



Using Projects to Reinforce Learning

A good idea that sometimes doesn't work

Cadence often uses project work to accompany development programmes, particularly leadership development. The potential benefits are to:

- reinforce learning by doing
- transfer skills to the work environment
- create usable work outputs
- work with other people cross-functionally

An important part of this training approach is the review process where participants extract insight and learning.

Projects can be very valuable to both the business and the learners but at times the results are disappointing. We have seen participants would invest huge amounts of time on low value projects or make naïve errors working on projects outside their expertise areas, and/or use inefficient project methods.

At times the insight and learning have been very valuable, but at other times participants have learned how not to do things in future rather than to practice / confirm new skills.

Over time we have identified the following the training project issues:

1. Inadequate project briefs

The project is based on a title or vague idea such as 'staff turnover'; or a solution to an unspecified problem e.g. 'we need a better performance review system'.

The consequences: The project solves the wrong problem, duplicates work already done, identifies naïve solutions, goes off on a tangent, or experiences 'scope creep' as the real issues become apparent.

2. Incorrect sponsor or limited involvement

A sponsor has the power to agree resources and implement solutions etc.

The first challenge is: someone agrees to support a project without understanding what is required; or the sponsor is the wrong person.

In both cases this runs the risk of push back and disagreement on the problem and/or the solutions.

The second challenge is: the group fails to engage with the sponsor. Conceptually, they understand the importance of 'buy-in' but in practice, many trainees concentrate efforts on creating a persuasive presentation rather than building understanding with their sponsor. This risks not fully understanding the business need or the sponsor needs.

The consequences: Great reports / recommendations that are not implemented. Energy is wasted trying to sell project results to a reluctant senior management team that may not have bought into the problem, let alone the solution.

3. No project plan

People launch straight into action and make it up as they go along. Alternatively, they have a plan which consists only of agreement about when the project team will meet.

The consequences: Tasks multiply, no liaison on when tasks need to be completed, timelines push out, pressures from the 'real' job mount because they were not factored in, scope creep, and changing project targets and tactic. Sometimes one person takes over and makes the project happen and other times the project fizzles out inconclusively.

4. Lack of appreciation of the opportunity

Participants don't internalise the importance of the opportunity to work on real business issues and demonstrate their capability. They give the project cursory attention, rely on others to do the work, and at times don't even fully get their heads around the results.

The consequence: They try to 'wing it' in during the presentation to senior management and give a very poor view of their capability.

5. Reviews are too shallow

The review process does not explore realistically areas that could be improved, as the group celebrates/congratulates each other on 'getting there'.

The consequence: The learning opportunity is severely diminished.

How you can make a difference

We changed our approach to make projects a more effective learning process and hope our learning will help you.

The first and key point is: if you don't have management acceptance and commitment to the approach, then try something different to apply learning on the job. You also need to have:

1. Senior Management Involvement

Involve senior managers in identifying and selecting the projects. Ensure at least one senior manager is committed to attending the project presentations and to giving feedback to participants. Ensure senior managers sign off the scoping documents and the sponsors.

To help this process, you need to provide managers with information on how to identify suitable projects given the time and people resources.

2. Pre-project training

Provide a pre-project training session that raises awareness of the requirements and processes, Include simple project management techniques for task breakdown and planning.

3. Project self-selection

Allow participants to select projects that they want to work on rather than allocating them. If only one person selects a project, consider dropping rather than people being allocated to work on something that is of no interest.

4. Project brief

Provide a short project brief which includes:

- Project scope: description of project purpose and what is in and out of scope.
- Description of the underlying problem that the project aims to address.
- A tentative project plan outlining phases and time frames.

The plan does not need to be definitive, but it should help the team think realistically about the whole lifetime of the project rather than just the first one or two steps.

5. Project contact person

Ask the project team to delegate a contact person to stay in touch with to check progress. It is also a good idea to keep in touch with the sponsors.

6. Have a presentation dry run

Require teams to run through their presentation to the sponsor (and if not available the trainer) before the presentation to senior management. Give feedback and ensure the groups have enough time to update their presentation.

7. Provide input to debrief

Involve yourself in the debrief sessions and provide feedback from your observation on how the group worked together, the processes they used, their results, presentation, and potential learnings.

With these changes to the learning process, our training-related projects were enhanced considerably and produced more valuable results and learning. I hope they can also improve your projects. I know that not every organization has the resources to use projects for learning but when you do, they can be a powerful (and useful) learning tool.

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