# APPA: Four characteristics of success

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*Rules are mostly made to be broken and are too often for the lazy to hide behind.* GENERAL DOUGLAS MACARTHUR

A good model is essential to the success of any change programme. However, models – including my own suggested six steps – carry an inherent risk. Precisely because they are necessary for success, it is tempting to believe that they are sufficient for it. They are not. Following a model unquestioningly is potentially catastrophic. When that happens, the model ceases to be a tool in the service of change and becomes instead its driver.

The problem is that a model, or any description of a process, can only imperfectly capture the nuances and complexities of a technology implementation. As Alfred Korzybski noted, the map is not the territory. Any description of a process highlights the key features, the salient points, the aspects of the geography of change we most need to be aware of. It cannot, however, provide the detail of conditions on the ground. That will be unique to each situation, and can only be experienced first-hand.

When someone implements a technology for the first time, the lack of previous experience can provoke a reaction – a too-rigid application of a model can lead to what General MacArthur described in the quote at the beginning of this chapter. The rules become a cover to hide behind. They provide an unfounded sense of certainty and security that is at best misleading in the complex world of organizational adult learning.

While it is crucial, therefore, for learning and development professionals to use a model of change and to develop a clear plan for the adoption of the technology they plan to implement, this is not enough to guarantee success and it is negligent to assume that it is. In my observation, the individuals and teams who successfully implement learning technologies, in addition to using a model, exhibit four common characteristics.

First, they all have a clear *aim*. This aim is expressed in practical terms; this implementation will solve a particular business problem. We would expect as much from the first stage of any of the models mentioned, whether it is the 'understand' or the 'discovery' phase. With successful implementations, however, the purpose is often couched in an understanding of the wider values and longer-term aims of the company – the implementation is seen as a coherent part of a larger plan.

Second, they know that a technology implementation depends on people: the employees, the people on the learning implementation team, the vendors and implementation partners and the managers and executives of the organization. Any implementation lacking the active support and participation of these people will be a pointless failure. Successful learning technology implementers recognize this and have a strong *people focus*.

Third, those who have made a success of their learning technology implementation consistently reveal a sense of *perspective* that goes beyond the immediate realm of this particular implementation. They know how this particular piece of work fits in. They know how things work internally in their organization, what is important, where to go to get things done and how things are likely to change in the future. But they also carry out what British organizational learning expert Nigel Paine calls horizon scanning, gleaning information from a range of sources to understand how both learning technologies and the business itself are likely to change in coming years. This helps them not only formulate and present their case for implementation, but also to plan it coherently and prevent it being rendered redundant in the future.

Finally, successful learning technology implementers above all have a pragmatic *attitude*. They make good calls on those decisions where the rules cannot help, or might deliver a poor outcome. They are prepared to compromise to deliver an effective solution today rather than a perfect one tomorrow. Usually, this pragmatism has its roots in a combination of experience with the company, a certain understanding of what makes people tick, and good common sense. Frequently, although not always, the most pragmatic individuals are those who have a wide experience at work.

Whether an organization is implementing a complex learning management system for an international audience or the simplest of cloud-based tools for use in a single office, if the implementation is successful, the people responsible for it exhibit APPA: a clear *aim*, a focus on *people*, a wide *perspective* in and beyond the organization and a pragmatic *attitude*. The rest of Part Two – the core of this book – is dedicated to examining these characteristics in more detail and exploring the tools and techniques to develop these characteristics.

## An APPA implementation: The Hershey Company

When The Hershey Company successfully rolled out an LMS to 11,000 employees worldwide in 2015, the HR function displayed APPA in good measure. Headquartered in Hershey, Pennsylvania, United States, the chocolate confectionery company had 17 plants worldwide at the time of implementation, including operations in the United States, Mexico, India, Brazil and Canada. It manufactures, markets and distributes products under more than 80 brand names to approximately 70 countries.

