

Leading Edge Training Techniques - A Simulation Example

By Steve Semler

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I have been working recently with the American Management Association (www.amanet.org) to develop a new course for trainers with five or more years of experience. The overall intent of this course is to help these experienced trainers to face the increasing demands upon them from learners, managers, and their organizations' expectation of a clear payoff from learning investments.

As a major piece of the course design, I included a set of three cases to challenge the participants as they move through the three-day training program. Each case portrays part of a specific business scenario as it demonstrates the major learning points in action. As learners work with each new module, the scenario continues to develop. In the final learning module, the participants move into a simulation based on the case scenarios. The simulation task requires them to use all of the things they have learned in the course.

Because the AMA is the largest provider of public management training programs in North America, we would not be able to predict or control the industry background of program participants. As you probably remember from earlier Learning Safari articles, making the scenario feel like the learner's real work setting is an important key to success. This is why I decided to use three different business case scenarios representing different industries.

Here are the businesses we represented:

- **Custom Circuits, Inc.** - High tech manufacturing
- **Venn Software** - Software development
- **Lachevsky HR Associates** - Human resource consulting

Each scenario was drawn from previous experience with the industries portrayed. I also developed a government services scenario that can be fleshed out and used for in-house programs for government clients.

Each participant in the program will decide which scenario he or she wants to address, and will work with that scenario for the entire three days. Report outs and debriefs will give people the opportunity to get a look at the other scenarios along the way.

Here is an example of one of the cases. While introducing and developing the scenario, there are also several learning points at work in this case:

- Different stakeholders have different needs and expectations,
- Training professionals need to be able to identify both explicit and implicit or implied demands, and
- Needs assessment is a political activity that often requires balancing competing demands.

Venn Software Case – Training Needs Assessment

"Elizabeth, here is my training request. I want to take the project management certification course Tanuja told me about. The details are in this brochure," the software developer said, handing the brochure to Venn Software's Training Director.

"Thank you, Masato. Is this request approved and funded?" Elizabeth Winter asked as she glanced at the glossy advertisement. She frowned mentally at the four-week training course the vendor was selling, while keeping her face composed.

Masato nodded. "Yes. Tanuja said she would send you an e-mail authorization. This is an important certification course."

"You're right. I will send this in right away for you. By the way, how are the project relationships with the independent developers working out?"

Masato's enthusiastic expression vanished.

"Not so good, huh?" Elizabeth guessed.

"No," Masato admitted. "That's one of the reasons I need to take that course. We are still having a lot of problems getting the contract people to work together to meet deadlines and to understand how we want them to work. I am falling behind on several projects trying to keep in communication with the people on my team."

"Well, if it's any consolation, you're not alone. A lot of our project managers are having a hard time working with this expanded group of outside software developers. We've had so much growth that we've kind of overextended our ability to manage this many complex projects."

"I know. It would help if these were people all working for the same company, but most of them are single-person operations. That makes it hard to coordinate all of the communication and planning and processes."

"I understand. I'll process this request through for you this afternoon."

Elizabeth added a caution, "You're going to have to figure out how you're going to break away for a week at a time these four months of the course, though. This is a lot of time away from the job, and this course has a lot of nightly homework."

Masato nodded with a solemn look. "I don't seem to have any other options."

Elizabeth sighed and returned to her office.

Later, Elizabeth was talking with Tanuja Ramiri, the Vice President of Software Development, and Jane Wilson, who was the Manager of Subcontractor Relations. Both were concerned about the turnover of software developers that was contributing to the need to use outside contractors.

"It is very simple," Tanuja stated. "We keep customers when we keep our promises to meet their requirements and deadlines. To do this, we must be faster in our development process. I think that we need to do a better job of this."

"Yes, I agree," said Jane. "We're snagged in the details of the projects involving subcontractors, which is just about all of them, right now. We're missing deadlines and milestones. I think that our people need more training in project management skills."

Elizabeth agreed. "From everything I can see, you're right. I don't think that official certification is the answer, though. It takes so much time away from the job that we'd have to hire more people to cover the lost time. We can cover the problems we face without having to go over the whole Project Management Body of Knowledge."

"Certification would be important to our customers, though. They would have more respect for the person who has certification," Tanuja replied.

"How long is that course?" asked Jane.

