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Critical Elements to Ramping Up a Large Team

By Lisa Toenniges, CPT, and Gayle Holsworth

Quality, scheduling, budget. Most companies find these to be important factors when applying resources and funds to major human performance improvement initiatives. In today's environment, it's critical to ramp up large teams as quickly and efficiently as possible to ensure your customers, whether internal or external, are pleased with the end deliverable.

How to Ramp Up a Large Team

One of the most important characteristics of any large team is to be flexible and able to work in the "gray." Most projects aren't black and white, especially at the beginning. Scope can change, objectives can change, and team members can change. The team must be responsive and able to tolerate ambiguity.

There's no magic process to ramping up a large team, but tackling nine key elements can significantly increase the team's and the project's success rate. At Innovative Learning Group, a performance improvement company, we address these items at the start of every large project.

Staffing – Define staffing needs and select team members with the right skills and experience in the industry, subject, delivery method, and role they're playing on the project. Don't forget to select staff for personality traits that will fit with the project's needs. Also, make it clear to all members what their role is and get managers and stakeholders to buy into the project – at the beginning. Most importantly, choose a dedicated, qualified project manager. It's the project manager who drives the project from beginning to end.

Process – Determining project steps is critical to creating an accurate schedule; not doing so is often the reason why large teams fail. Figure out the steps you want to follow and map out the phases, along with inputs, outputs, and milestones. By thinking through your process, you answer questions such as: Will we conduct a pilot? or Will we edit documents?

Communication – A project can rise and fall, be best-in-class, or be just average based on communication. You need to decide, as a team, how to communicate and when you'll communicate. Will you create project logs with status symbols? Conduct regular team meetings? Use a shared portal? Clearly communicate roles and responsibilities – know who is providing and approving content, and know who is serving as your stakeholders. Additionally, document the team's roles and responsibilities and contact information and distribute to the group.

Quality – Ramping up a large team is a fast process, but you must keep quality top of mind. No one ever started a project by saying, "We need to strive for poor quality." It's important the team knows the quality expectations of the project owner and stakeholders. Start by asking the generic question: What is quality? Then, take it a step further and ask for specifics. Quality

means different things to different people. One person's quality expectation may be great graphics, another's may be no typos, and a third's may be impeccable instructional design.

Schedule – It all starts with a good process. You can't just add dates; you need to understand how the work is actually done. Many times schedules contain details that are solely date-based, and when you look closer, it's obvious the entire project process wasn't thought through, making the dates meaningless. You want to run the project, not have the project run you. Schedules continually change. This is normal; expect it! So pick a program you can work with quickly. Make sure the schedule shows clear responsibilities and milestones and is at a level of detail that matches the project's pace. The short-term schedule should have more detail than the long-term one. Keep it simple – don't have 500 tasks if only 100 are needed. And remember to be flexible.

Budget – Always keep the budget in mind. If you develop an awesome product, but it cost double the original budget, it probably hasn't helped the organization. Ensure the team understands the budget for which they have responsibility and determine the tracking mechanism.

Templates – Establish working and deliverable templates prior to starting the project. Reuse existing templates if they're applicable or create new ones. Either way, templates should be well built using the appropriate software and branded for the initiative. The team also should be shown how to use them. Remember to ensure everyone has compatible software so no issues arise when the team begins utilizing the templates.

Facilities – Determine the physical spaces and locations needed to complete the project. For instance, do you need a dedicated "war room," office space for team members to co-locate, storage space for materials and equipment, separate work stations, or conference rooms for large gatherings?

Equipment – Make sure the team has access to any equipment for which they're creating training. This may include an auto part, medical device, software program, etc. It's difficult to create learning solutions and improve performance if the team isn't able to "work" with the actual equipment.

Benefits of Ramping Up a Large Team Properly

A properly ramped up large team will provide many benefits, least of which is successful project completion with quality deliverables. Other benefits include:

- The team will have a shared vision of how the project will work, including roles and responsibilities, processes, and schedules.
- The team will be able to focus on truly improving performance rather than just creating deliverables.
- The team will have lower frustration levels, be more energized, and bond with each other because they aren't getting distracted by chaos.
- Credibility with your customer will increase because it will be evident that the project is running smoothly.

By ramping up a large team properly, you're better able to focus on aspects of the project, which will allow the team to create a quality solution that truly improves performance and business results.

About the Authors

Lisa Toenniges, CPT, is owner and president of Innovative Learning Group. Toenniges has more than 20 years of experience in the performance improvement industry and has consulted with numerous national and international companies about learning strategies and solutions. A nationally recognized expert in project management for learning initiatives, Toenniges is the author of *How to Manage a Large-Scale Learning Initiative: Tools and Templates Based on 20 Years of Award-Winning Programs* and co-author of the ASTD *Infoline*, "Managing Training Projects."

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