The complexity of Hershey's operations are intensified by the range of languages spoken and the spread of employees over territories and time zones, not to mention that the workforce is split roughly 35:65 between salaried employees and hourly production employees. The former tend to be office workers, with computers and internet access, the latter typically are manufacturing employees with limited access to IT at work.

According to Megan Garrett, the Manager of Enterprise Learning, it was the company's plan to expand operations into Malaysia that precipitated the need for an enterprise-wide learning management system.

Megan had already been with the company for 16 years when this expansion was suggested. One of her first roles when she joined the company in 1999 had been supporting the implementation of the company's first learning management system. It was very costly and cumbersome to administer, and when the option came up to renew the licence three years later, the company declined.

Instead, they managed the marketing, delivery, registration and tracking of courses via an ingenious, home-grown solution combining a series of different technologies, not all of them designed for handling learning. Employees saw a single interface for all e-learning and classroom courses, and found the system straightforward to use. Behind the scenes, however, the system had grown increasingly complex over time, so that by 2015 it required – in Megan's estimation – 50 different steps to register an individual for a class. This, in her words, 'bubble gum and popsicle stick methodology' involved a considerable amount of manual intervention, including the inevitable manipulating of data in Excel spreadsheets, to ensure a smooth operation.

For some in this position, the idea that the Learning and Development department would shortly have the additional responsibility of training an entirely new workforce in a plant on the other side of the world might have seemed like a step too far. For Hershey's L&D team, it was the opportunity they had been looking for to create the training programme of the future in a high-tech new-build plant. And clearly the only way to train a large number of new employees rapidly and allow production to begin on time was to use e-learning.

In April 2015, together with her manager, Mary Farrell, and two counterparts from the IS (Information Systems) team, Megan created a business case, which was presented to the Senior Vice President of Global Operations and a number of VPs. After consideration, a number of meetings and implementation partner assessment, HR received the green light to purchase and implement an LMS in November.

## Establishing the need and aim

The immediate need of the LMS was clear. It would enable Hershey to ensure that staff in the new plant were well trained in time for operations to begin. There was also, though, another goal, a larger purpose. Implementing an LMS across the organization would allow for countless small efficiency improvements in L&D operations, greater reliability by abandoning the manually intensive system and ensure worldwide consistency in operations. It would also make it possible for the HR team to support any further expansion without adding headcount. As we will see, the implementation of a learning technology often has two aims like this – an explicit, immediate one, with a clear, tangible benefit, and a larger one, widely regarded as important; but, seldom justified by any short-term financial measure.

In this case, as usual, the immediate aim was the ticket to the larger one. No L&D team in any company has ever had a major expense signed off on the basis that it would improve the department's internal operations, especially when these, although burdensome, have been working fine for the previous 16 years. Megan was sure the Senior Vice President of Global Operations would be sympathetic to the request, but also knew that, of course, he had a financial responsibility to the company. The LMS would have to pay its way.

The clearest way in which the LMS could justify itself was risk mitigation. A company manufacturing internationally has a swathe of employment, food and safety regulations to meet. Megan worked with the Legal Department to create a business case around the financial impact of non-compliance. What was the typical cost of lawsuits in their sector? Megan was able to establish that in terms of legal risk mitigation alone, the LMS was a worthwhile investment. Of course, the executive team recognized the need to have fully trained personnel, but processes and systems in place were already taking care of that. The risk around extending the existing training methods to Malaysia was more difficult to define. In contrast, the legal risk was very clear and justified the investment.

There is nothing extraordinary about pitching investment in an LMS (or any training-tracking technology) as a way of mitigating risk. What makes it important here is that – although valid as a justification for purchasing the LMS – it was not the initial aim. Megan's ability to understand how to pitch the LMS was a matter of understanding the wider perspective of the organization. She knew whom to approach internally to establish whether the legal rationale was a good one, and so she was able to establish a clear organizational purpose for the implementation. It was a very pragmatic approach.

