

# THE EXPENSIVE SILENCE

What Leaders Won't Say  
About Their Training Budgets—  
And Why AI Makes That  
Silence Unsustainable

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## *What Leaders Won't Say About Their Training Budgets — And Why AI Makes That Silence Unsustainable*

### SYNOPSIS

Executives privately acknowledge that most training investments deliver minimal impact, yet publicly continue approving budgets and celebrating programs. This isn't dishonesty—it's organizational dynamics. But AI is changing the equation by revealing performance gaps in real time and exposing capability shortfalls at scale. The gap between what leaders know privately and what they'll say publicly is becoming harder to sustain. This essay explores why that expensive silence is beginning to crack.

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I met with a senior executive from a Fortune 500 company a couple of months ago. She described a multi-hundred-thousand-dollar leadership development program her company had just completed—three cohorts, twelve months, external facilitators, the full treatment. The post-program evaluations were glowing. Completion rates hit 98%. Participant satisfaction scores averaged 4.6 out of 5.

Then she said something I've heard variations of dozens of times: "Between you and me, it's hard to point to a single behavioral change in how those leaders actually lead. Not one. But I can't say that in the quarterly review."

*This isn't an isolated story.*

There's a vast gap between what senior leaders know privately about training effectiveness and what they're willing to acknowledge publicly. But something fundamental is shifting. AI is making the performance impact of training immediately visible in ways it never was before. And that visibility is making the expensive silence harder to sustain.

### **The Language of Avoidance**

The conversation about training effectiveness rarely happens directly. I've sat in many executive meetings, and I can count on one hand the number of times someone said clearly: "Our training investments aren't delivering the outcomes we need."

Instead, the language is carefully calibrated. "We need to revisit our approach to L&D." "Let's explore more innovative solutions." The phrasing is always forward-looking, always optimistic, always focused on what might work next rather than whether what we're currently doing actually works now.

This isn't because executives are dishonest. By the time a training program launches, it carries the endorsement of HR leaders who championed it, learning teams who designed it, finance teams who approved it, and executive sponsors who publicly supported it. Questioning effectiveness six months later isn't just analytical scrutiny—it's challenging a web of prior commitments made by people whose judgment you rely on. In most organizational cultures, that's genuinely expensive.

So leaders substitute incremental adjustment for fundamental reassessment. These aren't bad ideas. But they treat symptoms without addressing the underlying question: *is this the right investment in the first place?*

### **When AI Eliminates the Buffer**

Here's where AI changes everything.

Historically, the impact of training was fuzzy and delayed. You ran a program, collected satisfaction scores, measured completion rates, and moved on. Behavior change—the actual point of training—was hard to measure directly, so we measured proxies instead. These metrics created a buffer between investment and impact, allowing training to exist in a space where effectiveness could remain ambiguous.

AI eliminates that buffer. Not intentionally, but because AI reveals performance in real time at unprecedented granularity. When AI tools surface how people actually solve problems, make decisions, and apply judgment in their daily work, the gap between training completion and skill application becomes immediately visible.

An employee completes a data analysis course with high marks, then struggles to formulate a coherent AI prompt to analyze customer trends. A manager finishes a strategic thinking module, then can't effectively collaborate with AI to model scenario outcomes. A team graduates from a communication workshop, yet their AI-mediated written output still lacks clarity and precision.

The training wasn't designed for a world where AI makes skill application transparent and immediate. But the visibility that AI creates makes it harder for leaders to maintain the polite fiction that training is working as intended. When AI reveals capability gaps in real time—not in quarterly reviews or annual assessments—the expensive silence becomes more expensive to sustain than the uncomfortable truth.

### **The Competency Mismatch**

There's growing awareness that AI isn't just exposing skill gaps—it's changing what skills matter in the first place.

The competencies that training programs were designed to build are shifting so rapidly that even well-designed programs feel outdated by the time they're delivered. Leaders see their teams using AI in ways that bypass traditional skill development entirely. They watch junior employees produce outputs that used to require senior expertise, not because they've been trained better, but because they've learned to work effectively with AI.

The employees adapting fastest aren't necessarily the ones who attended the most training—they're the ones who iterate quickly, tolerate ambiguity well, and learn through doing.

This creates *quiet cognitive dissonance* for leaders approving training budgets. Training is how organizations have always built capability, and shifting away from it feels risky. But there's emerging evidence that the traditional training model is misaligned with how capability is actually developing in an AI-augmented workplace. Articulating this would require acknowledging that billions of dollars in annual training investment might be solving yesterday's problem while today's problem—how to build capability in an AI-accelerated environment—remains largely unaddressed.

## **What Employees Already Know**

What makes the silence particularly expensive is that employees aren't fooled.

They know when training feels disconnected from their actual work challenges. They attend programs dutifully, complete the assignments, pass the assessments—and then return to their desks largely unchanged. This isn't because they're resistant to learning. It's because the gap between what training teaches and what their AI-augmented work requires is becoming increasingly obvious, even if it remains unspoken in official conversations.

When leaders champion programs that employees privately know aren't relevant, *it quietly erodes trust.*

## **The Leadership Bind**

The path forward isn't obvious, which is partly why the silence persists.

It's genuinely unclear what replaces traditional training in an AI-augmented environment. And I can't pretend and say I have the clarity. Some organizations are shifting toward just-in-time performance support embedded in workflows. Others are focusing on AI literacy as a foundational skill. These approaches show promise, but they're still emerging, unproven at scale, and difficult to justify in budget conversations that expect clear ROI projections.

This creates a genuine bind for leaders. The old model feels increasingly misaligned. The new model is still unclear. So leaders do what's rational: they approve incremental changes

to existing programs, add AI modules to existing curricula, rebrand training as "AI-enhanced learning," and hope that small adjustments will bridge the gap.

It's not ideal. But it's less risky than declaring publicly that the organization doesn't yet know how to build capability effectively in the age of AI.

## **Why AI Breaks the Silence**

What's interesting is that AI itself might be what finally breaks the silence. Not because AI exposes training as ineffective—that's been known privately for years. But because AI makes the consequences of that ineffectiveness too visible to ignore.

When performance gaps show up immediately in AI-mediated workflows, when the distance between training completion and actual capability becomes measurable in days rather than quarters, the organizational tolerance for ambiguity decreases. It becomes harder to celebrate completion rates when AI is simultaneously revealing application failures.

The expensive silence about training effectiveness is becoming harder to sustain. AI isn't creating that silence—it's been there for years. But AI is making the consequences more visible, more immediate, and more difficult to rationalize away.

And that visibility might finally create the organizational space for the conversation leaders have been avoiding: not what training should we buy next, but whether training as we've known it is still the right answer to the capability challenges we're actually facing.

The expensive silence held for years because performance was fuzzy and consequences were delayed. AI is making both immediate.

*And this "immediacy" makes silence expensive in a different way.*

~Shaurav

### **In the Spirit of Transparency**

*I'm not an academic researcher or PhD—I'm a practitioner who has spent three decades working inside the machinery of consulting, organizational learning and development, watching what works, what fails, and what we keep pretending works.*

*These essays reflect observations, patterns, and possibilities I've seen emerge as AI reshapes how work happens. None of this has been rigorously tested in controlled studies. These are ideas grounded in lived experience, not peer-reviewed conclusions. If something here resonates, experiment with it. If you can improve it or have your own ideas—please do share what you learn. We're all navigating uncharted territory. There's no perfect map for what AI makes possible, only the collective wisdom we build by trying, failing, and sharing honestly. That's really the only way forward...*