

Formal classroom instruction and literature in the field never replace the learning that occurs from actual experience in the workplace. Recognizing this, the authors—two senior technical communicators—identify several typical, but not predictable, organizational problems that involve technical communicators and present them in a how-to, anecdotal fashion.

Survival Skills for Communicators within Organizations

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Learning how organizations and individuals within them interact is as much a part of the communicator's skill and responsibility as wielding the English language expertly. An organization's culture and strategy are frequently interchangeable terms that refer to patterns of behavior stemming from ingrained informal values and traditions (Hills and Frost 381). Especially in an organizational context, communication, "like power, is relational—it exists only as a result of the interaction of two or more actors (individuals, organizations, etc.)" (Zey-Ferrell 227).

Too often, organizational behavior is overlooked in assessing the value of the communication product such as a user's guide or a memo. This concept is beginning to be recognized in the literature. For example, in studying the issue of whether writing is a mechanical or a social process, Zimmerman reveals how one instructor approached the teaching of technical writing:

Textbook metaphors communicated the assumption that knowledge is independent of the social context in which it is created. . . . [The instructor], on the other hand, felt it was important for his students to under-

stand that knowledge is created by people and that writing is communicated in a social and political setting. (140)

When facing problems that loom large and seem unsolvable, communicators must remember the dual dictum of chaos theory: Simple systems give rise to complex behavior; complex systems give rise to simple behavior (Crichton 75). For example, a remote office of a large oil exploration company is located in Barrow Point, Alaska. Two people staff this office: one is an engineer and the administrator; the other is a technician. This appears to be a simple system—and it is. But when it comes to job responsibilities, both the engineer and the technician find they must provide the same number of services as the field office in West Texas staffed with 20 people. The simple system of the Barrow Point office requires two individuals who wear many hats. In juxtaposition, each employee in the West Texas office has distinct responsibilities; crossing lines of responsibilities is difficult because of the formal organization imposed.

Several workplace problems, although not always predictable, occur regularly in organizations. Examples of four such problems are presented here to provide opportunities for recognizing how organizations work and how they affect communicators.

The first scenario can be called the elusive technical coauthor. The coauthor may be an engineer, an illustrator, or any other person with skills and organizational placement that are different from that of the technical communicator. The next two scenarios occur amidst corporate changes—one when two departments are being merged, the other when growth is mercurial. Finally, the last scenario depicts the result of limited resources—both dollars and time.

Ultimately, the solutions to the problems illustrated in these scenarios are not to work harder, but to be creative and to work differently. Problem-solving skills evolve more from using common sense and learning from past experience than from following a cookbook. There are no style guides for organizational behavior and individual behavior within organizations.

Use the following scenarios to test your ability to understand how organizations work, how individuals respond in different corporate cultures, and what you would do. Then, because role-playing is one way of gaining experience without self-sacrificing, use the following scenarios to role-play what you would do as the technical communicator.

GETTING INFORMATION FROM A TECHNICAL COAUTHOR

Dr. Marcus Moxley has come by your office several times during the past two weeks to remind you of his high priority programmer's reference manual that is on a fast track. Your manager reluctantly has agreed to the compressed publication schedule because Dr. Moxley will be out of the country for a month. Dr. Moxley assures you on each of his visits that he is preparing information for you before he leaves. On his last visit, you explain that you have finished prepping the manual, setting up the template, and filling in information received from other authors. In short, you are ready for his information. He tells you he will have it on your desk Monday morning.

On Monday morning, your desk is clean, your chair is empty, and you can see no new files in your e-mail. You call Dr. Moxley but are not surprised when he does not answer, because most divisions of the company have Monday morning meetings. As the day progresses, however, you begin to wonder if Dr. Moxley is even on site because he does not return your phone calls. Ordinarily, you would wander by your coauthor's office and leave a stick-on note on his computer screen, but Dr. Moxley is in another, secured building to which you have no access. Your manager is understanding, mentioning that she has heard Dr. Moxley is very talented but stretched thin by other priorities. However, she also notes that interest in the manual is mounting because it is critical to the timely development of third-party software. The project is still yours, and your deadline looms. What do you do?