## Networks, stakeholders and resisters

Knowing who can affect an implementation both positively and negatively is an essential part of an implementation. So, too, is a network of contacts that will provide external validation of plans, and which will be able to act as a critical friend towards them. Usually, those behind successful implementations have these networks in place. Occasionally, they are skilled networkers who can create the network from scratch in short order.

This people focus is crucial because it is an organization's people for whom learning technology is implemented, and it is the people who will ultimately decide whether it succeeds or fails. Once the aim of an implementation is established, it is crucial to follow with a stakeholder analysis that combines a people focus with a clear perspective on the organization. In Megan's stakeholder analysis, her team identified multiple groups which could affect and be affected by the implementation. These included segments of the employees, the leadership population, helpdesk and client support, and two critical groups – training administrators in plant locations across the business and those employees currently delivering training and creating training materials.

The training administrators would be most affected by changes, but for them the impact would be largely positive. Although their work would change considerably, it would be mostly a matter of becoming familiar with a new, more effective system. Approximately 50 people across the business creating courseware, however, could possibly be resistant to change. They were involved in creating or adjusting training materials to fit local circumstances, but the central Learning and Development department saw the need for a coherent, well-branded and limited set of compliance training courses, for example on safety that could deliver a consistent message across the business.

Recognizing that these training staff were positive about the implementation but might want to retain their role of producing courses locally, Megan began communicating with them well before she received approval for the LMS purchase. The pitch was made in April, and immediately afterwards, she began a conversation with this extended group of training professionals. Approval for the LMS purchase was not received until November 2014, and thanks to these months of two-way communication, Megan was able to get the training staff on board, keep them positive about the implementation, and help them realize that there would be plenty of creative work to do following the go live... it would just be different.

In many large-scale implementations, one of the key stakeholder groups affected – and one which can have a significant influence on success – is the distributed personnel supporting learning across the organization. Bring them on board and they can be champions. Ignore them at your peril.

If stakeholder analysis is best done by combining the organizational perspective with a strong people focus, the implementation phase is a matter for informed pragmatism supporting the overall purpose. Any software system can be used as it is, out of the box. This seldom supports the full aim of the organization, so the system can usually be configured (making changes as part of the system) or customized (writing new code to solve a particular issue – almost always a chargeable service). The aim is always to reduce customization to a minimum, lowering both the time taken for implementation and the cost of delivery. Ideally, the out-of-the-box solution should be a good start – perhaps getting you 80 per cent of the way to your ideal solution. Closing the gap on the remaining 20 per cent on time and within budget is a matter of understanding what is essential, what is useful and what is nice to have. That can only be decided by working with the people in the business, and understanding the processes likely to be affected.

## Implementation and process impact

With an LMS, the impact on processes is always likely to be large. E-learning courses and resources need to be made available internally, usage often needs to be tracked, assessments need to be run, stored, and the results made available to HR and managers. With an organization as widespread as Hershey, you could expect the number of different processes to be significant, and you would be right.

How do you identify exactly what the learning administration processes are before you implement a technology that may alter them? Hershey did this by creating a flowchart describing the individual processes for creating, advertising and managing courses. In total there were nine processes, and each took place across 23 different groups. These groups were in some cases defined by territory, others were functions or individual plants. Each had its own particular requirements and in each group there was a possibility that the processes would vary. The process flowchart mapped all of these possibilities – a 9×23 grid containing 207 cells, all potentially different.

For an LMS implementation, creating a process flow is essential. But, to return to General MacArthur's words at the beginning of this chapter, rules are not things to hide behind. Once the processes have been defined, questions need to be answered: do we need all these processes? Can we simplify some? How much is the variation a matter of culture, or simply of habit, and how much is it an essential part of the way work is done in a particular place? Usually there are no simple answers to these questions; rather the answers have to be formulated in discussion. In these discussions with stakeholders, the process flowchart is a key tool. It helps keep conversation on track and focused, making it possible to make informed, pragmatic decisions. The result of this conversation at Hershey – as with most LMS implementations – was the configuration workbook for the system. Creating this is one of the hardest, most time-consuming parts of the job of implementing an LMS. However, if that step is missed, there might be implications down the line as each department attempts to accommodate its particular processes to the LMS. Alternatively, there is risk that they could abandon it, instead using the familiar, pre-implementation systems.

