



Defusing Politically Charged Training Environments

Avoid letting corporate politics and culture differences disrupt your project.

By Vic Passion and Meryl Natchez

As if developing quality training weren't difficult enough, many times, corporate or institutional politics make the job harder. Being caught in the political crossfire can be disastrous for a complex initiative, but it doesn't have to derail the project. Some proven techniques can help you recognize and cope with politically charged environments.

Training teams are perfectly positioned to be a scapegoat in politically charged environments. The way to avoid this is to be proactive and operate as an unbiased and positive team leader.

Do not wait for problems to delay or upset delivery. Confront them as soon as symptoms occur, and be willing to think outside of the training discipline to address the root cause. This leads to success in even the most challenging environments.

Early indicators

So what are the warning signs that politics may be a factor in your training development?

Culture clashes can be a significant obstacle to success. An example occurred when a technology company, a publishing house, and an engineering firm combined forces to develop e-learning courses for higher education. The technology company proceeded from the assumption that it owned the technology platform for the project as well as the relationship with the engineering firm.

As the content provider, the publishing house wanted to control input into the development process and look and feel of the final project. After all, they knew the audience best. In theory, this should have worked for everyone. However, each company had its own culture. The technology team worked quickly, the publishing company worked methodically, and the engineering firm didn't communicate, but just tried to stay out of the way.

This was the landscape in which the consultant instructional design team had to operate. The three sponsors became embroiled in conflict, and eventually, executives cancelled the project.

What could the design team have done to achieve success in this contentious world?

The first step would have been to recognize the potential pitfalls of an engagement with multiple, unaligned partners. This applies whether the principals are internal departments or different companies.

If the option is available, saying no to a dysfunctional project is often the best approach. If you choose to engage in the project, sit down with key members of each team up front, clarify points of agreement and differences, and work out a plan that incorporates the interests of each group. This approach can go a long way to resolving conflicts before they occur.

Process agreements, review cycles, and design ideas all need to be discussed

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and agreed on before development starts. The publishing house should have input into the design, but this needs to occur as part of the design phase, not once development begins.

The technology company, engineers, and reviewers all need to agree on reasonable review cycles and methodology. Above all, the project manager needs to be able to move between these factions without bias, keeping everyone focused on their agreements and on achieving success.

Ending trouble before it sets in

Building the right team is critical to the success of such a complex, political project. The project manager must find the right personalities for the team and must also foster a strong sense of teamwork so everyone can focus on their work tasks. The project manager also needs to communicate clearly within the team and outside of the team. The goal is to build a secure environment and avoid creating more fodder for the political machine.

Competing interests among consulting firms can also create conflict and

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change the focus from getting the job done to maintaining a foothold with the client, says learning and communications consultant Beth Colyear of BColyear Designs in California. These competing interests create conflicting directives that can wreak havoc among training, communications, business readiness, and support.

"Without proper integration between these teams and their disciplines, the audience receives disjointed messaging and may even notice a lack of integration between the core program teams," Colyear says. "This can damage the audience's respect for the program before they complete the first module."

What can the instructional design team do when their budget is cut?

Prioritize.

Jennifer Jackson of Elliott Jackson Communications was serving as the training director for an SAP implementation at a global financial services corporation when the training travel budget for instructors was eliminated. She had to review her plan to focus on essentials, as well as determine what each group really needed to make the implementation a success, and how she could roll out training to more than 2,000 end users spread across several states.

Once Jackson had a clear idea of the essential tasks, she developed a program to repurpose instructor-led training into web-based training.

Jackson assembled a team that included three instructional designers, a web developer, and subject matter experts. The client and consultants participated in a series of workshops to develop and hone their skills in web-based development. Using a mentoring and coaching approach, client staff quickly adopted the new development methodology.

This strategy allowed the consultant instructional designers to transfer their skills to the client subject matter experts, making the best use of their expertise. The full-time staff became respected advocates for the new design approach, and they also gained expe-

rience in training techniques that enhanced their value to the company.

Lack of executive support, poor IT support, and apathetic users are often the clearest symptoms of a difficult environment. It's difficult for a training project to succeed without corporate sponsorship and alignment. When encountering these symptoms, the first step is to address them at both the highest and lowest levels of the project.

Meet with key executives and IT managers, and let them know what you need. At the same time, acknowledge user concerns, and inform them about your plan to address them.

Andrea Ames, senior technical staff member at IBM, believes that establishing trust and outlining achievable goals are the first steps in turning around this lack of support. "You need to be honest about the problems, and state exactly what the program can and can't do," she comments. "This isn't always part of the training dialogue, but it needs to be. Taking control of what you can do, being up front about what you can't, and showing results are the only ways to manage success."

You can tell you have problems when sponsors repeatedly miss meetings or give other signals that your training project is simply not a priority for them. Maybe your emails go unanswered, or no one returns your calls. You start hearing things that affect your project from unofficial sources, and no one is turning in their comments or responding to your concerns. Any of these issues could mean that your training program is in trouble.

This can be tricky, but it is possible to resolve. Begin with your designated sponsor. Explain the problem, and ask why the sponsor thinks the project has so little traction. Is everyone busy fighting fires? Have corporate priorities shifted? Getting a handle on why no one is communicating with you is the first step to addressing the problem. The next steps derive from the answers.

If the team is off dealing with critical emergencies, you need to revise your schedule, let everyone know, and take

a step back. Maybe there is a way you can shift your priorities and help with the current problem. If there is a new focus at the executive level, discuss how you can align your project with the new agenda. Flexibility is the key in this situation.

End-user adoption and acceptance can also polarize training teams and stakeholders. Recently, a networking company launched a costly effort to move users from a legacy application to a new application. Things started to get political when adoption lagged at less than 10 percent, as the go-live date steadily approached.

None of the corporate groups—IT, training, communications, support,

or operations—wanted to be seen as the reason for the company's inability to meet the upcoming date, regardless of how daunting the timing seemed. The challenges created a climate of finger-pointing. The turnaround happened when the project's sponsors gathered all of the groups in a room, asked them what they needed from executives to meet the date, and required each group to make new commitments.

In politically tense situations, training teams that build cross-functional relationships can avoid or at least minimize backbiting. Building relationships with other teams also increases understanding of interdependencies and

may help everyone meet deadlines and perform their jobs more efficiently.

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