

## Description

General Electric (GE) Healthcare Company purchased IDX Systems Corporation in January 2006 (GE Annual Report 2007, 2007). That purchase included a ten-year-old radiology software course being offered to customers (also called end users) that has not been updated in as many years. The course is called the Centricity (General Electric product name) Radiology Information System ImageCast (IDX Systems Corporation product name) Master Trainer course or the RIS IC course. The course topics are based on the radiology application as it was ten years ago and the course has not been updated to include new functionality training unless specifically requested by the customer. The course is a two-week face-to-face (f2f) class and includes agenda items that many customers do not purchase nor plan to adopt for future use.

In the intervening ten years since the course was created, there have been 11 software feature and functionality updates and 3 updates that were major alterations that changed the look and feel of the user interface in addition to modifying what the application can do (T. Warren, personal communication, June 10, 2008). Currently, GE is in the process of preparing for the next release of the software, which has been updated to include 40 enhancements requested by customers and new functionality that makes it possible to interface with patient kiosks where patients can check in for appointments using a device similar to an ATM machine (K. Stavrinakis, personal communication, June 25, 2008). The course update will occur in tandem with the rollout of the updated Centricity RIS IC software.

## Literature

There are five primary resources that informed my understanding of leading and managing change in distance education (DE). *Management of Organizational Behavior* expanded my understanding of leadership theory, models and methods (Hersey, Blanchard, & Johnson, 2008). *Leadership for 21<sup>st</sup> Century Learning* provided excellent examples of DE leadership and approaches to change management (Latchem & Hanna, 2001). The importance of addressing change and ways to address that change in the DE environment was informed by *Reflections on Research, Faculty and Leadership* (Beaudoin, 2005). *Balancing Top-Down, Bottom-Up, and Peer-to-Peer Approaches to Sustaining Distance Training* provided concrete examples of leading from various levels and *Rethinking Team Building in Geographically Dispersed Teams: One Message at a Time* explored the importance of emphasizing problem solving to virtually connect with others and prime an environment for success (Dudink & Berge, 2006 and Hart & Mcleod, 2003).

## Intervention

The requirement to update the RIS IC course warrants leadership and change management intervention because there have been recent significant changes in the GE environment and because the course is slated to become a blended learning course. The acquisition of IDX, the resignation of the CEO of GE Healthcare this month and the appointment of a new CEO, as well as the restructuring of the GE businesses from six into four business units are all changes that impact the work environment and may adversely impact employee morale. Also, senior management has requested that the team work to transition the two-week f2f class into a blended learning course with an eye toward moving the course to a distance only format in an effort to reduce costs. Therefore, it is not unreasonable to expect resistance to this transition from both internal trainers and the end users who will be impacted.

## **Diagnosis**

An initial diagnosis reveals both weaknesses and strengths. The primary deficiency is that key stakeholders (the trainers themselves) are not open to change in the current unpredictable environment. In addition, they are extreme proponents for f2f instruction and are unwilling to change how they perform their teaching duties (P. Karlicek & A. Cole, personal communication, June 16, 2008). In the current volatile environment, trainers will be asked to function more as tutors or mentors and customer contact will begin earlier than the standard one to two weeks before the f2f event. Trainers will be required to maintain office hours and be virtually available to the customer. The previous environment allowed trainers working remotely, but not a customer site, to work at home or not with very little oversight.

A secondary weakness is the additional organizational pressure to gain the favor of upper management and secure positive recognition for the education team in an environment traditionally thought of as a manufacturing environment friendly to engineering and management, but not as responsive to educators or those who do not obviously contribute sales. This concern is more invasive given the current unpredictable environment.

A particular strength, as defined by Latchem & Hanna (2001), that can be leveraged for this effort is that the project manager is in senior management and has already taken the pulse of the GE and legacy IDX team members (p. 25). Another strength is that the team members have a background in education, are being re-educated about andragogy where appropriate, have been given access to the application's test environment and are required to test various scenarios and the team members are being trained on the use of Angel, the recently purchased learning management system, and retrained on Webex, used for teleconferencing and videoconferencing. All of the aforementioned are factors that can positively impact the use of DE for this course update (Beaudoin, 2005, p. 55). There is also a change champion who is leading a tiger team in an effort to motivate peers and to mitigate their apprehensions (Dudink & Berge, 2006). The project manager and the tiger team have been briefed and are positively anticipating their role as change champions and their project goal to improve morale and keep the project on track.