## The importance of the team

It is in these sorts of discussions that having the right team together really pays dividends. We will look at the make-up of an implementation team in a later chapter, but suffice to say that any significant implementation is always a team effort. Megan's core team consisted of five people: her manager, two people from the IS function, and a project manager. Megan describes the role of the project manager as absolutely essential for keeping the project on time and the team focused on deliverables. Particularly in the depths of the implementation phase, when difficult decisions have to be made, that project management discipline is essential.

While every roll-out needs a core team, that team also relies on close advisors. With a large technology implementation, the team will need to work closely with the vendor or an implementation partner who knows the software inside out. For Hershey, their implementation partner was an international technology company. Megan describes their knowledge of the platform as invaluable in helping make the right choices and technical decisions. Part of the role of such organizations is to help advise where processes can be supported using existing functionality. If change is necessary, they also make the change through configuration rather than more costly customization.

One simple example of this for Hershey was how users would search for courses. Crucial for a geographically dispersed organization, Hershey wanted to be able to search by location. The platform was not able to do this, but it could store courses by delivery method in two different fields. Megan had one of the delivery method fields for subject area reassigned. Instead, it now referred to location, and the filter enabled users to find courses according to their locale. This is a classic example of a small change to accommodate an existing process rather than cut costly new code.

## Top-level support

Megan's main strategic input and support came from the LMS Steering Committee that she set up. Made up of 13 executives representative of functions across the enterprise, the steering committee provided unique perspective from each business unit and helped guide the team's decision-making. Although not everyone could attend physically, the hour-long meetings were run as a physical event at Hershey's headquarters with remote members dialling in from around the globe.

Hershey's LMS steering committee provided strategic insight as well as practical guidance. For example, the LMS allows employees to log external training not provided by the system. If they attend a conference or a course, they can add that to their profile. Originally, the L&D team had set this up to require manager approval. The steering committee's reaction was that this was unnecessary. They trusted their employees, and didn't need to burden managers with this. Over the months of the project, a series of small decisions like this can make a huge difference to how the implementation is finally received.

Pre-read information prepared by Megan ensured all members of the LMS steering committee were fully briefed in advance, but follow-up was also significant. The minutes of the steering committee were also shared with the HR leadership team, so that all HR VPs were fully informed about strategic discussions and decisions.

Building and maintaining those connections with the HR community are essential pre-launch, during implementation and post-launch. The go-live date was set as seven months after the decision to purchase. In the build-up to launch, Megan was keen to keep communications open at all levels to understand how stakeholders would react to the system – its proposed configurations, the look and feel and any process changes. One key stakeholder group that she was regularly in touch with was the HR Business Partners, which consisted of the HR managers from each function across the business.

Nigel Paine refers to committees and groups like these as providing 'air cover' for an implementation. The greater the number of people affected by what is happening, the more important this sort of high-level support is. Knowing it would be crucial, Megan set up the LMS Steering Committee immediately following the decision to purchase. First gaining the assent of her VP, she made all the contacts herself via e-mail, explaining the importance of the committee, how it would run and made clear that the demands on members would be limited.

This proactive approach to the implementation illustrates one side of the crucial attitude behind a successful implementation: a propensity for action. The other side of the pragmatic attitude that underlies success with these implementations is shown in the grinding work of creating the process map and using it to create the vital LMS configuration workbook.

## Demonstrating APPA

During its award-winning LMS implementation, The Hershey Company exhibited APPA from the start by working with stakeholders to establish a clear aim that resonated with the business, while maintaining a subsidiary – and much needed – aim of improving internal procedures technically within the L&D function, especially around supporting online training internationally.