"Four weeks in residence for the whole thing. Plus preparation for the test. Plus the test itself, which is no small thing. Plus homework and travel. This is a very thorough course, but I don't think we need the whole thing to get at the communication and planning problems we're struggling with."

"Then, let's do e-learning," Tanuja replied. "We can have people take the classes online and not have to travel. We have enough bandwidth and server power to handle this, no?"

"Yes, that should work. I know a couple of vendors who have been recommended to me for this area."

"Will they still need to go through the whole thing?" Jane asked.

"If you want them to get certified, yes," cautioned Elizabeth. "But they could work toward certification as time and projects permit, with less interruption of work."

"I think certification would be good. Offering this would help us retain people, so they don't jump for employment elsewhere so quickly," Tanuja said. "Elizabeth, I would want you to get 20% of our lead developers certified by the end of the year, and 50% of the rest by the end of next year. We should track this certification process. Is this reasonable?"

"Umm... I think that should be possible, but it will depend upon the project workload and motivation of the developers."

"I will explain the benefits to them at our next all-hands meeting and ask for volunteers," Tanuja said. "Please check with your vendors and let me know when we can start."

"You might want to check with Ray Buck, too," said Jane. "He can help you figure out which parts are most important. And Shomi Anawala is meeting with one of her contractors this afternoon. You can ask them what would help the projects go more smoothly, too."

"Good! Thanks, Jane. I will let you both know what I find out."

After a phone call with Ray Buck, who was the Vice President of Marketing, Elizabeth had some additional information. Ray had said that meeting deadlines was the most important thing that impressed customers. Project management certification might be an impressive technical credential, but Ray didn't think that the customers cared, as long as their software was shipped and installed on time. Instead, customers wanted to be kept up to date on improvements and new releases. Elizabeth thanked Ray and went on to meet with Shomi and her contract developer.

"Project management training would be good, I suppose," said Shomi uncertainly, "but I'm pressed for time. I don't know when I could get to it."

"How about if it was online training? That way you could do the parts that were most useful when you could get to them," Elizabeth replied.

"That would be better. Especially if I can do a piece at a time, say, half an hour or so. I need flexibility to juggle all the stuff I've got going."

"Can you guys offer that to us subcontractors, too?" asked Clarence. "We don't get as much opportunity to get training as the guys who work here, you know. Maybe you don't want to pay for the whole thing, but can you get me a reduced rate on training, since I'm already connected to Venn's network?"

"Yeah! That would be a good idea," Shomi chimed in. "Then, Clarence and the others I work with could see the same thing about how I'm going to manage the projects."

Clarence nodded. "Yeah. I could scan the stuff to see if I already knew it. That way I wouldn't waste my time on stuff I can already do, but I could check out the new stuff."

"I think we can do that without too much difficulty," Elizabeth replied. "As long as you've got the connection and the bandwidth, it should work fine."

"Good. I want to be ready for promotion to Senior Developer. This could help," said Shomi. "I've done enough of the scutwork projects already."

"Hey!" Clarence exclaimed. "We've built some good code! That's not 'scutwork.'"

"No, I meant the other internal stuff I have to do on top of the customer projects."

"Oh, okay!" Clarence grinned. "As long as you keep me up to date on these changes and deadlines that keep getting shorter, we can stay on top of it. Maybe we can pick up some tips from that project management class."

"I'll see what I can do to help," said Elizabeth.

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How this was used

(2009 commentary)

The Venn Software training needs assessment case was introduced early in the three-day classroom program. Then, more information was added in each of the modules of the course, developing the situation and demonstrating other learning points. Finally, the participants entered a realistic simulation, armed with background knowledge about the simulated organization. At that point, the participant team received another "dose" of information along with a task. (Step 1, Setting the Stage) Then, they assessed the learning need, developed a recommended learning solution, and made a presentation to sell that solution to executive management. (Steps 2, 3, and 4, Make Three Meaningful Decisions)

The debrief of the simulation took the actions and decisions of the participants, peer feedback, and instructor observations into account. (Step 5, Reveal the Results) By working with the simulation task, the participants got the opportunity to "put together" the things they learned along the way. This gave them rich insights and material to consider for the development planning wrap-up.

This is just one example of how cases and simulations can enhance a learning program. Let us know what sorts of simulations you have done or considered in your programs!

For more information on simulation enhanced learning and 5-Step Simulations™, check out LearningSim at www.learningsim.net.