Surprise Dr. Moxley with your tenacity. Try *all* avenues of communication open to you:

1. If the elusive coauthor does not answer his phone or return messages, try his pager, if he has one.
2. Use e-mail or, if you are really lucky and gutsy, get your network admin to slip in a network broadcast message just for Dr. Moxley.
3. Use hall talk—if you see someone in the hall who knows Dr. Moxley, mention that you are waiting for critical files from him.
4. Send Dr. Moxley a fax.
5. Make Security your friend, especially Security attached to Dr. Moxley's building.
6. Find out what kind of car Dr. Moxley drives and leave notes on the windshield.

7. Find out what meetings he is scheduled to attend and, if possible, hover outside the meeting room door.
8. If you know someone else is going to the secured building, send a message with that person.
9. If Dr. Moxley has an officemate, have that person leave notes on Dr. Moxley's computer.
10. Inundate Dr. Moxley's admin with urgent pleas. Find out when Dr. Moxley will be in the office so that you do not waste your messages.
11. Have your manager talk to his manager.

In short, invade this person's space—politely, but persistently; nonetheless, you have deadlines, too.

When you do get in touch with Dr. Moxley, make sure you know precisely what you want from him. Elusive coauthors can sometimes be a bit disorganized and avoid you simply because they do not know what to give you. If he can send you his file, fine. But be prepared to start from scratch.

1. Make a list of questions that he needs to answer. Be specific and brief. Make it easy for him to give you the information you need.
2. Read up on what he is doing so that you can talk intelligently and minimize the need to get back to him later on.
3. If possible, get copies of important paperwork—files, notes, articles, graphics.
4. Get names of other contacts who can also—or alternatively—give you information. Find out where and how to reach these contacts—whether it be by e-mail, by telephone, or through a third person.

If you have an opportunity to meet with Dr. Moxley—he may be too busy—plan an encounter of a friendly nature. Try to establish communication on a one-to-one basis. If he likes doughnuts, bring him one. Remember, even once you have managed a meeting with him, you will be interrupted by phone calls and office visitors. Because he allows himself to be easily distracted, it is up to you to remember where he was before being interrupted. Hold his last words in your mind—because he may not hold them in his—so that you can quickly resume your interview. When he starts drawing on the white board, write it all down even if it does not make sense or you do not think you will need it. If allowed, take a tape recorder to record the interview or encounter.

Keep in mind that the first meeting is often the hardest until you establish a rapport with him. Do not be daunted if he treats you like

a secretary—technical people often view all people who use workstations to crunch words (not numbers) as secretaries. View him as your customer for whom you are providing a service. You may feel the 80-20 rule (80% of your time spent on 20% of the project) is in effect, but ultimately the more time you spend up front with the elusive coauthor, the easier sailing you will have later on.

SURVIVING CORPORATE CHANGE

The three epochal trends—the merging of many national economies into one global economy, the end of the cold war, and the long, slow decline in the standard of living for millions of Americans (Shepard)—make the next two scenarios particularly important to the technical communicator wanting to survive the next decade employed. Changes in the corporate structure—such as those resulting from downsizing (or rightsizing), reengineering, converting from defense to peacetime civilian products, and mergers—require survival skills. Changes also result from mercurial growth—as in fast-growing start-ups or companies that have just gone public.

Merging Departments

You and the rest of the TechDocs group have just met with Bert Tucker, Director of MarCom. TechDocs and MarCom are being merged. You all sense that Tucker does not give TechDocs much credibility. Further, you know that your manager, Herman Rickert, had worked for MarCom at one time and was given a lateral transfer several years ago when his product line was deep-sixed; Tucker figures Rickert is a loser.

Tucker decides to keep TechDocs together on the same floor but removed to the far corner—about as far away as possible without moving it to the boiler room. No windows for this group! Tucker moves his librarian to Rickert's old cube.

