

knowledge, you may be stuck thinking about knowledge transfer at too theoretical a level. I suggest that executives start to use these tools, just like every other subject matter expert in the company. When you start to notice that you're more effective at communicating and managing knowledge transfer, you can begin to tell about your own experiences. Believe me, there is no more powerful testimonial for change than when an executive says, "I learned something." When you have learned something, put this book into the hands of others in your company and talk with them about the changes you expect. You'll start to see the real results you're looking for.

IF YOU CAN'T FIND YOURSELF ON THIS LIST

I've spent the past 15 years customizing these ideas for many different situations. If you've just read this list and still can't find yourself, you might be thinking, "I'm a little different than any of the people you described here." If so, please contact me directly through my website (www.practicalleader.com) and ask for advice. I love hearing from people who are trying to solve their knowledge-transfer problem and will be glad to help. Just be warned, I might use you as an example in my next class!

ELECTRONIC ARTS CANADA CASE STUDY: THE TOOLKIT PUT TOGETHER

I've been working on improving how people transfer knowledge in the workplace since the early '90s. During that time, I've had a chance to work with a number of different types of organizations, each one faced with a different version of the same problem: "How do we get our employees to communicate with and teach each other with more predictable results?" This wasn't a new question when I started—and there is still much work to do on the subject. The results so far are worth sharing because you can definitely replicate them in your situation.

There are many stories sprinkled throughout the book explaining how different kinds of organizations have used and adapted the tools presented. In this section, the focus is on how one company

used the Peer Mentoring toolkit to improve the experience of their employees.

Electronic Arts Canada (EAC) is the largest and most profitable studio in the Electronic Arts (EA) video game family. In preparation for writing this case study, I spent a day interviewing people from EAC who have been involved in implementing the peer mentoring framework and tools for more than a year as leaders, peer mentors, apprentices, and executives.

The word that they used over and over again to describe peer mentoring was “framework.” Brad Herbert (EA’s worldwide vice president for human resources) and Jeff Ryan (EAC’s senior director for human resources) both described the peer mentoring tools as a framework for future training at Electronic Arts worldwide. “If you think that peer mentoring is only about onboarding, then you haven’t even scratched the surface,” said Herbert.

INITIATING A PLAN

When my colleagues and I started working with EAC in November 2004, the studio had been growing at an incredible clip, hiring more than 600 full-time employees in the prior 2 years, to bring their total number of employees to more than 1,400. The growth was at all levels of the organization, across all disciplines, including software engineers, game producers, artists, animators, designers, project managers, and testers. Video game development is a relatively new industry so there are many young people involved. The youthful employees managed their grueling 70-plus hour work weeks, at least for a time, by sheer determination and lots of Coke and pizza.

For me, the culture I encountered when I first visited EAC felt very similar to what I experienced in the early days of Microsoft: very smart people on the cutting edge of technology, passionate about their work, and committed to getting it done at all costs. On top of all the new hires (more than 60 percent on some teams), EAC was also facing familiar transitions, including integrating a company they’d acquired, adding additional office space, reorganizing the art teams into a centralized unit, and rolling out a new standard

for game development., To top it all off, they were in the final stages of releasing a new gaming platform. For many employees, the familiar technical environment was giving way to a far more complicated future. Oh, and did I mention they were also shipping games? The situation was defined by new people, new thinking, and new technology on top of increasingly aggressive competition and backbreaking deadlines.

The challenge, of course, was that the pace wasn't sustainable. There were some cracks opening up that put the organization at risk. Burnout was increasing, turnover was becoming a problem, and Electronic Arts' reputation in the marketplace for being a "sweatshop" was hampering their ability to recruit new talent.

Hiring continued through all of this. New employees were a cause of real concern because they were both desperately needed and at real risk of failure. They could, potentially, even do more harm than good. New people were brought on board with limited orientation beyond signing up for benefits and getting a tour of the facility. The dedicated in-house training resources were primarily coming from headquarters in Redwood Shores, California. Those training resources were focused on technical training and a few leadership programs. The Vancouver Studio (EAC) had grown so quickly and was focusing so heavily on shipping games that they hadn't begun to develop any orientation programs to help new hires get up to speed. With so few hands and so much work, each new recruit was thrown into the deep end with a "sink or swim" mentality.

I want to be clear that I didn't advocate taking away the "edginess" that made working at EAC exciting. As is the case in many companies, starting a new job at EAC will never be a completely "controlled" situation because of the nature of the work. In my opinion, taking the "sink or swim" approach isn't even all that bad, unless you also hand the new employee an *anchor* (all of the challenges noted above). That makes survival too difficult. I think that if you're going to throw new employees into the deep end, you need to make sure they have a good shot at living through the experience; throw the employee a life-preserver in the form of support from a solid peer mentor.

