Our Pipeline

Use tools available to you to inspire learning in your organization

NLC’s New Manager Development Program

“The elearning was surprisingly challenging and useful.”
“Discussions brought real-life knowledge into the course.”
“Shadowing a more strategic person gave me great insights.”
--Course participants

“Benchmark” is in our organization defined as ‘starting with something simple and continually improving it into something great without ever giving up’ (Northwest Lineman College, 2017, p. 82.) When the Learning & Development (L&D) team received the question ‘can we not just use these off the shelf courses for our leadership development?’ their first thought could have been ‘how can off the shelf elearning possible deliver quality results?’ Then again, a course for new managers was often mentioned as a need and there never seemed to be time to develop one. What if we could just make it work with the means available to us? Can we make it ‘Benchmark’? This design case describes the context, artifacts, and critical design decision for a new managers development program in Northwest Lineman College (NLC).

Poster presented at the 2019 AECT International Convention
Las Vegas, Oct 22, 2019

Jeroen Breman
Learning & Development Consultant,
Northwest Lineman College

jbreman@lineman.edu
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Context

NLC is a privately-owned trade school focusing on the electrical lineworker, telecom, and gas line trades. It provides pre-apprenticeship and apprenticeship training, as well as customized training for utility companies. NLC’s has campuses in four US time zones. The company is growing fast, from around 60 staff in 2016 to over 250 in 2019.

In the growing organization, the hierarchical structures change with more middle management positions. Over the past three years, employees who were promoted into supervisory positions had little structural support. Bielaszka-DuVernay (2008) states that ‘Making the leap from individual contributor to manager counts among the most challenging transitions in a career’ (p.1). This was recognized by NLC leadership, as new supervisors had varying levels of success. Need for training was mentioned, but no one took concrete steps to organize this centrally.

The Chief Cultural Officer in discussion with one of the internal Learning & Development Consultants, suggested using off the shelf elearning from MaxKnowledge (http://maxknowledge.com/). The L&D Consultant had doubts about the effectiveness of using such elearning but agreed to pilot a course that would be built around the available elearning.

Artifacts

The result was a 16-week blended learning course combining elearning and online discussion sessions including guest speakers, book discussions, job shadowing, and an application assignment.

Elearning courses

MaxKnowledge is a training provider for career education institutions (MaxKnowledge, 2019). Six courses were selected from the leadership track:

1. Do you manage or lead?
2. Leading and motivating
3. Team management
4. Change management
5. Feedback skills
6. Difficult Interactions

MaxKnowledge offers content from a variety of sources. In our case Five of the six courses contained Harvard ManageMentor. Final multiple-choice tests added by MaxKnowledge focus on scenarios from educational leadership and administration. Participants all completed the same course at the same time. They had two weeks to complete a course. Completion time per course varies from one to three hours.

Live online discussions

At the end of a two-week period, learners participated in a one-hour online discussion session using Microsoft Teams. The designer chose this tool because it is part of Office 365 which NLC subscribes to. The facilitator prepared five to six questions focusing on how participants applied elements of the courses content in their daily jobs. Four of the Six discussion sessions also included a guest speaker. Leaders in the organization shared their perspectives on the topic of discussion.
Job shadowing

Including a job shadowing requirement was, according to the Chief Culture Officer, critical. Participants selected a position in the organization that would help them with skills and knowledge they wanted to develop. Participants were required to submit a reflection paper upon completion.

Application assignment

Participants were required to choose one of the course topics and develop a plan on how they were going to apply the newly acquired knowledge in their work context. As there were only two weeks for this assignment, the written report did not have to include actual results from the application, as this might not yet be available. Participants did have to present their plan to their supervisor and / or department management team.

Critical design decisions

In this section the designer's critical decisions are discussed. The use of social networking tools to create a community of learners and improving the transfer of learning to the workplace are highlighted. While MaxKnowledge acknowledges the need to transfer the training to the workplace and emphasizes collaboration, it only suggests reflecting on the application of the learning and provides an online discussion board that is hardly used.

Managers are the most crucial factor in supporting learners to transfer their learning to the workplace (Broad & Newstrom, 1992). By building an application requirement into the course and asking participants to present this to their manager, the designer assumed that transfer increases.

According to Pappas (2016) certain people associate eLearning with isolation and loneliness. They want to expand their knowledge, but they do not want to do it alone. Pappas' (2016) suggestion to build an online learning community was implemented in this course by having participants work at their own pace in a set schedule with a cohort of peers. Bi-weekly, facilitated discussion were included to reinforce the sense of community and encourage learning from peer student's reflections and experiences.

Evaluation

Summary

- All interviewees are overall positive about the course, including the MaxKnowledge course, the bi-weekly discussions, guest speakers, and assignments.
- Four participants completed all the requirements of the course.
- All learners completed all the elearning courses on MaxKnowledge.
- Those who did not finish, failed to hand in reflections on the job shadowing—even if they completed the assignment—and failed to hand in the final assignment.
- Reasons for not completing were lack of time, the lack of a clear end to the course, and a desire for more structure to the assignments.
- Recommendations for improvements include more practical applications, try to get everyone together at least once, clear deadlines, a job aid for the learning environment, and spend time on discussing each other’s projects.
- All interviewees would co-facilitate, and most would be a guest speaker when asked for future versions of the course.
- The instructor recommends planning a next course for the fall of 2019 with minor changes.
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Course structure

The 16-week course had 4 main elements: six elearning courses, bi-weekly discussions about each of the courses, a job shadowing, and an application assignment. A Microsoft Teams course environment was the central place for information about the course and the online meetings. Overall, participants appreciated all these elements. And most thought 16 weeks was exactly right. One participant had a suggestion that would extend the program to 6 to 12 months. More about that in the recommendations at the end.