Clearly, the situation looks forboding. Tucker has indicated that the budgets for MarCom and TechDocs have been merged. The new combined budget is 20% less. Rumors abound that Tucker really wants to get rid of TechDocs entirely and give his marketing writers the documentation assignments. You get along with some of the marketing folks, but there has not been much interaction—no reason

to. Those with old product lines seem always to be on the phone with nail clippers in hand instead of a pen; those servicing the frontline products always look exhausted. The pay scale for MarCom writers is a bit higher than for TechDocs writers, but you wonder if it is worth it because they always look frazzled. Papers are piled high, four-color stats are strewn around the floor, empty Maalox bottles sit on desks, and dead flowers droop in makeshift vases. Several of them have regular junkets to the European offices, but most are chained to their desks 8 to 10 hours a day. You no longer wonder why none of them join the softball team. Many can be seen eating lunch in the smoking section of the cafeteria. Some of the engineers you have worked with are fed up with having to cover for mistakes MarCom has made in brochures with high distribution. Attention to details is erratic. You see the writing on the wall, noting that the company's stock has gone down 20 points in the last two years and no new patentable products seem to be in the works. What do you do?

Recognize that you always have options and that opportunities lie behind every closed door. Here are your options:

1. Do nothing; stay at a dead-end job.
2. Cozy up to Tucker and his crew.
3. Look for another job.
4. Do numbers 2 and 3.
5. Hope for another reorganization that will give you a generous early retirement stipend so you can start your own business.
6. Weather it out: What goes around comes around.

Perhaps Rickert has more savvy than you think. Maybe just being humble will help him work miracles. You are not sure that the blood-letting that comes with corporate changes will automatically mean that his overlooked talents will finally be recognized. In fact, you count on this not happening. But do count on Tucker to strengthen his own territory as quickly as possible. Unless under orders to do so, he will not want to lose head count through attrition—so just keep your head low. If anything, he will first attempt to justify a larger budget by getting more business. Expect him to market MarCom internally first. Volunteer for marketing jobs that no one wants to do or no one has time to do. One way or the other, it will not hurt you to learn another side of the business. Not only will it strengthen you as a

writer, but it will also demonstrate your flexibility to those who have control over your paycheck.

Pay attention to the relative health of the company in general. With a weak future product line and Wall Street already taking action, only a brilliant merger or a strong new CEO will make a difference. Radical surgery is imminent no matter what you do. Keep your résumé updated and look for opportunities outside the company while pursuing those within.

Joining a Start-Up

The ad in the Sunday paper catches your eye—it is not that you are actually looking for another job, but you would like some new challenges. And here it is:

Bright future for talented communicator. Must have excellent communication skills and be a self-starter. Send your resume to a fast paced, fast growth company looking for a creative entrepreneurial type. Excellent benefits. Unlimited opportunities.

The interview goes well. After talking to Russ and Ted—two bright, young Ivy League-educated men wearing jeans, designer sneakers, and sports coats—you realize that they were the whiz kids recently featured in the business section of the newspaper. You are immediately on a first-name basis with them, the president and vice president of the company.

When they tell you of their plans for future products, you share with them some ideas you have for print documentation. They ask you what you know about on-line documentation. You tell them of your experience with hypertext and linking. They smile. You are flattered and excited when they hire you right there on the spot. They tell you, as the first tech writer with their company, they consider you the expert. They know you are going to help them have a successful, paperless office.

On your first day, you try to sit down with Ted, the VP (you work directly for him), but he is bouncing from the phone to the file cabinet while you stand in the doorway. He has you sign your W2 forms, explaining that everybody wears several different hats—he is also the personnel manager.

Then Ted grabs his briefcase, walks you to your cube, and exclaims again how glad he is you are now on board. That is the last you see of him today. As the admin hands you a catalog from which to select your office supplies, she explains that he had to catch a plane. The network manager rushes by to let you know that he is trying to get you onto the network. And, that is the last you see of *him* all day.