People focus was apparent in several areas. First, there was the choice of team members, where Megan picked a team that would balance and complement her own skillset – including, for example, an experienced project manager on the team. The team's communications were also comprehensive, from ensuring distributed personnel responsible for L&D were brought on board even before the project was approved, to regularly briefing and receiving feedback from a range of senior personnel and HR directors and managers.

The composition of the team ensured a wider perspective within the organization by including staff from outside L&D. Team leader Megan Garrett brought her own, wider understanding of Hershey to the team, having worked for the company for 16 years and built up a considerable network over that time. In addition, the team's perspective on business issues was informed by feedback from the senior groups they reported to.

The attitude that drives a successful learning technology implementation is most characteristically seen in a single-minded pursuit of the agreed aim, combined with the ability to negotiate and compromise on the way. One place the Hershey team showed this was in the detailed work done on the process flowchart. Striving for perfection in each of the 207 cells on the spreadsheet would have left the project off-track and floundering, while rushing through the process would have created serious problems later on. What they achieved was the optimal result, which is what attitude is really all about – driving the project on so that it is finished well, on time and within budget.

## Ensuring the four characteristics

We will examine these four factors in the succeeding chapters of this book, illustrating each with one or more case studies and exploring how to build them into an implementation. These four characteristics can all be developed in a team, but when doing so, it is worth considering an important distinction between the first two and the last two.

The first two – a clear aim and a focus on people – can both be described in terms of activity. Arriving at the aim of the project is a matter of working well with key decision makers, both to understand the goals of the business and to describe the implementation in terms that reflect those goals. It is, as we will explore in the next chapter, a matter of how to reach a consensus on value and express it clearly. It is also a matter of knowing how to carry out a useful conversation, using the skills of performance consulting and good listening as well as using a sense of political awareness.

Any good learning technology implementation has to be focused on the people involved, through techniques such as including stakeholder management and communications planning, but also the matters of team selection and gathering feedback before, during and after the roll out. Like articulating the project aim, these are all things that can be described in terms of activity and which can be improved with the right tools and methods. The first two characteristics could be described, then, as skills-based.

In contrast, while the effects of perspective and attitude also show themselves in certain activities, these are the manifestations of a certain mindset. A team that seeks a wider perspective is constantly challenging itself to understand more about the broader context in which it works. It will explore L&D beyond its own practice, and it will examine the world of business, both inside the organization and beyond it. It will aim to learn from experience and have mechanisms for doing so. Yet although it will have these and other methods that create a wider perspective, the entire characteristic is the result of a particular mindset typified by two things: curiosity and a quest for improvement.

Similarly, a team with the right attitude gets things done through various methods such as well-planned projects and good meeting management, but behind those activities again is a mindset – a tendency towards taking action and completing things. These enable a team with the right attitude to overcome that seeming contradiction of relentlessly driving towards the implementation aim while at the same time being ready to compromise along the way. The mindset here is clear: the aim is so important that it is worth negotiating to reach it, rather than holding out for a perfect solution, which it never succeeds in attaining.

And the aim of the implementation is all-important. It is the focal point of the entire project, what makes it worthwhile, and where we start our exploration of APPA in detail.

## Key takeaways

1 As well as following a process during implementation, successful learning technology implementation teams also typically exhibit APPA: an *aim*, a *people focus*, a wide *perspective*, and a pragmatic *attitude*.

2 During its award-winning LMS implementation, The Hershey Company exhibited APPA throughout its implementation.

3 An implementation aim will always need to have value for the executives signing it off. It may, however, have additional benefits, too.

4 Good implementations show their people focus in a range of ways, from team selection to the range of stakeholders consulted, to the effectiveness of communication and feedback generation during the project.

5 Perspective is a matter of knowing the world outside the immediate confines of L&D and of the business.

6 The attitude that drives successful implementations is most obviously seen in the team's bias towards action and completion.

7 While the Aim and People focus characteristics can be developed as skills, the right Perspective and Attitude are the manifestations of a mindset. All four characteristics, however, can be developed.