

Preparation for Training – Creating the Mental Environment

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Abstract: One obligation of the Chief Project Officer is to ensure that the organization has a pool of project managers available that is adequate to support the needs of the enterprise. This requires training in, and continuing development of, project skills in both new and experienced project managers. A further challenge to the CPO is training of team members [and stakeholders] to fulfill their roles and obligations to the project process. Creating a training plan based on motivation, education, and connection is necessary for any development to be successful; lack of any of these critical components can doom even the most sophisticated training endeavor.

It's almost a cliché in project management that unsuccessful projects usually fail before they begin, due to ineffective scope definition or other planning issues. Unfortunately, the same phenomenon is frequently seen in training projects – only the root cause is different. Unsuccessful training efforts usually fail because of insufficient attention to three critical psychological factors: motivation, education, and connection.

The Chief Project Officer of an organization usually has a responsibility for skill development in project management, to insure the capabilities of current project managers and to develop a pool of new talent to staff future projects. Fortunately, there is no shortage of help in defining those skills – the Project Management Institute, for example, defines project management skills in great detail in the *Guide to the Project Management Body of Knowledge*, readily available to any CPO who wants guidance in what present and future project managers need to know.

The situation becomes more complicated when it's realized that team members and stakeholders may need training as well, to be able to carry out their responsibilities to the project. As organizations institute enterprise project management tools, especially, each person has to know his or her role in providing and reviewing progress information and making prompt decisions to keep the project moving. The experience of our company in installing, configuring, and training to use Microsoft Project 2003 in enterprise environments has reinforced my awareness of “garbage in – garbage out” – unless each participant in the project provides accurate and timely progress information with alerts when exceptions occur, senior management can be misled about resource utilization and demand as well as cost and delivery status.

Although what participants need to know varies with their role in the project, there are three constant factors that must be considered in developing project skills by training: motivation, education, and connection.

Motivation

Learning anything new, from a software application to a new project request procedure, requires hands-on experience. People learn by doing. But most people have more than

enough to do; they are rarely looking for something to fill their idle time. Not only that, they have learned some way to accomplish their goals. We're now asking them to forget the old method and learn a new one – as always, the project manager [of the training, in this case] becomes an agent of change, and it's widely believed that people resist change. Actually, they don't. People resist being changed, a subtle but crucial difference. If participants are positively motivated to change, not only do they not resist, they're impossible to stop!

Positive motivators include asking people for help to solve an organizational problem, making their jobs easier or less crisis-driven, giving them more autonomy...in fact, there are almost as many positive motivators as there are participants in the training. The complex and subjective nature of positive motivation often encourages a one-size-fits-all motivation approach, such as "you get to keep your job". One plant manager was heard to remark, "If they don't like it, they can leave."

Most people have too much invested in their jobs to leave because they don't like a change, so those who don't like it frequently stay – and do what they can to sabotage the change. Mistakes and forgetfulness are often symptoms of a lack of motivation to make the new system work. It's worth the time and effort needed to provide a wide range of potential positive motivators, so participants can self-select the one that appeals to their own psychology.

Education

Malcolm Knowles, the noted adult educator, once said, "Education is the art of replacing an empty mind with an open one." Since people learn by doing, what's the value of formal training?

On-line and self-training provide few opportunities to present the motivators we have defined; a group setting with a live presenter can provide a passion and enthusiasm that promotes positive responses from the learners. Outside trainers often have more influence and credibility simply because they can "tell it like it is" – they are seen as having a broader view of the situation and less need to toe the company line than internal trainers. This may or may not be true, but perception is important in training for a positive response to change.

The biggest advantage of formal training is the opportunity to connect the solution [the change] with the problem [the motivator]. If participants are convinced the solution will work and meet a real need, they will be more likely to willingly work through the learning curve that every new methodology or system requires. Well-done training will also show them how to proceed – what steps they need to take to begin the familiarization process and what they can expect along the way.

Honesty is crucial. Everything is hard, at first. No matter how easy it will become, the learning curve must be climbed [remember the first time you tried to drive a car?]. A realistic description of the time needed and the process required, as well as a source of help to answer the inevitable questions, will make the real, informal learning seem possible.

Connection

Connection includes two distinct components. One was already suggested in the motivation section: we all tune to WII-FM [What's In It – For Me?]. This is a very personal and individual matter, so participants in project-related training will make this connection themselves from the buffet of positive motivators presented.

Trying to make this kind of connection for other people often comes across as manipulation, rather than motivation. It's tempting to try to figure out what will motivate an individual based on experience with that person [or personality assessments, such as Meyers-Briggs], but people have a bad habit of being individuals, not easily classified, and of changing from day to day. It's much more effective to present as wide a choice of positive motivators as possible and let them pick their own.

The second component of connection is the responsibility of the trainer: it is very difficult to learn something that is completely new. The learning process becomes much more straightforward when the unfamiliar is connected with what the individual already knows. The context for the new information becomes crucial. Think about learning a foreign language – if it's connected to the language you know, learning becomes a matter of memory and repetition. Imagine trying to learn a color and music language, like that of the aliens in *Close Encounters of the Third Kind*. What does a blue b-flat mean, unless there's a way to point at an object that it represents?

Unfortunately, even experienced trainers often present an alien system or methodology without reference to how it compares and contrasts with the known, current system or methodology. What will be the same? What will be different?

If planning for a training project includes adequate attention to motivation, education, and connection, the project has a realistic chance of success and the change being introduced will be accepted and adopted much more readily.

Delivering what people need to know in a way they helps them learn and use the information will support the developmental responsibilities of the CPO and itself presents a learning opportunity even for seasoned project managers.