

# IS BUILDING RELATIONSHIPS THE KEY TO LEADERSHIP?

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Instructional designers are at the forefront of many interactions both within an organization and client-facing. They are responsible for providing noteworthy learning experiences and ensuring the success of instructional programs. However, are instructional designers at a disadvantage because of a lack of interpersonal and building-relationships skills? This article begins to uncover the notable absences of leadership and relationship-building skills in professional and educational instructional design environments and the consequences to practicing and budding instructional designers.

THE IDEA OF COMMUNICATION transcends every boundary and every organization regardless of the goals or ideals of any company. It is present in for-profit and nonprofit organizations and business, academia, and daily living. However, what really constitutes communication? Is it the written word such as a procedure, an email, a publication, or perhaps, in more modern times, a blog or wiki? Maybe communication is not focused solely on writing at all and is defined by verbalizations between two or more people. Another avenue of communication is the ever-present marketing and advertisements such as those present in commercials, and now movie theaters as well. This article focuses on a small aspect of communication, and how the ability to communicate in more than one manner is what leads a company to a learning agile 3.0 corporation and leads instructional designers onto a newer foreground, that of leadership in their roles within an organization.

According to Merriam-Webster Online Dictionary (2010), communication is defined in several but important ways: as an act or instance of transmitting; as information transmitted or conveyed such as a verbal or written message; and as a process by which information is exchanged between individuals. All of these meanings discuss the transmission of information in some manner. However, I posit that communication has more involve-

ment than merely providing or transmitting information. Communication, in fact, has farther reaches into a person's being, and it is that communication ability that separates a leader from anyone else.

Instructional designers are under unique circumstances in that they must play active roles in communication to both ends of an organization: interdepartmental and client-facing. They are in precarious positions to build strong foundational relationships in which to serve and excel at providing the architecture for quality instruction. However, "instructional designers are under pressure, perhaps as never before, to justify what they do, how they do it, and what results are obtained from it" (Rothwell & Kazanas, 2008, p. 309). Although part of this need for justification can easily harken back to poor evaluation and contribution metrics in various training departments (Kirkpatrick & Kirkpatrick, 2006), there are a number of factors that can easily derail effective communication on the part of the instructional designer. A small sampling of these derailments includes relationships, education, collaboration, credibility, and workplace culture.

## BUILDING RELATIONSHIPS

Leadership is a relationship. Being able to establish relationships and open the doorway to better opportunities is

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not something that lies at the top of management. Instead, it is something that each person has the opportunity to achieve, if it is in his or her will to do so. "Leadership is a relationship between those who aspire to lead and those who choose to follow" (Gallos, 2008, p. 33). In fact, it is the ability to have and foster open communication in which leaders are able to gain valuable information. Clark and Gottfredson (2008) echo this sentiment when moving organizations toward the learning agility 3.0 model. They discuss the importance of leadership behavior in being receptive to people and their ideas and "create an environment where others feel both motivated and safe to learn" (p. 17).

Solomonson (2008) concurs with the importance of building and establishing relationships and discusses different considerations for fluency with people, in the forum of building solid quality relationships with clients:

The truly *fluent* instructional designer will have not only a certain level of mastery in terms of what may be considered the "technical" aspects of design itself but also a certain level of mastery in terms of the consultative, decision-making, and relationship management aspects of client-interaction; that is, within the *context of people* [original emphasis]. (p. 12)

This itself leads to areas of credibility on the part of instructional designers because the lack of ability to build and keep relationships limits the opportunities for further development for both instructional designers and future leadership capabilities.

Credibility, in and of itself, is closely related to building relationships and is inherent in a leader. "Credibility is achieved by gaining people's confidence" (Summers, Lohr, & O'Neil, 2002, p. 28). Kouzes and Posner (2007) posit that "credibility is the foundation of leadership" (p. 37), and they evaluate credibility on three attributes: trustworthiness, expertise, and dynamism. But credibility is not solely based on a leader or an instructional designer, but instead on the actions that are taken to

build that relationship and thus credibility with others. "Leaders work to make people feel strong, capable, and committed. Leaders enable others to act not by hoarding the power they have but by giving it away" (Gallos, 2008, p. 31).

How does Solomonson (2008) reflect these relationships? The relationships, along with physical descriptions of process and product, also lend some insight into the relationship between the instructional designer and the client. Three relationships are described: product-oriented, prescription-oriented, and product-process oriented. Yet it is only the latter relationship, product-process oriented, that allows instructional designers to work in a leadership capacity by being receptive and giving equal control to the client. "It is dynamic, interactive, and actively managed. The 'co-ownership' of the process throws responsibility of the relationship management not just to the designer but largely to the SME [subject matter expert]" (Solomonson, 2008, p. 13).

