

How to Create Effective Project-Based Learning in the Corporate Setting

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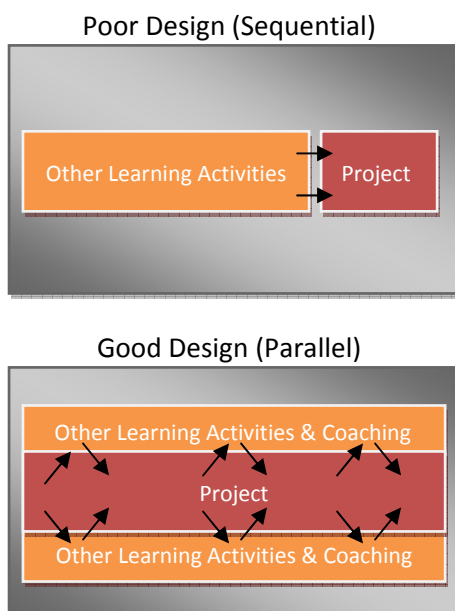


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Introduction

Increasingly, companies are using team-based projects for executive education. The results of our most recent Management Training and Development Corporate Practices Survey shows that 58% of companies plan to increase the use of project based learning¹. These projects usually involve the use of a “virtual” project team, with members coming from throughout the global organisation, to resolve a strategic issue for the corporation. While such a development process can potentially offer the company a significant return on their learning investment (learning PLUS engagement of employees in key strategic issues), many companies are having a hard time transforming this seemingly simple learning solution into an effective reality.

EML Executive Development has numerous years of experience in designing and implementing project based learning for our corporate clients. Our experience strongly suggests that positioning the project as an “application” of coursework at the end of a session or suggesting it is an “add-on” to other activities, decreases its potential value (real and perceived by the participant) and provides little learning power or value for the organisation. In fact, projects should be at the CORE of development programmes, with courses, e-learning, coaching and other learning activities being built in a parallel fashion around the project.



¹ For a free copy of the Executive Summary from this survey, please contact EML Executive Development (evans@em-lyon.com).

In addition to this critical design feature, our lengthy experience suggests that there are other factors to be integrated.

Provide all teams with a common executive level sponsored project theme ...NOT a problem

All too often, companies define problems to be resolved by project teams. However, one of the key learning objectives of executive education is to develop critical thinking. If the team is not involved in the problem definition phase, they are not developing a key executive competence and they will be less engaged in the project.

We suggest that companies ask participants to investigate larger key “issues” (customer satisfaction, organisational collaboration, innovation, etc..) using the Creative Problem Solving process. In this manner, teams define the problem and the solution. This approach is also more flexible as one sponsor can provide assistance and oversight to multiple teams, all assigned the same issue to investigate. If project team members come from diverse backgrounds and areas of the company, there is little if no risk of two teams having the same project. However, as they all share a common theme, teams should be encouraged to share information, developing another key competence – cross boundary collaboration.

Make sure that the projects have sufficient assistance from 3 key actors

There are three key supporting actors in project learning: the high level sponsor, the subject or theme expert and the team learning coach.

The high level sponsor not only provides legitimacy to the project, his or her presence also helps get others engaged. But high level sponsorship needs to be more than just words. If sponsors don’t show up for final project presentations or don’t take their role seriously, the impact on the project team and on the credibility of future project based learning is put in danger. Big names are nice to have...but only if they are engaged in the process.

The subject expert is often provided internally. This person offers each team information, resources, and of course, door-opening assistance. The subject expert should be made available to all teams and should be contacted, as needed, by the teams.

Finally, it is important to recall that the project team is a learning team. While internal sponsors and subject experts help the team advance with the project, a designated learning coach should be assigned to make sure that the team is advancing and that the team is using the project as a learning opportunity. An external (3rd party) learning coach works best as participants feel free to discuss internal issues knowing that confidentiality is maintained. (Note: always announce at the start of the project that what is discussed with the team learning coach remains confidential.)

Keep the project length short to keep energy levels high and to underscore the urgency of the issue being analysed

We suggest a project and programme period not exceeding 3 to 4 months. Projects that extend beyond this time frame are extremely hard to manage. With longer periods comes increase risk of local management problems arising. Project team interest wanes and overall energy dedicated to successful project completion decreases. Also, in a turbulent business environment, participants have a hard time seeing the relevance or importance of projects that extend too long into the future.

If you wish to use project based learning in longer programmes, we suggest 1) starting the project several weeks into the programme or 2) creating multiple projects of shorter length with different team members eventually.

Define clear final and intermediate deliverables with specific deadlines

Learning projects should have clear deliverables with fixed Deliverable-Days (D-Days). The deliverables should be spaced out every 3 to 4 weeks giving teams sufficient time to complete the required work. All deliverables should be sent to a project coach who reads the deliverables and feeds back to the team. The final deliverable content, structure and form should be clearly defined from the outset.

