The eLearning Coach Podcast
ELC 083: Quality Management: It's More Than Missing Commas
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Connie: Hi, Hadiya. Welcome to The eLearning Coach Podcast.

Hadiya: Hello, Connie. Thanks for having me.

Connie: I'd like to start with a definition of quality management, so we all have the same understanding as we get started. Can you give us one?

Hadiya: Well, my definition of it, and the one I saw most prevalent in the literature is that it's any systems you have in place that support your mission of quality, and I think that's an important one and where you have a breakdown is if you don't have a mission and you don't have an overarching ideal that you're supporting, then what you have is random task that quickly become replaced. People quickly forget to do or don't do or don't value. So, it becomes a system when it is beholden to something greater than its parts. There's a mission that there is a belief, there's a principle behind it that you are upholding. Of course, there's mechanical definitions around it that there's processes and interlocking phases and all of that. But I would say the key part is that you have that vision and that mission that is holding everything together.

Connie: Mm-hmm. So how did you get interested in quality management because you're often known as the story training person?

Hadiya: Yeah. Well, from the beginning, from the first missing comma from the first rewrite and redo of any workbook I ever had, reviews were always frightening to me. It was always a scary thing of what's going to happen now. What's going to be that thing that I missed? I took it personal. I took it as a reflection of my ability to work, but the real deep dive started... one time I was going to some American Express, a business free thing or something for people in business, and I remember I was walking downtown, and I was in the middle of a review process. It was at the clients, and I was crossing the street and I thought, "Wouldn't it be great to have a company that I could just send all this too?" They would review it all and then they would send it back to me.

That would be an interesting company, and I actually explored that idea of what if I did that? What if I made a company like that and made a service and I had all these plans written out and all this documentation and the idea was that I would take people who were new to the field and entering

the field and train them, whatever that meant at the time to be reviewers, and then we would send it through this process and it would be a three-day turnaround or something. So that's what I was really thinking about and then I started talking to people, which you should never do when you have an idea. I tried talking to people and I quickly realized that because there is no one way to practice L&D, there is no one way. I sort of dealt with quality management a little bit when I worked in tech support and when you hit the print button, you know what's supposed to happen, there's a program behind it and it's pretty consistent across most applications.

If you hit a button in e-learning, goodness knows what's going to happen. There is no way of saying this is right or this is working in context and definitely not take it to that next level which people always wanted to do. Is this working and are people going to learn from it? There's just too much context for me, a stranger, to take that and determine that **for** you. I'm sure I can find typos, but that's the extent of it and even then, it gets a little tricky. So, I said, you know what? I don't think I can do this. It would be too much. What do we keep errors in there? What are the terms of service?

I could not deal with it. That sort of led me on this journey of there's something missing in the way I'm thinking about quality management, and so I started studying a little bit and started writing about it and thought maybe I can write a book about it and then maybe certify people in how to do it, so it becomes this additional skill that you can get certified for in learning and development.

So, I started studying that and then I got approached to write the book and when I first started writing it, I didn't know it at the time, but my view of quality management was, I would call it quality assurance or control at the time, and it was narrow because it was just focused on the review process. I didn't even think larger than that. It was just, "I'm going to make the perfect way to check a course over and over again. That was my first vision of a quality management book and what I was thinking. Then I started actually thinking, "Something's not right, something's still missing." So, I studied quality management. Quality management itself as a discipline in all these other different manufacturing environments and I got a certification from a certifying body of quality management, and I realized that, well, that's the problem.

I'm starting at the end of a larger process and realized that the problems in the review process are actually the symptoms of a larger problem. I tell people that the person who compromised quality is not the instructional designer who missed the comma. It was the manager who decided that two weeks was enough time to make a course. It was the person who didn't give you the tools in order to do that, and that also comes through in the literature that it's not the people, it's the process and there's got to be something that we can do, even though we all practice this differently to figure out how can we for our organizations develop a larger system. So that's sort of my journey of how I ended up here.

Connie: Well, that is really interesting because the next thing I was going to ask you is how has your perspective on it changed since we've recorded a podcast on this subject a few years ago, but I think you may have just answered that question. What do you think?

Hadiya: Yeah, it was all about reviews. It was all about finding errors, which is such a reactive way of approaching quality management, and it explains so much clarity for me because I would create all these spreadsheets and all these checklists and all these perfect ways of doing it, but they weren't attached to anything. They were just random list of things that aren't attached to something greater. Every tool that we make has to be in service of something else, and the way I advise people to build systems is almost like this tower of blocks, sort of a Jenga tower of blocks that support one another.

