Ensure your training program is relevant and timely by focusing on its end before you even begin.

Dissecting the Deadline:

Keep Your Training Projects on Track

By Hadiya Nuriddin

In his book, *Identifying and Managing Project Risk*, Tom Kendrick writes that project failure can be attributed to one of three causes: The project was actually impossible, the project was overconstrained, or the project was not properly managed. For many training projects, the signs of risk are clear before the project even begins. Scrutinizing the final deadline will unearth many of these signs if training developers ask the right questions of the sponsors and stakeholders during initial project planning.

During this stage, developers must secure agreement from stakeholders that project plan deadlines are reasonable. If the training project is attached to a larger, time-bound, high-stakes initiative, it is more likely that the deadlines will be met because the goals and dependencies are clear. However, other projects with smaller scopes, lower stakes, tenuous connections to business goals, and only marginal support from senior management can often languish after being killed and resurrected time and time again. Therefore, it is critical for training professionals to dissect the anatomy of the project deadline early, during the first stakeholder meeting.

The practice of deadline dissection

Dissecting the deadline involves asking a series of questions to peel away the layers of the deadline and reveal information about the project that may not be shared initially. In general, the more vague the answers to these questions are, the greater the chance that your deadlines are at risk.

The following is a list of three questions you can ask to begin the dissection process. Use these questions in addition to the typical instructional design queries to uncover potential gaps in knowledge and skills. When phrasing the questions, avoid implying that the project will result in a learning solution because typically this conversation takes place before enough information exists to make that judgment.

Question 1: Why does this training project have to happen now?

Most training requests are viable and worthy of discussion. Although managers may ask for team training on listening skills when the root issue is obviously a management problem, managers are not going to waste the company's resources by suggesting singing lessons for the technical support team.

It is not a matter of questioning whether learning should take place, but rather, why *now*. For example, if managers were poor at delivering feedback last year, too, what makes feedback skills a priority now? Acceptable answers could include: "We can trace performance problems back to inadequate feedback" or "We want our performance reviews to be more effective."

While these responses do not provide a sufficient basis to calculate a return-on-investment, further discussion could unearth crucial information that developers can use to

Photo by Veer

communicate the cost of missed content review deadlines.

If stakeholders cannot provide a specific answer to this question, the project is at risk. Internal team projects that need to launch *right now* will always take priority over dispensable training initiatives.

Question 2: What is driving that specific deadline?

If the project is not tied to a larger business implementation, and yet the sponsors provide a project end date up front, the deadline must be questioned. The rationale for selecting deadlines can be surprisingly arbitrary and disconnected from performance. Some examples include: "Our vice president wants to get this done," "We have money in the budget this year," or "We've been sitting on this for too long."

If the answers to this question are connected to people and ideas instead of employee or organization performance goals, the project is at risk. Answers that connect the deadline date to events or performance objectives can help the developer to modify the solution if the project gets off track. For example, perhaps the content can be divided into chunks, each focusing on behaviors needed now, as well as at different time intervals in the future. This is difficult to accomplish if the developer does not clearly understand what drives the date.

The sooner mitigation strategies are discussed, the better. Suggestions made after the project has already derailed appear to be Band-Aid solutions rather than alternative methods for meeting learners' needs.

Question 3: What are the consequences of missing the deadline?

The sponsor shared the issues that are potentially affected by the solution, but what are the tangible and relevant consequences of not facilitating a performance change by the deadline? The answers to this question are essential to the project's content and management. Again, developers can use this information to keep the project on track and begin to consider a variety of different options to meet the client's needs.

The sponsors' inability to identify the consequences of maintaining the status quo is indicative of how well they understand the problem and its impact. It also calls into question whether the team feels enough "pain" to make developing a performance initiative a priority. Knowing the situation ahead of time will help developers assuage the possible risks and adjust the timeline as needed.

In general, the more vague the answers to these questions are, the greater the chance that your deadlines are at risk.

What's next?

If stakeholders are able to answer these initial questions, you may have sufficient information to keep the project on track. If they can't provide the answers you're looking for, options include rejecting the project until the answers are clear or simply moving forward and relying on the stakeholders to drive the deadlines.

The most viable option, however, is to help the sponsors piece responses together by asking more questions. Follow-up queries generally fall into two categories, each with a different focus.

Ask questions that focus on behaviors. When subject matter experts or stakeholders use the words "know" or "understand," help them to translate that knowledge into behaviors by asking what the learner is expected to do with the information provided. When developers need to drive deadlines, they can focus on the behaviors that need to change rather than worry about meeting specific deadlines.

Ask questions that focus on ownership. Learning projects can quickly change from, for example, a high priority "finance department performance initiative" to "a training class" if the client doesn't accept full ownership of the problem or the solution. Ask questions about what's at stake and for whom. In my experience, every time stakeholders could not tell me who was ultimately responsible for the performance initiative, the project deadlines—and the project itself—were adversely affected.

When asking these questions, it's important not to accept agreements on your conclusions as the final answers. Sponsors need to express the answers in their words and in the language of the business. Otherwise, they are less likely to own the project and stand by the finished product.

Dissecting the deadline encourages stakeholders to reveal information about important project dates so that training professionals will be able to manage risks and delays as they emerge. If this analysis fails to take place, the developer will realize too late that the project is in jeopardy.

Incorporate these questions into your initial planning so that you are not the one whose project, which "absolutely had to be finished" two months prior, is still at its beginning stages six months post-implementation, and the sponsors seem indifferent to the problem.

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