Thriving in Ambiguity

Is there one of us who has not been affected by the tidal wave of economic change? It's doubtful.

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As new companies emerge from those that have been merged, acquired, spun off, chewed, or disgorged, two things are certain. First, the rules, while implied, are not yet written. Second, finding someone in charge is a daily task. Beyond these certainties lies a sea of ambiguity.

As organizations remake themselves, roles and titles change at a lightning pace. So-called authorities abound; those who accept responsibility do not. Corporate cultures are remade. The organizational chart—if the company is stable enough to have one—is found only online. And many job descriptions are outlined in pencil.

For those who remain in the "new" organization, questions are plentiful. What are my responsibilities, my role? What does the new management team expect? How will they measure performance?

As technical communicators, we are caught in the middle. Incorporating the unknown, especially for products that are being developed as we develop information about them, has always been part of our job as communicators. But when the entire organization is exposed to questions about the way it does business, then decision making is also left in question.

The Underlying Assumptions

A full-page ad that appears frequently in *Business Week* reads, "MORE Work. MORE Responsibility. MORE Hours." in big boldface type. For this advertiser, an insurance company, stress-related disability insurance is big business. Fewer people to do the work means increased stress and the possibility of increased disability compensation somewhere down the line. Sound familiar?

The economic changes that are shaking up the way we do things also mean fewer people to tell you how to do your job and fewer people to give you the help you need.

Your job may be in the management ranks where support has traditionally been available. But working in an authority vacuum is rapidly becoming the norm in many sectors of the economy.

"Ambiguous authority" is a term used frequently to refer to this situation. Some view working in a company with ambiguous authority as a creative challenge. Others find it is downright confusing.

As with solving any problem, identifying it is the first step. In this case, the problem is ambiguity. The second step is defining it. Because ambiguity is currently so pervasive in business organizations, let's take a look at some of the forms it takes.

The Quick Fix

One form of ambiguity found in the new leaner, meaner organization results from an unspoken desperation. With more work than ever and too few people to do it, one solution is to grasp at straws and create an illusion.

For example, some management information system departments, in trying to adapt to the growing needs of information technology, are attempting to use process engineering techniques on information technology. Rapid System Development is one name for it. But unless the process is thoroughly understood, trying to implement it is like trying to squeeze orange juice from apples.

By totally disregarding the elements of what makes a system work—well-versed subject matter experts (SMEs), recognized standards, clearly defined project scope, for example—an organization can believe its own hype and run on empty. Capturing the terminology without understanding the concepts behind it leads to one form of ambiguity. All you have are round holes and square pegs. In the end, more money and people are thrown at the project than if a more cautious, clearly focused approach were taken.

Another version of the quick fix results from doing what no one else is

doing. Being in a unique position has its advantages, but if performance is tied to profitability, or worse, if no one understands the value of the position, it's a good bet the job will be done with little thought from the corporate headcounters.

The Functional Approach

Another form of ambiguity emerges when functional and organizational structures are arbitrarily mixed. Because documentation is a process that crosses most departmental and functional boundaries, technical communication positions can be funded within a department dedicated to communication (e.g., customer service, testing, training, documentation) or parceled out among the various functional groups.

The rationale for the decentralized approach is that engineer, SME, and technical communicator become part of the same expert team. The communicator gets to be an expert in the subject area and thus more self-reliant, requiring less time of the engineers and SMEs.

But what happens to issues that are common to all the writers? Answer: they sometimes fall between the cracks.

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Often, no one person is in charge of these matters, although a coordinator is sometimes named. For the coordinator, solutions for technical communication issues lie in cajoling, coercing, and negotiating with the various functional managers who hold the purse strings and therefore clout.

For example, the coordinator may be faced with the following two problems associated with a new product release:

The coordinator sees the need for a style change for cover, packaging, and binding. Without a project budget, any production costs associated with documentation are charged to the manufacturing group. The coordinator's job, then, is to convince the manufacturing

manager that he needs to pay for upgraded binding styles and multiple cover styles.

The new product moves to another platform. To capture shots of the graphical user interface, the writers need new equipment. Determining the number of machines needed, writing a justification, and determining which line managers are going to fund this purchase is and is not part of the coordinator's job. In the first foray for information gathering, the coordinator encounters such questions as "Why are you involved in this? This is between the writers and the managers."

Who's in Charge?

Another type of ambiguity arises when a problem is addressed by throwing a body at it. It is not uncommon, especially in new emerging technology, to assign a person to define the problem more clearly who then can determine the strategy for addressing it.

For example, the novelty of creating a World Wide Web home page is too hard for most engineers to resist. Unfortunately, aesthetically pleasing pages that also hold content are a rarity. And most creators lose interest after the initial birth of the page. The relative openness of the Internet makes it difficult for many corporations to know what to do with it. Putting a person in charge of such online activity is one solution. But establishing authority over the lawless Wild Wild West of the 1990s is a task imbued with uncertainty.

Another example involves transferring technology from engineer to engineer. In the highly competitive semiconductor industry, striving for zero defects is a constant task. Staying on top of the latest developments in new equipment and processes and disseminating the information in a timely fashion is an overwhelming job—especially when thirty sites worldwide are involved.

Sharing information and encouraging regular communication between peers becomes a logistical nightmare—even when the ombudsman assigned to the task is on the road 50 percent of the time. ∎