MOVING TOWARD A SOLUTION

In August of that year, a member of EAC's technical team met me at a workshop I was teaching in Vancouver. She referred me to an in-house contact to talk about customizing a program for them. One of the things that impressed me right away about EAC was how quickly they could make decisions and move me through the ranks to arrange meetings with Brad Herbert, Jerry Bowerman (their chief operating officer), and other executives and senior managers. Jerry was working to stabilize the game development process and set standards that would help the game teams to get more done in less time. Brad wanted to talk about two main issues: work-life balance and growing leaders quickly enough to help his studio stay in front of the wave of growth. "We needed a framework that we could build on to create a predictable talent pipeline and a better working environment for our people," said Herbert.

SETTING GOALS FOR PEER MENTORING

One of EAC's business issues was very clear. They had enormous potential in the marketplace and a very talented group of people assembled to tap into it. Their leadership was solid, but strained, and they needed to get a lot of people "skilled up" to handle all of the work. Just hiring all those new people wasn't going to be enough. The new hires needed to get up to speed using their peers as resources—in an incredibly challenging environment. We set the following goals to help focus our Peer Mentoring efforts to help address the problem:

1. Ensure a consistent, predictable onboarding experience for 100 percent of the new employees joining the studio in Vancouver.
2. Develop a Training Plan for each job family so that every employee can customize it and see a clear list of skills he or she needed to develop.

3. Develop knowledge-transfer skills in both the experienced employees and the new employees to expedite ramp-up to productivity by teaching the Peer Mentoring Workshop to more than 500 people.
4. Identify and support a pool of leadership talent that could develop into managers as needed.

The first goal was to solve the immediate problem of taking care of the new talent entering the building. We believed we could reduce the time it took them to ramp up by half and also make them less likely to burn out in the process.

The second goal was to “deconstruct” each position into the sum of the skills that were needed to do the job in its entirety. We could then take each new employee and have them work on the subset of the larger list that they would need for the work at hand. Everyone else could view the list as a barometer of their progress in becoming truly skilled in their role.

The third goal involved developing the kind of “culture” of communication and knowledge transfer that we needed to improve the consistent development of all the employees. We would bring them together in teams and teach them the tools to improve the flow of information.

The final goal took into account that identifying good peer mentors was a way of identifying and developing good potential managers. Because we expected more than 30 percent growth in the studio, EAC needed a pool of leaders to draw into the management ranks.

CUSTOMIZING THE PROGRAM

Once we knew what we hoped to accomplish, we set about customizing the tools for the audience. We conducted a day of focus groups at all levels of the organization to better understand the vocabulary they used to describe the situation, the areas of most intense frustration, the specific skills and tools that were most commonly an issue (so we could make them into examples), and

the motivations of the employees. We included recently hired employees in the conversations right away, because they were such an area of concern. We asked them about their greatest challenges in getting themselves going and what they'd recommend to help those still coming onboard. The picture that emerged was helpful in planning next steps.

RUNNING THE WORKSHOP

Some of the game teams were having more trouble than others because they had up to 60 percent new employees. When there are so few experienced people, the burden can't lie entirely on the peer mentors; there just aren't enough of them. Sometimes we had to recruit the silo mentors for specific subjects from other teams because no one on the target team had the skill. Of course, the other teams were plenty busy managing their own projects so the situation required some help.

We decided, wherever possible, to teach the Peer Mentoring tools to whole teams at once, or at least to include multiple groups from a team in one session. This meant that we were teaching not only the experienced peer mentors, but also the apprentices and their managers all at the same time. We figured that if we had so many new people, we needed them to take as much responsibility as possible for their own development. We also needed some of them to become silo mentors—while they were, themselves, apprentices on the same topic. It may sound crazy, but it was far less crazy than simply throwing the new hires into the deep end and hoping for the best.

The workshop gave the team a common vocabulary and a process they could follow. In each class, the team would talk over which of the tools they'd like to have everyone use consistently in order to improve overall communication. They also figured out who would be the silo peer mentor for each subject (technology, process, documents, meetings, relationships, etc.) and what was expected of each of them. Because they were in the room with the producer (the most senior manager) who ran their team, they could get

some guidance from him or her about how the team would implement the ideas. These sessions always improved morale because people could see a solution to some of their concerns.

One of the senior producers recently remarked that 50 percent of his current team has not taken the workshop. He's at the beginning of another game development cycle and has decided to run all his employees through the workshop again as a way of resetting expectations and ensuring that everyone is prepared to use the ideas to work together on the coming project.