While all projects should have been defined with the final deliverable in mind, as each team advances on their project and clarifies project “fuzziness”, some projects may emerge as more (or less) complex than others, requiring different times to achieve the final deliverable. Rather than modifying the deadline, we suggest reviewing and adjusting deliverables about half-way through the project life cycle with the project coach. Remember, the project is a learning mechanism. Requiring all teams to arrive at the same point regardless of the project complexity is not appropriate.

Pre-define project teams as a function of individual development goals and participant diversity

Project teams should be defined by the programme manager prior to the start of the programme. Teams should be defined to maximize diversity and provide opportunities for peer-based learning. Teams should be encouraged (in some cases required) to assign tasks as a function of member development goals. Team peers with competency strength can be used as a “shadow” for those seeking to develop a particular competence.

Using information obtained through participant CVs, application forms, personal assessments and other materials, programme managers should define teams in order to maximize diversity. Projects offer a unique opportunity for participants to discover other people across the organisation and encourage cross boundary collaboration.

Allocate work time at the end of each day during face-to-face sessions

Teams are expected to undertake project tasks during the inter-session periods (i.e. in virtual mode) and during the face-to-face sessions. Initial face-to-face sessions provide a key moment in the team’s lifecycle to establish trust – an essential building block for virtual teams. We strongly suggest providing project work time starting around 4 PM of each training day. Anyone involved with the day’s training activities should be available to help teams immediately apply the day’s materials to their project.

Be transparent on the project and the time it will require with participants and their superiors.

As mentioned above, teams will also be spending many hours advancing their project in a virtual mode. This is by far the biggest challenge for the team – and subsequently the most important source of learning. While there are many ways to help virtual teams advance (for example, drawing up a virtual team charter that defines roles, responsibilities and communication rules), it is essential that participants understand the amount of time that will be required of them from week to week. Be honest. When possible, use surveys of past project teams to provide new teams with clear benchmarks. Inform participants of the expected workload during a pre-programme audio-conference or have a past participant attend the first face-to-face session to explain his or her past experience.

Provide a team development framework to help teams advance

Team members need to know that things WILL get tough. While the first few days of the project team's life may be fun and exciting, there will be tough times ahead. To best manage through the project team lifecycle of ups and downs, we suggest providing them with a clear model of team development at the kick-off of the project. The *Forming-Storming-Norming-Performing* model or the *High Performing Situational Leadership II* model are often the most appropriate. Prior to launching the first virtual work period, teams should do a self diagnosis of their status, the challenges that they may face and be able to explain the leadership behaviours that are expected of them to advance.

We also suggest fixing specific dates for teams to submit a "team development diagnostic" to the team learning coach. How does each team member see the

team advancing? What behaviours are helping/hurting? What behaviours are needed in the next project phase? Responses to these questions can then be used by the team learning coach to help orient the team and keep them on track.

Get executive sponsors to listen to the project results and act on any findings

This point is worth reiterating. Having one or several high level sponsors is important for the projects. But, their impact will be quite the opposite you expect if they are not actively engaged in the analysis and assessment of each team's output. If the sponsors don't take the project work seriously, neither will the teams.

Kick-it-off right and celebrate the learning

Lastly, make sure you kick-off the team project with sufficient time dedicated to trust and relationship building and celebrate the conclusion of the project with a ceremony. Also, take time at the end to debrief the "learning journey" of each team. Where did they start? How far have they come? What did they learn? What learning can they take back to the workplace?

Conclusion

While there is no "magic formula" to guarantee project success, applying the guidelines above will move your project learning in the right direction. Finally, as can be seen from these guidelines, effective project-based learning requires careful process management. Make sure that the required resources are dedicated to this process in order for it to succeed.

Good luck and good learning!

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About the author

As Chief Innovation Officer at EML Executive Development, Dan is responsible for the development of innovative and efficient learning solutions for degree programs as well as tailor-made programs for companies around the world. Under his direction, the Performance Lab works closely with both facilitator networks and heads of corporate education to identify emerging trends in adult education and explore applicable solutions.

Dan holds a Ph.D. from The Ohio State University in Economics. He started his academic career upon his arrival in France in 1993. He has since been Director of MBA programmes, Head of technology based learning activities and Dean of Executive Education. Aside from his managerial responsibilities, Dan facilitates various training programmes:

- Navigating the Corporate Intrapreneurial Maze and Building the Intrapreneurial Organization
- Who is the Entrepreneurial Leader
- Creativity and Lateral Thinking
- Political Agility and Organisational Savvy for Intrapreneurs
- Opportunity Recognition, Evaluation and Transformation

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