be to destroy the enemy

**Figure 2. Comparing Approaches for Creating a Leadership Development Program**



SOURCE: THE PERSIMMON GROUP

base. But you can take multiple paths to get there, making decisions at various waypoints to achieve the overarching desired outcome.

Take, for example, an LMS implementation. Such projects can be among the most tedious and complex initiatives an L&D function will undertake, and they provide an ideal opportunity to use a mission-based team approach.

A recent client LMS implementation using the mission-based team approach included:

- Re-engineering the business process
- Capturing requirements

- Issuing an RFP
- Selecting the vendor
- Implementing the new system

In a mission-based team approach, after the team captures requirements or needs for the learning management process, it could take different paths as a result (see Figure 1). For this client, team members identified improvements in the process that the organization could immediately implement to realize value.

It is important to remember that the mission-based team approach does not entail predetermined paths. Rather, those are left to the elite team to assess.

In another path, if the team determines it is beneficial to proceed with capturing requirements, team members may decide they need more than one learning management-related system to meet the requirements, which would then require the organization to issue multiple RFPs or bids. Or the team may determine that the company could enhance the current system using internal staff to achieve the goal for less expense. Each of those could be the next mission.

For example, after the team decides to issue a request for proposal for the LMS and receives bid responses, it may move forward with selecting multiple vendors it needs as well as making changes to the existing systems or processes. By applying the mission-based team approach, multiple paths can occur in parallel to achieve the ultimate outcome.

In other words, in a linear approach, the project team would move immediately from re-engineering the process to capturing requirements for the new system. But a mission-based team could implement quick wins, define a new process, change tools or policies, or provide new training.

Another example of using a mission-based team is for creating a leadership development program. Traditionally, teams tasked with program development likely took a linear approach, such as:

1. Capturing leadership program needs assessment
2. Developing learning events
3. Conducting a skills assessment
4. Developing class content
5. Delivering learning events

But look at Figure 2 to see how a mission-based team changes the process. In developing a new leadership development program, initial program requirements (or needs assessment) could result in various subsequent missions—from learning events to mentoring to learning tools. That approach enables multiple empowered teams to work in parallel with real outputs (for example, class content, participant skills assessments, and a mentoring program) that could be initiated whenever desired. The mission-based team provides real flexibility in the implementation while enabling ownership of its outputs.

What ultimately occurs is that the team decomposes the initial plan into smaller packages or work deliverables that could lead into different next steps depending on what the mission-based team finds.

That empowers the mission-based team to implement changes or improvements incrementally instead of waiting until the end of the initiative. It also enables the team to stop parts of or all the initiative at any point instead of spending time completing an initiative that will not deliver value.

# Multiple paths can occur in parallel to achieve the ultimate outcome.

## Adoption

The approach creates incremental change quickly with intense focus while under a strategic outcome for success. To start using such teams in your learning organization:

- Select a cross-departmental initiative, such as an organization-wide learning initiative.
- Establish the team's mission and objectives.
- Resolve who should be on the first team. For example, a mission-based team for LMS implementation may comprise a team lead, a project manager, an e-learning expert, an L&D administrator, and an IT specialist.
- Determine the mission's desired length. Remember that it should be less than 90 days. Based on the scope and the people involved, the schedule may be intense, where the team sets aside a solid day or two for initiative work. Or it may be incremental—for example, carving out an hour a week over the course of multiple weeks.

The team's role will be to assign a member to be the lead (the person who reports status and ensures the mission remains aligned with its scope), validate and refine the missions and objectives, set the structure and cadence for team meetings, execute the mission, evaluate the mission, and recommend the next mission and team.

## Plenty of opportunities

The speed of change can lead to chaos as employees and departments start running in different directions while reacting to the issues of the day. But it also can lead to opportunity.

By implementing mission-based teams across your L&D department and organization, you are better prepared to excel against the next big disruption.

**Bill Fournet** is founder and CEO of the Persimmon Group. He helps leaders and organizations innovate how they work; [billfournet@thepersimmongroup.com](mailto:billfournet@thepersimmongroup.com).



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