INDIVIDUALS TOOK ACTION

After the workshop, it was up to the individuals to take action and put the tools to work. Nothing gets better without making some changes in behavior. We tried to map out the specific changes we expected. For new hires, we picked five ideas from Peer Mentoring that would help us toward our first goal, “a consistent predictable onboarding experience for every new hire.” Following are the five ideas we agreed to guarantee for every new hire:

- A designated primary mentor who was introduced on the first day
- A First Meeting to set expectations
- A customized Training Plan that was filled out at least two weeks into the future, if not more
- An Air, Food, and Water checklist to make sure the new hire wasn't tripping up because of missing basics
- A Big Picture conversation to ensure they got the lay of the land and understood their place in it

Even without many formal training resources, we found that making sure these five ideas happened consistently had a huge impact on the experience of the new hires. Later on, as more formal training became available, these resources continued to provide a foundation. All of these steps could be completed in a couple of hours and could shave days or weeks off the ramp-up to productivity.

MANAGERS TOOK ACTION

During the discussions about communication in the workshop, the producers and development directors who were the primary managers for the game teams took notes on which of the tools seemed to have the most potential impact for their teams. Over the subsequent weeks and months, they guided their teams toward implementing them. For some teams this meant that everyone started using the Status Report Worksheet from Chapter 2 every single week. Other teams spent 15 minutes talking over the anatomy of a problem-solving question as a way of improving troubleshooting. Many used 10 minutes of each team meeting to have people (especially the experienced people who were feeling the most stress) describe their communication preferences so that the rest of the team could try to respect their wishes. In some instances, the teams created quick web sites to allow employees to post their preferences. This made it easier for new hires to access the silo mentors confidently without inadvertently stepping on toes. Many teams reported a new respect for different learning styles and a willingness to adjust their training approach as necessary.

Each team went after incorporating the ideas in a slightly different way, depending on the managers and the employees themselves. It was exciting for me to receive reports about the immediate effects. One senior producer said, “If you’d told me a month ago that my whole team would be enthusiastically sending and reading status reports every week, I would have told you that you were nuts!”

EXECUTIVES TOOK ACTION

The Peer Mentoring Workshops created a lot of enthusiasm. “When I heard that people were ‘line jumping’ to get into the class, I knew we were onto something,” said Herbert. But, there was still something missing. EAC didn’t yet have anyone on-site who was a dedicated training resource. I suggested a role I helped define when I ran the training department at Microsoft. We called the role a “training program manager,” wrote a job description, and then helped identify people to fill the position, ultimately bringing five

people into the role: one for each job family (engineers, quality, art, development directors, and producers).

We hired current employees who were already experienced and well respected in their fields. We didn't require any training experience, but did look for people who had embraced the peer mentoring tools and were excited to work on the training problem. In addition to ensuring support for knowledge transfer, these program managers would be responsible for supporting their constituencies with whatever training programs were needed (classroom, informal sessions, web-based documentation, brown-bag lunch meetings, cross training, etc.).

The EAC executives made it clear that taking on this role was a great way to get visibility and to show big picture leadership—a nice career stepping stone. The executives understood that some of the program managers would be in their role for less than a year, while others might choose to stay longer. We arranged to have the program managers report into executive producers or senior technical managers, as well as having a dotted line into human resources. In this way, the program managers were very central to the business.

“The existing soft costs far exceeded the cost of the headcount for the program manager position. That was a great investment for us. We also found that it was very important to bring seasoned employees into the position to get the most impact from it,” said Herbert.

TRAINING PROGRAM MANAGERS TOOK ACTION

The first training program managers at EAC were Bert Sandie (software engineering) and Matt Manuel (development directors and people and project managers for the game teams). Others filled in for the other job families over time. Both Bert and Matt fit the profile we were looking for right off the bat. They were experienced, well regarded, and had many relationships that they could draw on to help identify silo and primary mentors for the new hires. They were also able to help identify primary mentors who could work at the studio level to help set some standards.

The first thing the training program managers worked on was ensuring that every new hire had the five elements that we identified as defining a consistent onboarding experience. They connected with the Human Resources department to find out who was starting on the coming Monday and checked in with the hiring teams to ensure that a peer mentor had been assigned, a Training Plan had been customized, a First Meeting was scheduled, an Air, Food, and Water list was provided, and a Big Picture conversation was in the works. In some instances this was already happening because the hiring team had taken the workshop and was on top of it. In other cases, some or all of the list was missing and the training program manager needed to step in to facilitate an effective onboarding experience. “We had already been using the peer mentoring tools and bought into the framework ourselves, so it wasn’t hard to take that experience into the program manager role,” said Sandie.