I don't want people to create something that's unsustainable, so you have to really do the work and figure out what's going to work for you. You may not need the whole tower. You may just need a mission that we all sort of adhere to and we all do our own thing, but we have clarity on that mission, but sometimes we don't have clarity on that, and people are doing different things. So that's when you need guidelines that goes up, then that supports you more. Sometimes that's enough. You don't need anything more for different things that you're developing, but sometimes you do. That's why you have the next level of processes and procedures. So, I'm trying to position it as you need to figure out how big this tower needs to be, but understand the more support it has, the more sustainable it is, but it's also harder to maintain.

Just juggling act, and I'm just really... I think the biggest takeaway I'm encouraging people is like you have to do the work for your team and find out what works for you. No more searching the internet looking for the perfect checklist that's... you're going to download and say, "This is great," and then you'll abandon it and forget you did it and you're going to search again and go, "Oh, is this... wait, don't I have something like this?" You have to do the work to see what's going to work for you and really get into that mindset of continuous improvement, not just of what you're doing in the classes but of the process itself.

Connie: That's one of the things I like about your book is that it feels flexible. It feels that you're allowing for variability in how people use their quality management system because you know it's going to be different for every team or every organization, and that really comes through because if you laid out every single detail, no one would be able to stick to it, just like with instructional design.

Hadiya: Right. I love that flexibility because I think it's important, but the issue is that you'll only know that something needs to change if you're watching it. And I think the biggest pushback I'll get and that I've already gotten when I talk to people are this idea that can't everybody just be in charge of their own quality management that, "Okay, we have a mission and Tom does what he does and Mary does what they do," and that's possible if you know what Tom and Mary are doing. And I think that's a big thing. It's that... I do say in the book that what is at stake here? What's the cost of not doing this?

And I worry more not about the people who know exactly what's going on. I worry about the people who have no idea what is happening in their groups and how people are coming to the conclusions that they're coming to. That's fine if you have your own system, but what is that system and are we ever going to talk about what that system is, and can you explain that system to me because maybe we can share? But a lot of them don't have the language to articulate. It's like I just look at a class over and over and over again and some people have these enormous spreadsheets that are so meticulous and that's what's comfortable for them. So as long as and have an eye on and try to figure out what everyone's doing, I think you see how it contributes to the mission then go your way. But I think a lot of us don't know because we don't talk about what we're doing,

Connie: Right. But it does seem like it's larger than one person like it should be done at a very high level. In case we have any skeptics listening, can you talk about how learning and development can benefit from having a quality management system in both the short term and the long term?

Hadiya: It's very interesting how we think we're so unique as a profession and when I teach these topics or any learning development course, I always some point ends up saying that every problem that we have in L&D has been solved by another industry and we sort of just go, "I don't know how to do it." Go look at those other industries and then apply what you have to L&D. And so that's what I did with this. In my mind, I mean, I'm a writer. You are too, all of us. You don't have to write a book. I mean, all of the writing that we've done is writing. So why would you think that your writing should be different than what they do at The New York Times or how they make sure there's quality in assignment issues?

I mean, why would you think that your writing should be immune from those types of checks? When I'm developing e-learning, I'm not a program. I don't pretend to be, but I'm making a lot of the same decisions, where buttons should go, where things should go on the screen. Why do you think that there should be no regulations on the decisions that you're making? And we treat it very much like an art rather than a science, and okay, but it is a science. You could treat it the way you want, but there is a science to it, and we need to figure that out and apply to what we do.

So, I think that's one, any process, anything that you're building, we are making products. We are making products. Every one of us who produce anything from a workbook to a job, to a class that is a product and every industry that makes products should have some sort of quality regulation to see whether or not it's meeting specifications. There is nothing that we're doing that is different even just within your own company. It requires that because we are trying to meet a specific need, the need of the customer to learn, the need of the organization to improve performance, and if we are all just doing our own thing based on whatever we like, how do we know that that's happening?

If you can show me how that's meeting the needs, okay, but it was decades before I saw anybody take any of my e-learning courses. I just put them out and somebody would look, but I never watched that process

to see what it looked like to see whether or not they were fully engaging in that course. Why? Those are things we should do as part of the research to see what quality is and what's not quality. This is a common thing. There's nothing unique about what we're doing here. It's a common thing. Now you can say it's unique from company to company to company, but it's not unique in your company. Ideally, you're using similar tools, you're giving the company a similar experience, so try to develop systems. I think in the long run, I think one thing that people want to know, will this get them out of review purgatory with the zombie courses that keep coming back time and time again? And that would be a great benefit of course if that is your goal, and that's the thing, you got to set goals.

