ROOT CAUSE ANALYSIS: A CAUTIONARY TALE

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It's often the case, in our experience, that a critical first step in the ISD process may be being overlooked. If it is, it's possible to design a strong ladder (the course) only to find it leaning against the wrong wall (addressing the wrong issue) once it has been deployed. This frequently overlooked first step is to understand the "why" (root cause) a design project is being undertaken in the first place; a process that is a bit more complex than many organizations appreciate. The reason for many errors is leadership's bias for action. In ISD this bias is manifested when clients all too often fail to look past the overt behaviors being exhibited (symptoms) to find the deeper root cause(s) of the problem. To be certain that a correct solution is being designed, the fundamental first question to ask is what's the root cause of the problem/issue we're being asked to design a solution to address?

Case in point. A client that we worked with some years ago wanted us to design a conflict resolution course for their employees. The stated reason for the request was that they felt there was too much infighting and arguing by employees when a problem came up and all to many issues seemed to wind up on the manager's desk to make decisions that was felt should the employees should have made. Our response was yes, we could design a conflict resolution course but first we would like to perform a needs analysis, a step that tracks with most ISD outlines but with one major difference.

That difference was that as part of the needs analysis we first interviewed a large cross-section of employees to get their take on the problem; more commonly, consultants take the manager's view as definitive. Second, we then asked them, along with the client, to describe in a sentence or two, any conflicts/disputes they could recall. When we analyzed the results we started to see a pattern develop. It seemed that the arguments were most often about which person got to make the decision; not necessarily about what the problem was or the best decision to make, but who's would make the decision. This led us to ask to review a cross-section of job descriptions and take a close look at the reporting structures.

What we discovered was two fold: First, many of the job descriptions (JDs) had overlapping work responsibilities and, secondly, many of the reporting structures were not clear. In the first instance, the JDs were out of date. Job responsibilities had grown organically over the years with no formalization as the "new" way things were really getting done, with individual responsibilities out of date being the result. In the second instance, employees who once had unilateral control over their work processes were now unofficially duplicating those responsibilities performed by others and often those others were located in different teams with different perspectives and goals. The result was when a problem arose there were two valid definitions of what the problem was along with multiple solutions to solving "the" problem; hence the conflict over what to do.

Once we had collated the information we spoke with the client and suggested that while we could design a conflict resolution program for his organization, it was unlikely that the problem would be resolved. However, by permitting us instead to clarify work responsibilities, update job descriptions and recommend a reporting structure with clear lines of authority and reporting relationships, his problem could be permanently resolved with the caveat that JDs and lines of authority continued to be up to date.

The result? The client, with an understanding of the root cause's impact, opted to allow us to facilitate the JD and reporting structure redesign and, nine months later, we were asked to present a conflict resolution course to the realigned company. Could a conflict resolution program have helped? Yes, but it would have been only superficially beneficial at best. However, by doing the work to identify the problem's root cause, the client avoided playing whack-a-mole as the problem would have continued to manifest itself in other ways.

A needs analysis is an excellent place to discover root cause if you don't get tunnel vision on what the client has determined to be the problem. Perform the analysis with an open mind and

include those individuals who are going to be impacted by your design; don't be surprised when their view of what the problem is and/or what is needed, is at odds with the views of management.

Our suggestion is never to assume that the client has done their root cause due-diligence. More likely they have only defined the visible symptoms presenting themselves and, with that process, assume they have identified the problem. If you can facilitate for the client, or encourage the client to facilitate, the process to define the root cause, the solution you design will provide greater client value and, in the end, make your job as an instructional designer both easier and more relevant.