While Solomonson (2008) appropriately discusses relationships between instructional designers and clients, what about the relationships that must be built with an employer or peer? Summers et al. (2002) discuss the implications of communication with potential employers and peers and how the attention to detail and establishing a baseline or rapport can help or limit success. This same establishment of relationships must be ever present within departments and organizations to debunk the silos and formed groups often found in that arena. This movement toward open collaboration is another feature also present in the learning agility model 3.0 described by Clark and Gottfredson (2008).

Building relationships has to be built on a foundation of honesty and trust, "hence, establishing rapport means creating a trusting relationship with another person or group of people ... perhaps the most important single element in working as an instructional designer is the ability to inspire (and keep) trust" (Rothwell & Kazanas, 2008, p. 368). This ability to inspire and keep trust is an attribute of all leaders, and one where a leader must recognize that building relationships is performed with "a dialogue, not a monologue" (Gallos, 2008, p. 28). In fact, it is the ability to listen that breeds innovation in a society. The mere action of listening to a client and "paying attention, paraphrasing, conveying empathy, going where the client goes" (Green, 2006, p. 27) is what moves the relationship forward into a positive and effective relationship.

Collaboration is naturally a commonplace with building relationships and propelling them forward. It is the efforts of collaboration by instructional designers that can add significant impact to a client perspective. "The instructional designer faces the dual task of

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driving the instructional design process while *managing a positive relationship* with the SME” [original emphasis] (Solomonson, 2008, p. 13), and in fact “the consequences of how the relationship is viewed or thought of has a significant impact upon the effectiveness of what is accomplished in both the long- and short-term” (Davies, 1975, as cited by Solomonson, 2008, p. 13). This effort of collaboration builds credibility and demonstrates trustworthiness of an instructional designer to a client, thus moving the relationship forward and encouraging a successful process. Green (2006) puts the idea of collaboration between an instructional designer and client succinctly: “Don’t speculate about what clients are thinking—ask them” (p. 36). What better way to establish and build relationships than to actually have verbal conversations!

Summers et al. (2002) describe the relationship between an instructional designer and a client based on two items: data and feelings. Although data account for the quality of information that is being forwarded, the author mentions that “feelings address the importance of connecting with the client and knowing how the data influences them and what it means to them” (p. 28). Clients need to build trust, credibility, and comfort with an instructional designer and the conversations and communications between them are what will propel or stagnate a relationship. If the client is comfortable and has good feelings regarding a person or process, the relationship will continue to build and be profitable for both parties.

Building relationships and collaborating with peers is another avenue yet to be considered. As Rothwell and Kazanas (2008) and Kirkpatrick and Kirkpatrick (2006) have pointed out, instructional designers are not always seen as the leaders they are, but instead they need to prove their worth in both a development and a return forum. Without doing so, instructional designers have little recourse in their employment. However, one must also realize the essential relationship-building skills that instructional designers must make in their own places of employ. Gallos (2008) discusses the boundaryless organization and talks about “making boundaries more perme-

able, allowing greater fluidity of movement throughout the organization” (p. 201). The building of relationships with multiple people in multiple departments and with multiple organizations helps to transcend these boundaries and make them less apparent, and this transcendence is the responsibility of the leader instructional designer. “Anyone must be able to communicate with anyone else in the organization and that everyone assumes that telling the truth as best as one can is positive and desirable” (Gallos, 2008, p. 365). The instructional designer must often collaborate with different departments and must be cognizant of the communication and performance needs of both the process and the knowledge of a peer. Through the use of effective listening and building rapport with peers, instructional designers can focus their skills on the performance of instruction and how the process is equipped to reduce workload, because a clear understanding of the purpose and relevance of instructional design is had by all parties involved.

## EDUCATION AND EXPERIENCE

Instructional designers are charged with developing sound instruction. In fact, it is instructional designers who are in the “business of creating refined and intensified forms of experience” (Parrish, 2009, p. 514). Sound instructional designs should themselves provide for lasting resonance with a learner, but at what point is the instructional designer being taught to achieve these masterpieces of quality instructional design work and at what cost?

Parrish (2009) suggests that it is the learner who is “the protagonist of [his/her] own learning experience” (p. 515) and it is the learner’s own struggles and achievements that make learning successful. The learner is voluntarily entering an educational situation that will likely challenge current beliefs and concepts (Parrish, 2009). In this respect, instructional designers need to understand the limitations of their own personal thinking so that they may continue to challenge themselves and develop those skills. It is this ability to recognize personal limitations and to make strides towards closing the gap that can bring about characteristics of a budding leader. “The toughest problem for learning leaders will be to come to terms with their own lack of expertise and wisdom” (Gallos, 2008, p. 365). Recognizing these inherent limitations in personal characteristics is the first step toward acknowledgment and perhaps movement toward a fruitful realm of knowledge. It is the learners who must take charge of these situations and “acknowledge ... when reality moves beyond their knowledge and skills, and ... demonstrate [an] ability to learn and adapt” (Clark & Gottfredson,

2008, p. 19). Parrish (2009) describes this learner as a transformational learner “who seeks significant personal change from learning” (p. 516).