Undaunted, you ask the assistant if she can find you any of the company's documentation and brochures. "Oh yes. I meant to do that," she says. She pulls out two sets of thin photocopies, each stapled at the top left corner. You ask where the copier is. She tells you they do not have one yet but you can go next door. Letting her talk for a while, you discover that two recently hired software engineers—doubling the current engineering staff—cannot work full-time until after graduation, which is in 3 months. She also tells you the president is leaving for a marketing trip to Japan tomorrow. "Oh, do you mind answering the phone for me?" she asks. "I've got a hair appointment."

The first week seems a repeat of the first day. You bring your own coffeemaker from home because the vending machine is cupless. Before you know it, you are making coffee for everyone. The job begins to look as if it was an opportunity to be a secretary. What do you do?

Congratulations on taking a gamble! All the global and national economic signs support your decision to move to a small business in high technology that is grabbing for the brass ring. Accountability is strong in these firms because there are only so many people to point fingers at. Watch out! This could be a roller coaster ride—both up and down. Start-up firms are a test of a communicator's survival and diplomacy skills. They also offer the opportunity for really running your own show and learning all kinds of new skills *FAST*.

Everyone in this start-up is learning—including you and your management. The top management has plenty of experience and great contacts, but they are working with a product that cannot afford a high-profit margin. In their previous positions, they probably were excellent financial manipulators—and not product managers. They are used to living on the fast side of the dollar and are probably fast learners. They have already recognized that their presence in the marketplace can be greatly enhanced by having excellent documentation. The question is, are you ready to run with them?

Remember that the ad was looking for a self-starter. This was not just an advertising ploy. At a small start-up, you may have the opportunity to be anything you ever wanted to be as well as to play roles you never dreamed of.

This situation is not for everyone. If you want to succeed here, you must learn to live and breathe the business. Entrepreneurial situations—including those within large companies—are often alluring to those who want to be their own boss. But, with that allure, comes the responsibility of literally working several jobs at the same time. Listen to what your interviewers were trying to tell you: (a) On-line documentation is the way they want to go. (b) You are the expert. The ball is in your court. Don't drop it. Learn what the firm's business plans project and what target markets management plans to attack. Take heed and the responsibility for the economics of this nascent firm. You are part of what will make it live or die.

Mutable roles are the hallmark in this free-flow environment where all end up thinking on their feet. All contribute in some fashion to corporate strategy, goals, and objectives. All are ultimately responsible for the profitability of the company. Changes happen rapidly in this type of organization. Do not get carried away with your new command of the production schedule and process; you may have to scrap your plans at a moment's notice. If the company's customers are content with photocopied, stapled documentation, think twice about planning a glossy, two-color manual. Time, money, or the management will ultimately stop you dead in your tracks. When the company begins to attract more demanding customers, then you can think about more costly documents. Until then, be creative, use your resources wisely, be conservative. Also, do not burn yourself out trying to meet some impossible deadline, complicated by a demanding production schedule. Further, what may have been true today will inevitably change tomorrow.

WORKING WITH LIMITED RESOURCES

It is always exciting to be involved in a project characterized by budgets, the bottom line, and a tight time frame. But the fact is, more and more of us must work under limitations that had not existed before. On one hand, product development is focused more on the

well-defined target niche, making distribution a nightmare if done in the traditional fashion. Another trend in cost cutting is to use outside sources for various in-house activities. In contrast to the proliferation of full-color presentations currently available, requests for two-color and one-color designs are appearing more frequently. Another clue that belt-tightening is affecting technical communication is that project management was one of the most popular topics at the 1993 Annual Society for Technical Communication Conference. A coincidental trend that also is influencing limited budgets is the rising appreciation of ecology-friendly communication. One aspect of this is to minimize packaging and to use only recycled paper.

You have come to technical writing with experience testing user interface systems and with a limited background in layout, design, and desktop publishing acquired from doing your church newsletter. Currently, you are a team leader working for a firm that provides third-party documentation. The main clients are large, internationally known companies. Your company cannot afford to be creative or expend big dollars on promotion; otherwise, the firm's clients might think twice about how their money is being spent. Yet, your firm needs a good-looking brochure to be included as part of a bid package for a big project with another large firm. Your firm turns to you for help because of your reputation for taking on impossible tasks. At first, you are really excited to have the assignment because it allows you to use your other creative talents. But then they throw in the wrench: You must do this in one-color only, distribution is limited to 500 copies, and the budget is appallingly low. What do you do?

