

Lyford Rome

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EdTec 685

December 15, 2009

BEFORE AND AFTER:

A Performance Technology Makeover

For my PT Makeover project, I have selected a grading system software deployment at a K-8 private school in Scripps Ranch. This school had hired me mid-year to take over when their tech director went on extended medical leave. One of the most pressing problems facing the school was deployment of the GradeQuickWeb/Edline system to allow teachers to publish their grades online for parental access. On my first day, I was told that the system "wasn't working right" and needed to be fixed. Since I was unable to communicate with my predecessor, I had to educate myself about both the program and the school before I could even begin to recommend a course of action. I soon came to realize that there were a whole constellation of issues that would need to be addressed before the system would be used successfully, some technical, some procedural, and some requiring staff training.

A unique aspect of my involvement with this rollout was that I came into it after much of the work had begun. In many respects I had to deal with it as a performance issue, since the institution had already committed to this product line, but was dealing with a partial implementation and many, many technical and organizational problems. Drawing upon my experience with similar systems and my background with K-8 schools, I was able to eventually implement the system successfully after much work. The solutions included teacher and administrator training, identifying and clarifying ambiguities in policies and

procedures, managing expectations and retroactively tailoring the program to align with the school's needs. I also had quite a bit of technical work to do with the data and configuration, much of which was either inappropriately matched to the school or just plain incorrect. This latter part was what most of the administration considered the total responsibility of my job as tech director: "Just fix the computer program and put the grades on the website!" But the truth was that the actual technology was only one factor in the chain of causality leading to success. I knew that correct grades appearing online was the end result of many stages all happening correctly, and that I had to influence each part of the process, including delicately dealing with a school administration that had no concept of the scope of the issue.

Looking back, I can see not only with the benefit of hindsight but also with the perspective of best practices from performance improvement. I have to say that much of the work I did in original project I would deem appropriate to do again. *How* I went about doing it I would change, especially with what I know about change management. I must confess that I was a little naïve when it came to the dealing with the "culture of blame" that existed within this school. I was prepared for technology becoming the scapegoat for frustrations that often bubble just beneath the surface of faculty-administration relations. But I was unprepared for how much work was needed to overcome this hostility. This was especially true since the system they had chosen required very clear and uniform policies but the family run school was used to a more authoritarian (but inconsistent) method of management.

Analysis before my arrival was non-existent, the entire decision process consistent of the principal choosing the program without consultation. This is why I use the term "retroactively tailor" to describe the process of attempting to match an ill fitted system with the needs of the institution. I performed an assessment and did my best to interview sources from all the communities in the school: parents, teachers, staff, administration and even students. What I wish I could have done was question the whole enterprise itself. The

product to which they had committed was overly complicated and presumed a level of practice that did not exist in this school. The community was not ready for what it had set out to do.

If I had been hired the year before that school had embarked upon that path, I would have made sure that a full analysis had been done even before deciding to “go online.” I would have asked the head of school what he wanted to achieve by doing this, and worked to meet those goals as well. Ground work would have had to be done to prepare the community for new ways of working. Workflows would be redesigned but most importantly expectations would need to be clarified. I did touch on these during my time there, but the damage had already been done. Trust had been lost and all my efforts at remediation seemed to only bring the school back to a stable point. Choosing to initiate such a service line should add value and move the community forward, not just exhaust a tremendous amount of resources and good will to break even. It may be a cliché, but the school would have done well to remember the RSVP mnemonic – focus on results, provide systemic solutions, add value and build long term partnerships.

It is somewhat ironic that I now find myself in almost the exact same situation at a much larger school with a much more prestigious reputation. My predecessors have committed to information systems without understanding the change that deploying such systems would bring to workflow. As long as management continues to believe that “everything can stay the same but just put this stuff on the computer,” then the institution is poorly served by their lack of systemic thinking. Regarding the investment in technology, a senior administrator was quoted as saying “Now what? Now that we have spent all of this money, how do we achieve instructional innovation?” From a PT perspective, I now understand how backwards that manager’s statement really is.