But the onus of learning cannot be left only to the learner as a variety of academic institutions have a wealth and breadth of instructional design curriculums in place to help student instructional designers build their knowledge and skills and provide ongoing opportunities for development. It is here where the split between academia and experience must occur.

How are instructional designers prepared for the outside world and is the educational environment limiting their potential for future leadership roles? According to Sorensen, Traynor, and Janke (2009), students in higher education need to develop their leadership skills specifically because of the leadership roles they are likely to achieve once working in the field. It is likely that learners with advanced degrees such as MDs, PharmDs, and PhDs are more apt to be placed in positions of leadership. However, the leadership skills required are not necessarily inherent to the learners. Sorensen et al. (2009) posits that one of the determining factors for student success is their leadership skills. He describes one of the roles that students may aspire to as that of a “change agent,” and these skills need to be learned through formal education and integration into a curriculum to better prepare students when they begin work as a professional. Mughan and Kyvik (2010) agree that many students are not being properly prepared in communication skills, which can often jeopardize international relations as well. Where competencies in other business-related areas are given ample attention, “there was too little attention given to developing leadership and interpersonal skills” (Mughan & Kyvik, 2010, p. 181).

Larson and Lockee (2009) also recognize the limitations in leadership skills taught in instructional design programs and the generalizations that are often made based on the level of graduate work achieved and the perceived avenue of employment post graduation.

The program’s faculty agree that their doctoral degree adopts a “generalist” approach, preparing students for a variety of career environments, building upon practitioner skills and emphasizing research and management skills. In contrast, however, the design of the masters program reflects, as one senior faculty put it, most masters students “go into business and industry so a lot of courses that we offer are ... targeted towards preparing them for business and industry” (Larson & Lockee, 2009, p. 6).

In the study conducted by Larson and Lockee (2009), where they studied a highly reputable and well-known university known for its excellence in instructional design

curriculum, the authors make mention of changes to curricula that “were based on their own experience or on employer feedback” (p. 8). Although it was interesting to note how “war stories” made it into the curriculum to encourage real-world examples, there was minimal mention of the establishment of relationships and leadership attributes. In fact, of the 36 competencies listed for instructional design learners, only five had to do with communication, of which only one was directly related to interpersonal skills (Larson & Lockee, 2009). In the graduate curriculum, not a single competency or development opportunity was listed for leadership development, and these same leadership development qualities are missing from the International Board of Standards for Training, Performance and Instruction, Instructional Design Competencies (IBSTPI, 2010). Are leadership development and interpersonal skills not important for graduate-level instructional designers? Is it because they are not perceived to play a part in leadership roles? Faculty does recognize the importance of interpersonal skills and communication for instructional designers into curriculums, but it appears that the integration of such change is slow to take place.

Larson and Lockee (2009) used the following excerpt from a faculty member regarding communication as a vital part of the field:

I don’t see much of that anymore. Communication is so pervasive in all of our work lives. It’s relationships with other people, it’s introducing new ideas, it’s taking the current setting and coming up with alternative ways of doing it. It’s learning how to listen to other people and not just talk. (p. 19)

Although faculty recognize this challenge, they have not made changes to their curriculum, and yet personal experiences and recommendations from employees find their way easily into an updated curriculum. This same lack of skill in building relationships also finds its way into the workplace and is the cause for early terminations with instructional designers new to the field.

As cited by Larson and Lockee (2009) and Gardner (2000, as cited by Larson and Lockee, 2009):

The school-to-work literature, which recommends internships and apprenticeships, underscores the need to prepare college students with the interpersonal and teamwork skills needed for transition to the world of work. These skills are among the top ... reasons new college graduates pre-terminate their first jobs: ... poor interpersonal skills, and lack of teamwork skills. (p. 20)

Perhaps there is another aspect to education that must be considered. As graduate students, the focus is often on

professional communication via the written word in the form of essays and articles. However, does this advanced writing skill necessarily translate to the world of business communications where employers or clients may not be so highly educated? Summers et al. (2002) posit that it is these advanced writing skills that hinder the communication between employers, peers, and clients simply because of the ornate nature of graduate work:

Writing skills taught in graduate school do not transfer to the demands of the corporate world ... graduate students spend time developing skills communicating with graduate peers and scholars, only to find that later they need an entirely different set of skills in the workplace. (p. 28)

Although these instructional designers are highly adept at writing prose to academic audiences, it is this movement away from writing to the average person that may lead others to believe that their writing skills and instructional design skills are lacking (Summers et al., 2002). This combination of advanced writing skills and lack of interpersonal skills can easily lead to a road of unsatisfactory performance and, worse, termination.

