

CASE BRIEF: CASE STUDY #10, ROSS CASLON

1. Who is the decision maker in the case that I am supposed to identify with and what position, title and responsibilities do I hold?
2. What appears to be my issue(s) (concern, problem, challenge or opportunity) and what is its significance to the organization?
 - Primary issue(s)
 - Secondary issue(s)
3. Why has this issue(s) arisen and why am I involved now?
4. When do I have to decide, resolve, act or dispose of this issue(s)? Is there urgency?
5. Have I (or others) already taken any steps to resolve the issue(s)? If so, what are they? Have they been successful – why or why not?
6. How will you proceed from here? For each point, be sure that you provide the reasoning behind your thinking.
7. Specific to this case – (Question #4 – Page 88) Describe the impact of unclear project leadership on your effort to encourage the effective use of WebPath.

My name is Ross Caslon, and I am an instructional designer at Lane State West (LSW). I have been given the responsibility of developing a training program to teach faculty how to use WebPath, a learning management system – by yesterday (in other words, as soon as possible). The university wants to roll out the software to the university community within a year, and to that end I've been appointed to a software implementation team by the director of the Office of Technology and Communications (OTC). Also on the team are three managers from OTC.

Our team is struggling – with each other, and with the task itself. Looking back to when we were first given our task, I can see that we skipped over a couple of essential steps. We should have determined who would be the project leader; this has clearly hampered our communication, and each of us seems to have carved out our own territory. We're not really acting as a team, and as a consequence, with only a few months left before the project is supposed to be complete, we are at a stand-still. Faculty won't be able to make effective use of WebPath if we can't resolve the discrepancy between what faculty feel is necessary to meet the learning goals for their students and what OTC is willing to provide.

Another important step we skipped was to develop a common vision and goal(s) for the project, then developed a plan for the project. It's clear that each of us has a different idea about what our task is. Jamie offered a plan for how we should proceed, but it was immediately dismissed by Zinny, and no one pushed the issue.

Speaking of Zinny, he's the biggest obstacle, from my perspective. He drew a line in the sand early on, deciding how the software would be implemented, what his group would and would not do, and what features faculty would have access to. He's convinced the software isn't mature enough, that it has numerous security holes (he's already turned off the chat feature because of this), and he's concerned that managing the user accounts and course creation, not to mention correcting the deficiencies, will take valuable staff time that should be used on other projects. I understand his concerns, but I think that by working together we can address them.

Someone once told me to think of the runaway stagecoach scene in old westerns. There's a runaway stagecoach, and out of the corner of the screen comes the guy on the white horse. He catches up, then rides along with the stagecoach for a while. The good guy jumps onto the stagecoach, grabs the reins of the horses, and manages to take control and turn the stagecoach away from the approaching cliff just in the nick of time. I need to employ this approach with Zinny – I'll start by inviting him to coffee (on neutral ground) and ask him to help me understand the technology issues. Perhaps there are some assumptions I've been making about his position that have been hindering agreement, or perhaps I'll find an opening that I can exploit to help us reach middle ground.

One specific suggestion I'd like to float by Zinny is to develop a joint case for a contract staff position to help address some of the specific technical issues related to the management of the software, such as automating the course and user account creation processes (and in the meantime, taking care of those tasks manually). It's clear that the lack of staff resources in OTC to deal with this project is a serious handicap; I don't know if such a proposal would be successful, but it can't hurt to try.

I made a big misstep in the first round of training, too. Jamie suggested I ask Ruth, who's been a big proponent of technology-enabled instruction, to help with the training. I thought it would be good to have a faculty peer discuss the advantages and features of WebPath, but I should have realized, when she wouldn't respond to my emails about the plan for the workshop, that there could be a problem. She's clearly knowledgeable about using technology for instruction, has actually developed some sophisticated models for use in her science courses. When she showed up for the workshop, she was completely dazzled by the training lab, and she was clearly unenthused by this software.

If I want to get faculty excited about WebPath, I'm going to need to focus on pedagogical concerns, rather than the technology, in the next round of training. Perhaps I can enlist some of the faculty who used WebPath in the fall to talk about why they decided to try it, as well as what their experiences were. I have to be careful that this doesn't turn into a grip session; my goal is to offer solutions within WebPath (or to acknowledge when WebPath is not the

answer— it's important for faculty to have realistic expectations about what WebPath can and cannot do).

I would also like to invite faculty who are using other technology solutions to accomplish the same things that WebPath can do to address the pedagogical reasons behind their choice to use technology as a solution. For example, WebPath offers asynchronous communication features; if faculty new (or relatively new) to using technology can see how rich an online discussion among students can be, they may be convinced to try the communication tools within WebPath. I would make common pedagogical concerns expressed by faculty (e.g., student discussion, assessment, group work, etc.) the focus of these workshops, rather than a particular technological solution, although each workshop would include a component on how to use WebPath to address the concern.

And the training lab – it's great to have all the bells and whistles, but it's completely unlike the classrooms in which the faculty teach. There, the technology is unreliable, and faculty have lost confidence that the technology will work when they need it (and they've also lost confidence that OTC will respond to their calls for help with classroom technology). I don't know that there's an immediate solution to this, but perhaps I could encourage Jamie to collaborate with academic IT staff on potential solutions – creating a knowledgebase to share solutions and offering IM as a means for faculty to communicate with IT support (assuming they can get an Internet connection in the classroom) are just two of the solutions they might consider.