Within weeks of having the training program managers in their new roles, we were able to say that 100 percent of the new hires coming into the studio could expect a consistent onboarding experience. That was a huge improvement right away!

The next step Bert and Matt took was to get control of the Master Training Plan for their respective job families; Bert took ownership of the Training Plan for all engineers and Matt took ownership of the Training Plan for all development directors. Practically speaking, ownership translated into a combination of gathering and compiling the customized plans that were already in use from the workshop and fleshing the plans out to make them as robust as possible with the help of a few extra meetings with me. “[Having the program managers flesh out the Training Plan] was a big help to the peer mentors and managers who were training new hires because they didn’t have to start with a blank Training Plan. They could just customize the Master Training Plan,” said Manuel.

Instead of scratching their heads when a new hire came on, the peer mentors and managers could scan the Master Training Plan, as if it were a menu, and make a “wish list” of all of the skills they wanted the new hire to have. They could, then, interview and test the new hire to see what he already knew and check off those skills

on the plan. What remained could be put into sequential order, the resources could be adjusted for the circumstances, and a date could be entered to set expectations. I watched Matt customize one of these plans for a new hire (with the Master Plan as his baseline) in less than 10 minutes.

Now, each new hire would be greeted with a plan. That was truly a welcome step forward!

ADDITIONAL PROGRAMS

The Training Plan could also be used as a basis for investing in further programs to develop the skills the studio needed to meet the goals we had set. Bert Sandie recruited more than 40 subject matter experts to develop and deliver content to support the engineers' Training Plan. This is the heart of a 1-week engineering onboarding program that Sandie runs every month. At the beginning of the week, each new hire receives a plan and is told that by the end of the week, he will need to be able to demonstrate competence for the skills on the list. "It really focuses them, to be so clear about what will be expected," said Sandie. Matt Manuel does something similar for the development directors.

EAC doesn't always have enough engineers or development directors starting at the same time to run a formal bootcamp, but regardless of the size of the incoming group, those new engineers still need support to get up to speed. When the number is too low for a bootcamp, the new employees still receive the same Training Plan, but instead of having a formal program all lined up in the "resources" column, they have a different set of resources available. The resources might include online training, documentation, and a series of one-on-one sessions with the silo mentors for each topic. The new hires might also get a little more time than one week to prepare to pass the test. The point is that whether they're part of a bootcamp or are the only new hire that month, they still have a clear path to success.

The results of these efforts were clear to me when I was invited to a presentation that served as a graduation for the first group of development directors who had been through the onboarding program that Matt developed. The presentation team was made up of the five development directors who had been hired six weeks ago. The audience was John Schappert, Brad Herbert, and Jerry Bowerman, three of the four executives running the studio. After six weeks on the job, these new development directors were able to stand and confidently deliver a comprehensive presentation of their own roles, describe the areas in which they knew they'd need to focus using the vernacular of the studio, and take questions as if they were pros. It was such a win! Only a few months earlier, a new development director would have barely been able to find his way around the building in six weeks. Instead, we had leaders who were prepared to take on projects and teams. We had shown good progress on our fourth goal, to identify and support emerging leaders.

BOOK SUMMARY: PUTTING IT INTO PRACTICE

When I think about the most satisfying moments of my work in developing the ideas in this book, it is easy to point to stories, such as the EA story in this chapter, in which I got to be part of something that really changed the work lives of a lot of people. The EAC employees worked from the executive level on down, executed a plan in a disciplined way, and garnered results that were clear and measurable. Of course, that was very exciting for all of us.

Having said that, I'm actually more energized every day by the individuals who have taken my workshop and sent me notes saying that, even though they were alone in the classroom and returned to a work environment that wasn't exactly "progressive," they were able to implement a handful of the ideas and make a difference for themselves and their immediate teams. I love the fact that useful change can happen whether you're the CEO or an employee working on the front line. It really doesn't have to be too complicated. It starts with one person taking steps to improve his

or her situation, trying to be clearer, making a bit more of an effort to be disciplined, and then sharing the best ideas with close colleagues. In this way, a culture of communication and knowledge transfer can be built from the bottom up. It can start with you.

With that in mind, there are two messages I want to leave you with at the end of this book. I hope they don't sound too sappy, because I mean them sincerely:

1. **Do something differently today than you did yesterday** to improve your success rate at both transferring knowledge and getting your work done on time. Don't let inertia get in the way! All of these ideas are useful by themselves and take only minutes of investment to get hours of benefits in return.
2. **Bring someone else in on your plan** so that you're not alone. Hand this book to your manager or a co-worker and then have lunch next week to talk about the handful of ideas you'd like to implement together. Then, you'll have a co-conspirator who can both work with you to improve the situation and hold you accountable for doing so as well.