Remember the chaos theory dictum: Simple systems give rise to complex behavior. Complex systems give rise to simple behavior. Respond to a complex request in a simple fashion. Do not try to add a lot of flourishes that you do not have time to do. Although you could say you are too busy, be pragmatic: This type of organization does not like to hear the word no—regardless of how nicely you might state it. Therefore, try the following:

1. Being bombarded by color every day means that a one-color brochure can stand out in a crowd, if done well. Use the color of the paper to act as a reflection of the color ink you choose (you are not bound to use black ink, only to use one color).
2. Even though recycled paper comes in some handsome look-alikes to nonrecycled paper, take advantage of the paper that looks recycled. It has a psychological advantage, looks nice, and says you are sensitive to the ecology-friendly movement.

3. Visit your printer. To survive in a very competitive industry, printers must know their business and are usually only too happy to advise you on what makes a printer's life easier. Let your printer help you figure out how to keep the costs down and still have a nice brochure. Let your printer show you his house paper stock—which is less expensive than another paper you might have ordered. The printer might have different inks on sale.
4. Use standard paper sizes when designing your brochure to keep the costs down.
5. Even though we are used to seeing many brochures—especially mailers—being folded in three, it costs less for a twofold.
6. Think about a design that will reproduce well on a copier—for those times when you cannot get a print run because you lack the budget or the time.
7. If you do not keep a file of cheap design tricks (you should) that you have clipped from your subscriptions or found while keeping abreast of your industry, then hit the library for a quick rundown on design books (see White; *Packet Pal*).

CONCLUSION

When these scenarios were pilot tested at several technical communication conferences, we asked attendees to offer their solutions to the problems depicted prior to sharing our suggestions. Table 1 summarizes participants' suggestions for the technical coauthor scenario.

Note how similar the suggestions of the conference attendees are to those offered in this article. Not all of their solutions are realistic given the circumstances, but it is important to recognize that there is always more than one solution to a problem. The more-experienced technical communicator will have more tricks up the sleeve. Nevertheless, less-experienced communicators can use creative problem-solving techniques and persistence to achieve results.

Like a lot of skills, the more practice you have at problemsolving, the easier it gets. Further, understanding how organizations work provides a framework for creative problem solving. It cannot hurt to learn some of the textbook concepts of organizational behavior (see Albrecht and Albrecht; Handy; Hills and Frost; Lorsch; Zey-Ferrell). Technical communicators frequently find themselves in situations that require more organizational skills than simply knowing what makes a good document. Learning how to work through those situations is essential to being a good communicator.

TABLE 1
Possible Solutions for Getting
Information from a Technical Coauthor

Run with your best shot. Put blanks where you think his input should go.
 Make it up! Write inaccuracies to force him to give you the correct information.
 Leave a paper trail; be sure to document your efforts (CYA).
 Get your manager (and his) to help.
 Buy him lunch and sneak in an interview.
 Camp out at his building or outside any rooms where he has a meeting.
 Ask questions on his answering machine.
 Get other people after him. Befriend his secretary or administrative assistant; corner an assistant in the lunchroom to get information either for the manual or to pin down your technical coauthor.
 Determine creatively how to get to him (e.g., locate his car and wait for him there or leave a note).
 Track him like a dog—notes, messages, faxes—include your phone numbers and deadline.
 Puff him up; leave him positive messages.
 Look for alternative sources of information; ask for his notes or existing documents from which you can pull the information. Find out if others can give you the information that needs to be conveyed.
 Negotiate a new deadline.
 You are a peer; act like one (your deadlines are just as important as his).
 Blow the deadline—but make sure it is someone else's fault.
 Bribe him with food and drink.
 When you do get to meet with him, record him, if possible (company security measures may not allow this).

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