In the interviews, participants discussed each of the elements in more depths (see below).

MaxKnowledge elearning course

Six courses offered by MaxKnowledge were chosen as main content for this course:

- Management vs leadership
- Motivating others
- Managing teams
- Change management
- Feedback
- Resolving difficult interactions

Harvard Business School developed five of the courses. Norris University was responsible for the sixth (Management vs leadership).

All participants were positive about these courses: “surprisingly challenging and useful!” The content was directly applicable to the workplace and provide useful resources.

While management vs leadership had some technical problems, it gave many interesting insights about the need for both management and leadership and was often mentioned as a memorable course. Also providing feedback and resolving difficult interactions got specifically mentioned by several learners and one mention motivating others as a favorite:

“Good to understand intrinsic vs extrinsic motivation; what makes your staff tick.”

All participants finished all courses! Individual elearning is sometimes challenging. Perhaps knowing that they needed to be able to discuss the content in the Friday meeting helped moving people along.

Bi-weekly discussion sessions

The Friday web-conferencing discussion were sessions were liked by all. They were good to find out that others have similar issues and hear different perspectives on dealing with them. Made the content more valuable by hearing what others take away from the courses.

“Friday meetings were great. You hear about other ways people apply the learning.”

“Meetings were useful for team building and getting different perspectives.”

“Good to have a mix of people and experiences.”

One participant thought the discussions lost a bit of steam later in the course. And one mentioned that they felt not everyone was opening up. Receiving the discussion questions in advance was a preference for most participants. There was no further feedback about the facilitation of the meetings.
Finally, guest speakers were appreciated. They included the Chief Culture Office, President of the organization, and Marketing Director.

**Assignments**

**Application**

In an application assignment, learners needed to plan using learning from one of the courses in their daily work. Because of the relatively short time in the program, the requirement was only developing a plan. Four participants handed this in.

**Job shadowing**

Some loved this experience, other did not have much success organizing it or are not sure what they got out of it. Learners report needing more structure and support setting up successful job shadowing opportunities. Questions such as 'who to pick?' 'what is required of them?' were often asked. Several participants suggested having a pool of potential people to shadow and more individual support from the facilitator.

While more than four participants completed their job shadowing, only four handed in the required reflection. Time and not clear deadline were mentioned as reasons for not completing the assignments.

**MS Teams**

Participants liked the Teams environment. For some it took some getting used to, but overall it was good to have all resources organized in one place. One person reported problems finding information: “Can you make important messages sticky?” The web-conferencing function worked well, and everyone was always able to connect for meetings. One person once used their phone to dial in from an airport.

Learners agreed that one discussion channel might be enough rather than a different one for each elearning course. And for future versions of the course, a job-aid and a brief introduction were suggested.

**Suggestions**

Several suggestions for improvements came up in the interviews.

**More practical application**

One participant suggested longer periods of time between each one or two elearning courses, to immediately apply the knowledge and skills on the job. This would greatly enhance the transfer of knowledge to the workplace. On the downside, not everyone may be able to apply all content immediately to their specific jobs. It would also stretch the course out to six or even twelve months with the risk of losing momentum.

**Mixed vs similar cohorts**

Some participants thought it was great to have a mix of experience in the program. Others though it would be better to have people at similar levels. The type of questions one would ask of experienced managers wanting to hone their leadership skills, versus those who do not manage yet and are wanting to step up are different. And, learning from more experienced colleagues can be greatly beneficial as well. Alternatively, a more senior masterclass might be an option for higher-level managers and leaders.
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**Safe working environment**

More effort could be done at the start of the program to create a safe working environment. One participant had the feeling that not everyone was opening up. That some participants were answering questions as they thought would be appropriate rather than from genuine experience and opinions. Perhaps the fact that some participants had their manager in the same cohort or as one of the guest speakers caused some of them to hold back at specific times.

**More discussion**

One participant suggested to add a formal online discussion for each elearning course. This would enhance the engagement of all participants. They could also be assigned to produce a question and moderating the discussion and summarizing it in the online meeting.

**More structure**

Some of the elements of the course were more abstract than others. For example, the job shadowing was easier for some than others. In the brief period to prepare the course, not much time was invested in producing lots of explanation and while the course was ongoing, the focus was on preparing content for online discussions. For a next version of the course, the instructor will have time to produce and give more guidance including how to determine own development needs, rubrics and timelines for each requirement, and job shadowing requirements. Individual check-ins and discussions about assignments early on the program can help.

**Next versions of this course**

The course can easily be offered another time this fall with minimal changes. Pilot participants suggested several potential participants and last year’s call for participation left some on the waiting list.

Finally, asking interviewees if they wanted to be involved in future offerings resulted in a unified ‘Yes!’ either as an instructor or a guest speaker or both.

**References**


