

Using Projects to Reinforce Learning

A good idea that doesn't always work ...

In Cadence, we often use project work to accompany face to face training work. The potential benefits are clear:

- reinforcing the learning by doing
- transferring the skills to the work environment
- creating usable work outputs
- where appropriate, getting people working together cross-functionally

A critical component of this training tactic is incorporating a review process to get the participants to extract insight and learning.

At times we have found that the results are disappointing. Some participants invest huge amounts of time on low value projects; or make naïve errors as a result of working on projects outside their expertise areas; or they adopt grossly inefficient project methods. Often the insight and learning is very valuable, but it is more about how not to do things in future than to practice / confirm new skills.

The problem is not dumb trainees, but we needed to change the learning process to get better leverage from the time that people invested in their projects.

The first ploy we used was to incorporate some project management concepts into the training before initiating the projects. This helps - but marginally.

But the real problem we realised was the differences between larger, more structured projects required in organisations and small, informal, ad hoc projects (like the ones typically associated with training). There are three key factors which needed to be considered in the pre-project training:

1. Ad hoc projects often start with grossly inadequate project briefs. Often they just have a project title or vague idea (e.g. 'why don't you look at staff turnover'). Worse, they may start with a solution to an unspecified problem (e.g. 'we need a better performance review system').

The consequences: projects solve the wrong problems; duplicate work already done; identify naïve solutions; go off at tangents; or experience 'scope creep' as the real issues become apparent.

2. The second problem is related; many ad hoc projects do not have informed, committed project sponsors. (The sponsor is the person with the power to agree resources and implement solutions etc).

It is easy to make assumptions about the level of commitment or how informed a supposed sponsor actually is. In reality 'they suggested the project' or 'I've had a chat with my boss and she is supportive' is not enough.

Worse still is when the project idea comes from the trainees themselves. They may reflect personal conviction or interest (e.g. 'I'd like to redesign our website') and could meet with apathy or even outright opposition from the real sponsor.

Conceptually, trainees accept that they need 'buy-in' to implement / approve their project. In practice, many trainees concentrate their efforts here on creating a persuasive presentation than selling their recommendations. But unless there is also 'buy-in' to the underlying problem / issue, sponsor contact may be too little too late.

The consequences: great reports / recommendations that are never implemented; resistance from people defending their patch if the project gets too close; huge energy put into trying to sell project results to a reluctant senior management team that may not have bought into the problem, let alone the solution.

3. Ad hoc projects often don't have any project plan ('hey, it's only a training project!'). People launch straight into action and make it up as they go along. Or they have a plan which consists only of agreement about when the project team will meet.

The consequences: tasks multiply; input from others comes slower than expected, telescoping the timeline; pressures from the 'real' job start to mount because they were not factored in; scope creep and constantly changing project targets and tactics; projects fizzle out inconclusively.

A better way ...

We have put in place two simple initiatives to overcome these tendencies.

1. A short pre-project training session concentrates on raising awareness of these potential hazards and the central importance of project brief, project sponsor and project plan. Then simple project management techniques for task breakdown and planning are introduced.
2. A simple one page project brief in three sections is used as a discipline to follow before any project work is undertaken.

The first section clarifies project scope and requires a description of project purpose and what is in and out of scope.

The second section clarifies the underlying problem that the project aims to address. Both these sections need to be agreed and signed off by the sponsor at the outset to ensure that both the project team and the sponsor are operating from a common basis.

The third section identifies a tentative project plan outlining phases and timeframes.

This plan does not need to be definitive, but it gets the team thinking realistically about the whole lifetime of the project rather than just the first one or two steps.

With these changes to the learning process, the use of training-related projects can be enhanced considerably thus producing more valuable projects and better reinforcement of positive learning.

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