## **Strategy**

Beaudoin (2005) identifies several factors that have the potential to encourage distance instructors new to the experience by studying “the transition and self-perception of a sample group of faculty currently teaching in distance education programs, all of who have taught previously (or still are teaching) in traditional campus-based academic settings” (p. 32). Thus, (1) ensuring that the instructors are familiar with and can comfortably use Angel, Webex and the RIS IC application, (2) making a top-down, bottom-up, and peer-to-peer communication plan a priority, and (3) focusing on the positive aspects of virtual mentoring are all items that will be a part of the strategy moving forward (pp. 34-35). The course for instructors should also include information on the importance of interaction and should suggest activities that encourage tutor-student interaction, something important to both instructors and students (Beaudoin, 2005 and Holmberg, 2005).

As an overarching theme, the use of tiger teams (composed of peers who support the projects goals and are comfortable with the technology) for a pre-defined period of time should also be incorporated as a part of the strategy. Tiger teams can mitigate resistance and this is an important activity because it is

possible that “resistance may have its roots at the physiological or emotional level and be linked to an individual’s struggle for survival” (Dudink & Berge, 2006, p. 6).

Finally, the strategy should incorporate “intensive task-related communication at a distance, and follow with face-to-face opportunities for team building before returning to distant locations for more work” throughout the life of the project (Hart & Mcleod, 2003, p. 360). Mandating periodic f2f update and strategy sessions will hold all team members accountable to one another for progress and success and provide opportunities for encouragement.

### **Leadership Style**

According to Hersey, Blanchard and Johnson (2008), the leadership style most conducive to ensuring goal attainment in business environments is management by objectives (MBO) (p. 125). This is an established leadership style and has been found “to be a useful adjunct to achieving corporate effectiveness” (p. 126). The style is one that encourages participation because teamwork will “establish a personal stake in the attainment of the formulated objectives by those who actually perform the task” (p. 126). There are potential pitfalls to this leadership, but they can be mitigated by leaders who acknowledge that “the system must be developed, implemented, and managed with an understanding of the problems it can generate” (p. 128). Therefore, communication is paramount and feedback should be timely, paperwork should be monitored so that it does not become excessive, and employees should be encouraged to work through obstacles with their peers and other team members (p. 127). Because there is already a culture of action, this approach should work well in the GE environment.

### **Reaction**

If we identify the stakeholders as those who will implement the change and those who will experience the change, then the trainers tasked to deliver the course and the customer who will receive the course are key stakeholders for this project. Because the trainers are working in an unpredictable environment and because customers are comfortable with the current f2f course, the key stakeholders, then, will most likely be resistant to the change and will need convincing that the change needs to occur at all. The senior manager playing the role of project manager is also a stakeholder in the project and prior experience has shown a willingness to create opportunities for independence, a solid understanding of the business objectives, a foundational understanding of how to motivate those resistant and how to foster further commitment from supporters as well as a non-reactionary approach to both success and failure. Thus, the senior manager will likely be non-reactionary and simply redirect the team if there is too much push back on the project.

### **Next Steps**

There is a certain amount of freedom for instructors that will be taken away and more of the burden of participating will fall on the customer. Because the changes to the f2f course is occurring in the midst of corporate changes, there may be the additional challenge to morale and by extension, motivation. These barriers can be mitigated, but will require a firm message from senior management and strongly encouraged task-related interaction (Hart & Mcleod, 2003, p. 359). To that end, the first step is to implement the communication plan using email, electronic newsletters, surveys and project kickoff notices and updates, as is the process for organization-wide GE changes. This promotes continuity and introduces a norm to the project that internal team members are familiar with. Additionally, the tiger team should be identified, educated as to their role and responsibilities and partnered with other team members. The project manager and the tiger team should then work to set and confirm goals, tasks and

milestones. Tiger team leads can then contact internal team members and early adopters, welcome them to the team, provide guidelines and rework the goals and objectives. The project manager should then meet with the tiger team to evaluate and sign off on the updated goals and objectives after which team members should be given dates for f2f meetings and the expected outcomes to be presented at those meetings.

## **Conclusion**

There are myriad challenges facing DE and the management of those challenges is important to the success of DE efforts. GE Healthcare is just one of many institutions, both academic and corporate, willing to move into the DE arena. Approaching the upcoming project with a specific leadership style, cognizant of its limitations, applying the tiger teams approach to the project and emphasizing the importance of relevant and timely vertical and horizontal communication has the potential to mitigate anticipated and unanticipated impediments. Leadership is an imperative for the successful management of classes taught at a distance. There will understandably be an “army of passive doubters and active obstructionists,” but solid leadership can foster an environment that supports the move from f2f to virtual environments and create a foundation for future use as other courses transition where appropriate (Beaudoin, 2005, p. 43).

## References

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