

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

FOR MEMBERS

OVERVIEW

From PowerPoint to Experiences: Transforming Technical Training

by Liz Smith of General Mills

General Mills found a highly effective way to train its young chemical engineers and food scientists. Here's how they transformed a weeklong series of PowerPoint lectures into a training program with a waiting list.

LIZ SMITH, a chemical engineer, is the Continuous Improvement Manager at General Mills, where she has worked for 22 years.

General Mills is a global operation and one of the world's largest food companies.

“For us at General Mills ... saying that we’re going to spend 30 hours of a 40-hour class doing scenarios got a lot of raised eyebrows and a lot of looks, but the proof is in the pudding.”

THE CHALLENGE

The revered heritage course involved 40 hours of class time at company manufacturing facility for early-career chemical engineers and food scientists in quality-engineering roles. Experts, armed with 1,331 PowerPoint slides, came in and spoke about 43 topics over five days.

No other training method had ever been tried and the suggestion to change the course met with resistance, but the company had to accelerate the learning and development of its young quality engineers. These digital natives wanted to learn in the moment of need and did not want to wait for a class. They wanted to think on their feet and immediately apply what they had learned.

The Transformation in Numbers

	Then	Now	Change
Prerequisites	0	24 topics	Infinite
PowerPoint Slides	1, 331	724	Cut in half
Hours in Lecture	33	15	Cut in half
Hours in Experiences	3	21	7 times more
Participants	15	27	Almost double



THEN

GENERAL MILLS



NOW

19

THE TRANSFORMATION

Piloting or experimenting in small way is an accepted practice at GE so they started with just one course. They had to sell the idea, so formed a coalition of key leaders across the organization.

They chose scenarios because a key way for millennials to learn is through experience. They had employees play the roles of plant managers, team leaders and others in rich, robust, complex learning scenarios. They based the scenarios on real events.

Groups of three to four participants watched an event unfold, worked with the actors to investigate, presented a recommendation, and debriefed with the entire group. Participants used listening, critical thinking and influencing skills, as well as their technical skills.

The scenarios were scripted and were complex and branching. If participants went down one path of discovery, the actors used their scripts to follow them down that path. Some teams did more rigorous analyses than others, which became a topic of discussion in the debriefings.

Lectures were presented when information needed to be conveyed, but they consumed far less of the week. If there was a lecture, it was immediately followed by a scenario.

THE RESULTS

90 days after the training, participants reported greater confidence in performing job. Before, that was so-so metric.

Over 6 months, managers reported great skills gains compared to the progress of previous participants. They showed more leadership and accountability.

The second time the training was offered, there was a waiting list.

They are now expanding the teaching method into other areas of training.

“This was scary for us. General Mills has a long heritage -- we are a conservative company -- and this is a big leap for us to say we are going to take 27 employees, put them in these scenarios and not drill them on every nuance of our corporate policy. It has turned out to be well worth it and we will continue in this fashion.

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The executive summary above was written by staff from watching the presentation and many other ideas were presented. Members may watch the full presentation if wished by logging in.