The experience of instructional designers is of significant importance when dealing with communication. However, it is the scaffolding of education and experience that provides an instructional designer the abilities to progress fruitfully through a career. For a leader to be effective, “new skills require a foundation of solid, developed skills” (Armitage, Brooks, Carlen, & Schulz, 2006, p. 45). Instructional designers need to continuously build their knowledge base through experiences and personal development. “Professional development is never finished. It requires constant effort ... [and] the most experienced instructional designers ... should continuously strive to build their knowledge [and] maintain their awareness of new developments and approaches” (Rothwell & Kazanas, 2008, p. 406).

How, then, does maturity fit into this leadership and experience paradigm? According to Armitage, Brooks, Carlen, and Schulz (2006), maturity and wisdom are often confounded and portray “the notion of development from some initial state to some more advanced state, acquired through active learning and meaningful experience” (p. 42). The authors pay special attention to capability as an underlying theme and whether a leader is able to gain experience and usable knowledge to forward an organization. The authors also introduce competency as a performance measurement and describe competency as “a combination of knowledge, skills, and abilities typically achieved through education, training, or experience” (Armitage et al., 2006). However, the

question still remains: If these traits are not taught in an educational environment, then do instructional designers need to solely rely on their experience in the field and does this put them at a disadvantage compared with other curriculums that do pay closer attention to building relationships and developing leadership skills?

Leadership is not solely at the person level and in fact has additional levels that need to be considered. According to Armitage et al. (2006), other factors are responsible for good leadership and they include processes, individuals, and programs. This idea of different avenues of leadership is similar to Clark and Gottfredson’s (2008) learning agility model in that five distinct areas can contribute toward moving an organization into a learning agility 3.0 model: environment, learning mindset, leadership behavior, learning technology, and organizational support. Leadership is, in fact, the sum of these respective parts in that it fosters quality leaders and leadership organizations. “Leaders lead not in a vacuum, but within the context of an organization system” (Armitage et al., 2006, p. 44).

Instructional designers need to consider performance measures of their learners as a baseline for determining if instruction is effective. Through these performance measures and evaluation methodologies, they can continuously update and enhance a program until it meets the needs of a client and a predetermined objective. “It is the exploration of capabilities, those factors enabling or preventing effective performance, which provides critical understanding to effect and improve both individual leader and organization leadership performance” (Armitage et al., 2006, p. 44).

Leaders do not act alone in the progression of a learning agile organization, but it is a culmination of departments, peers, and sources outside of an organization that can move instructional designers into great leadership situations. What, then, can derail this relationship? Workplace culture.

## CULTURE

“Cultural understanding and cultural learning starts with self-insight” (Gallos, 2008, p. 369). It is this same ability of self-insight that critical thinkers use to understand their own thoughts, perceptions, and ideologies and allows them the capability to see not only a personal point of view but also that of others. In a workplace environment, there are many cultures and differences that can easily derail the work of an instructional designer in providing the optimal solutions or having open communications.

However, from a leadership perspective, it is these same obstacles that leaders break through to ensure an organization can work through any cultural adversity.

But cultural limitations can include a variety of things. As Larson and Lockee (2009) describe, these can include politics; tradeoff between work quality, timeline, and cost; project resources; decision-making freedom; employer attitudes; and employee workloads. Mughan and Kyvik (2010) point out the very real differences between cross cultural and intercultural understandings that can easily lead to misunderstandings and miscommunications leading to expensive yet avoidable mistakes.

Changing the culture or the environment in which it resides is by no means a simple feat. However, it is these barriers that precisely need to be overcome. This comes in the form of sharing knowledge, not just with one or two people but also with all within an organization. "Knowledge is power, and to publish your knowledge is to relinquish it" (Giang as cited by Gallos, 2008, p. 224). Instructional designers realize this limitation and need to openly share their knowledge and expertise with those peers and clients who are less knowledgeable about a topic. True leadership is not about personal gain, but about building relationships and fostering an environment of communication and innovation. Although this open communication and sharing of information may not be forced, it is the dual relationship of giving and taking that can lead to a successful project, happy client, and fruitful career.

## CONCLUSION

Instructional designers are at the forefront of any quality-designed instruction and they must be the leaders of their organization, peers, and clients by building quality and substantial relationships. However, neither the building of relationships nor the quality attributes of leadership capabilities are always provided to instructional designers. It is the responsibility of academic institutions and instructional designers alike to provide budding instructional designers with the education and subsequent experiences that builds relationships and thus builds quality leaders. Communication, regardless of the subject, is ubiquitous, but the needs and qualities to communicate well and build relationships is still in its infancy stages. It is these areas of relationship, collaboration, education, and culture that experienced instructional designers need to lead by example and provide the scaffolding for the novice instructional designers of the future. 🌞

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