That's not going to happen by magic. You're going to have to set goals and you're going to have to figure out if that's what we want to do, then that's what you work towards and that's going to be part of your mission and you develop quality control to support the guidelines around that. It's up to you what this system doesn't support. Part of the legwork is figuring out what you want it to support, what's the problem that's happening because you don't want to create a solution in search of a problem. Build a system that is going to correct that problem.

Connie: This reminds me of an event early in my career. I was on a team and after a year, the graphic designer said to me, "I've never seen a finished e-learning course," and I said, "What do you mean?" He said, "Yeah, I read the storyboards, make the graphics, and I've never seen it all put together." What a disconnect.

Hadiya: Yeah.

Connie: Why do you think that quality management is low on the important scale of so many L&D teams?

Hadiya: I think that one, we're in a hurry. That's one thing. So, rush, rush, rush. I wonder sometimes if the low value, the perceived low value that the organization places on us doesn't bleed over to what we think as well. So many times, even to myself, I think they're not going to read it. They're not going to... this is just going to be for the class, or we sort of downplay the importance of these things and we don't see our e-learning courses as software. We don't see our guide that is 100 pages is a book in that way,

but it is. You put a lot of work and ideas in that, and it should be treated accordingly. So, I think it's overall respect for what we do. Also, not a whole lot of guidance on how to do it per se. I find that a lot of people that I interviewed for this that really focused on it came from organizations that focused on it.

So, they came from manufacturing organizations for example, and so it was just part of what the company did. It was part of the culture. But if you work at another services organization for example, I've never worked at a service organization that put particular guidelines on anything that they did, let alone training and development stuff. We want it to be good. We want people to learn. What does that mean? And I think that's part of it is to be able to operationalize these ideas, these nebulous ideas of how people learn and what does that look like and what do you do to get there and it's that operational piece of it to do it. So, I think those are the main reasons of and not really having any guidance, placing a low value on what we do and also just not being in a culture that overall supports quality from top to bottom.

I say in the book how quality management systems can be built from the ground up, but they have to be sustained from the top down. They have to be protected. Once you build it, they have to be protected because there will be people who come in, "Let's skip all that, skip all that. We need to get this done." Getting it done means that it's a quality product, I hope. So, they don't want to go through those steps and so leadership has to step in and protect this system sometimes from itself.

That's a hard thing to do if you really implement something and those who have done it know this changes your relationship with the business overall, that we are a business too and we have guidelines as well. I think another benefit to your question earlier, in many ways, I do recall working internal. I had a way of working with people, other people had a way, we were just all doing what we thought was right and the business is just going with the flow. There's this sense that we're making this up. There's this sense that we are not following any real guidelines at all, and I think that doing this and communicating this, because that's a big thing you want to do is communicate to the business that we're doing this and this matters to us and the impact will be X, Y, Z, then it feels like, oh, this is real. This is an actual profession, and this is something that is important to

them and they already know that doing it this way is going to support the organization and so maybe it's easier to get buy-in in that regard.

I can say another benefit too that I like about it is that I said that I used to take this stuff very personally, and it was because really it was personal because I wasn't following guidelines. I was following what I thought was best. So, if you tell me that my class is bad, then that's a reflection on me. That's only a reflection on me and my education and my skill. If you have guidelines, it becomes a reflection of not just this person's talent, but whether this course meets guidelines and what can I do to support you while making this course and meeting the guidelines. It is less about your talent and your skill. How can we make it so that all of us can comply with these guidelines to the best of our abilities? What kind of supports do you need, education resources or whatever you need to do that? And it becomes less about you, more about what we're trying to accomplish.

Connie: That's a good point. It sounds like it can increase the respect that a team has within a company and their perceived value. It also makes it feel from what you're saying, more holistic. People will think in terms of the entire department, not just one person.

Hadiya: Exactly. And that flexibility allows you to say, "We don't have to do everything the same way." I would resist that. I don't want to do everything the same way as everyone else, but that's when you have to figure out where the lines are. You may say you don't have to use the same exact storyboard template, but it has to have these elements in it. You could say, we are always using storyline and you're going to have this shell, but what you do in that shell is up to you. I've worked with clients where they try to template everything and you spend more time trying to figure out what layout of these five templates are going to work for this, and you're just sort of Jerry-rigging,

And that may work for some, but not for everyone. If you're creating the same content over and over again, maybe that works, but not if you are doing something larger than that, you may say this has to be the same and what you decide goes into it different. You may say that the button should always look this way, but where you put the buttons depends on the course. So, you need to really just find out is that a thing? Does anyone care about... Is that a problem or not? I think too, I want to stress

that you shouldn't use quality management to teach instructional design either.

