Chapter 4
The Balancing Act:
Interpersonal Aspects of Instructional Designers as Change Agents in Higher Education

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Upon hearing a multitude of complaints from faculty members about the required training module prior to teaching online courses at Great Plains University for the first time, the instructional designers at GPU's North Central Campus decided to work with a faculty fellow to create a local version of the training. Before discussing specific modifications to the training module, the group delved into the interpersonal aspects of the relationship between instructional designers and faculty members in higher education. They suspected that these relationship dynamics had something to do with the shortcomings of the existing training module, and they wanted to ensure that they addressed them in the new version of the training. The result was a set of recommendations sent to the Provost at NCC that aligned the modifications to the training intervention to the performance problems in the institution, while simultaneously accounting for the interpersonal aspects identified in their discussions.

ORGANIZATION BACKGROUND

Great Plains University (GPU) is a public land-grant university in the Midwestern region of the United States with approximately 75,000 undergraduate and graduate students across its six campus locations. Within each of these campuses, instructional designers work with faculty members to deliver instruction to students in face-to-face, hybrid, and fully online learning environments. Individuals in each group are members of separate professional unions that operate under collective bargaining agreements regarding working conditions, and this organizational paradigm often influences relationships between these groups. This arrangement and its corresponding delineations of duties for each group serve to accentuate the questions regarding the nature of interactions between instructional designers and faculty members within higher education as a whole. In addition, the majority of instructional designers at GPU have an educational background at the master's level, while most faculty members have terminal degrees in their respective fields.

At the North Central Campus (NCC), the second largest with GPU, there are about 250 full-time faculty members and two full-time instructional designers. The designers are classified as Instructional Design Specialists within their bargaining unit and spend the majority of their time working with faculty members to design instruction for delivery to students. Both instructional designers have educational backgrounds that include a master's degree in an area closely related to instructional design and technology. Each has experience as an instructional designer in a sector other than higher education prior to their current position, one within public secondary education and one within the industry.

In addition, these two instructional designers are both relatively new to their positions and are able to compare their interactions with faculty members to those with subject matter experts outside higher education that are still in their recent memory. The expectations and perceptions of these two individuals are somewhat unique to the experiences of other instructional designers within the GPU system of higher education who have a range of different backgrounds and amount of experience working in this role in higher education.

The two instructional designers at NCC are both male and Caucasian. Randy Kerrigan is a male in his early 30s who has been with the university for a little over two years. His colleague, Steve Gilmour, is a male in his late 20s who has been with the university for just shy of one year. While they both possess master's degrees in a field closely related to instructional design and technology, their undergraduate degrees are in disciplines within the humanities. In addition to working with faculty members in the arts and sciences, Randy and Steve also interact with faculty in business, education, and human services.

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