You shouldn't kind of say, "These are the guidelines and you're going to become an instructional designer based on these guidelines," or worse is a way to sort of shame people or fire them based on those guidelines alone. The guidelines are just sort of the manifestation of what we decide as an organization works. That's management's role to make sure they can meet those guidelines. It's not, "Here are the guidelines. You didn't follow them, but I didn't support you and making sure that you knew how to make accessible courses, but here are the guidelines for accessible courses." But that's a problem. So, you're not teaching accessibility to that guideline. You still have to teach them how to create those courses.

Connie: Right. Next, I'd like to talk about setting up a QM system. Let's say I'm a manager of a team that has eight L&D people, instructional designers, developers, a multimedia person. What would you help us set up? What would you recommend for us?

Hadiya: Well, the first thing is I want to know what you're solving for. I want to see proof of that because I get that as well where people will say that there are errors, but is that such a prevalent problem? First, what are you solving for? What issues are coming up that are actually causing you harm? Do you have any data to support it or where would we find the data to support it? Because just building the system and not measuring to anything is an issue. However, I would not recommend that we go through every class to find all the errors and say a percentage of this, that, and the other. Just want to hear stories about how people have been hindered by the process. That gives us an idea of how far we have to build up the tower. So that would be the first thing that I would do. I will always start with the mission, what the mission is, and then start having discussions around how are you now meeting that mission and how are you falling short?

And that begins a discussion around developing guidelines. I'll figure out as we continue to talk, how much control they want, how strict they want this system to be, because we could stop at guidelines, but we may say, "Well, we don't need anything further for design, but maybe for visual design," because people are really struggling for graphics design, so then we just have the guidelines that, so that's quality assurance, but we may

need quality control measures because controlling quality and production not afterwards. So, for visual elements of the course, so we'll look at the guidelines for visual elements and we'll build processes and procedures to support them. Maybe it's access to the right database, maybe it's guidelines on color, guidelines on what makes a good image or things like that to go further into that so that we don't have to create processes for every single thing because that's hard to maintain and you probably won't need them, and who's going to watch that that's happened.

That's another part of it as well that you can't really do. So, there's those elements of it. And then we need to start building a review process of how we are going to invite subject matters experts into that. If we are, how are we going to review against guidelines? You're going to always have reviews about accuracy with your SMEs and any errors they may find. However, there is a review against the guidelines to make sure that people made it. Sometimes you may not go outside for that. You may stay in learning and development for that, but we have to see what it looks like. So, you're just sort of answering questions. What are we solving for? What will it take to solve that problem? How will we know we solved it? And my goal is to find that story for them, as I could have tie it into that that quality management as I discovered is the story of L&D.

It's who you are, it's who we are as an industry, and it is who your team is as you begin to build this out. It's not an add-on. It's not an additional thing. It is woven into the fabric of how you build the products and service the organization that you're servicing. And so, my mission is to get rid of it as an afterthought and make it the first thought of how are we going to consistently meet the needs of this organization and what does that even look like?

Connie: I like that. Now, one last question. How would someone who's in a department of one implement a quality management program if they are alone in their organization?

Hadiya: Well, it is pretty much a similar process. What are you solving for? If you're not going to get more people and it's just going to be you, then you have to build a system that accommodates that. Now, one thing that I always recommend too is piloting portions of a system. For example, you may just say, "We're just going to do e-learning. The rest is going to go through its

regular whatever we already have workbooks and instructor-led, but e-learning is what we're going to focus on." Ideally, one day you'll have something larger, but people have to get used to building this into their lives, and so that's the same for you. I know some people, department of one, they are a department of one, but they do heavily rely on others to review some of this content. So, you can build a system with them to see what role they can play in this to sort of bring them in.

But you can also just focus on a very narrow piece of this and when you get that down, bring it out a little bit. Again, maybe I'm just focusing on e-learning products for corporate projects. I know retail has their own thing. I'm going to focus on corporate projects and I'm going to focus on maybe even just finance. You can make it narrow and then get used to it and see how it works and see how it moves. This is ongoing, this isn't, "We have a product, let's go." This is going to be an ongoing living breathing mechanism that's going to move into your house. It's going to be there because it is us. It is what we do. So, I would recommend they start with same process, what are we solving for and all that, but really narrow in scope. Scope is the savior here, and even if you're a big organization, you may still start very small, go into scope, get used to it, build the tools, see how the organization is compatible with it. Keep watching and when you build the next phase, expand, or restrict.

Connie: Very good. Hadiya, thank you so much for your time. I love your approach to quality management, and I think a lot of people will find this very helpful.

Hadiya: All right. Thank you, Connie.