Too many chefs—an allegory

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The following allegory on multiple-authored reports is based on personal experience.

Some months back a friend from a local oil and gas service company phoned. He and a task force of coworkers were finishing an 18-month project and were about to write the final report. My friend was very concerned that they would write a weak report, upsetting his client and losing the follow-up work. He was calling for help. We set up a lunch meeting (if I didn’t get a contract, at least I’d get a meal).

After hanging up, the old adage “too many chefs spoil the broth” kept passing though my head. Over the years, I have read many large final reports, most of which were poorly written and nearly useless to anyone except the writers. Too many end up gathering dust on shelves. To get this contract I’d have to show how this could be prevented.

A few days later, we met. I began, “The key to your success is thorough planning. So let’s begin with some questions: How many chefs?” A confused look flew across the table. I’d forgotten that we were in a restaurant. “I mean, how many authors and how many contributors for this report? Actually, before you answer that, how have you written reports in the past?”

My friend answered, “It’s been pretty simple. We do the work and just sort of write the final. Company policy dictates an internal review before sending it, so a colleague reads it. He or she usually has two or three comments, a few changes are made, and the report is sent. It seemed to work. We’re still in business. However, recently I’ve reread some old reports and, frankly, they are poor! That’s why I called you. For one thing, our reports seem to lack organization. They read as if we are saying to the reader, ‘Here is what we did, now you figure it out.’ Some of it is my writing, I want this one to be different. It represents a lot of work, a lot of money spent, and even more money in the future.”

“How many chefs?” I replied. “Let’s go back. How many authors and contributors?”

“Thirteen, sort of, but what’s the difference between authors and contributors?”

“Authors write and are directly responsible for the product; contributors give graphs, pictures, data tables, etc., and can walk away. The number of each represents the amount and variety of management that the head person must do.”

“Head person?”

“We’ll get to that in a moment; continue with the manpower loading.”

“Well, actually it’s a bit complicated. For writers, there are six of us here in Denver, five in Texas, and two, who are the client’s engineers, living overseas. For contributors, I’m not sure.”

“Since your authors are spread out, your preparations will be different than if everyone is on the same floor in the same building, OK, next. What is the focus of this report?”

“Focus? I haven’t thought about that. Can you clarify?”

“OK. What value do you want this report to bring to your client? If you want to impress your client—that is, get additional work—you have to walk in his shoes and bring your work to his needs. You have to focus this document on his problems, how you’ve solved them, and the benefits he will derive. Benefits usually mean money. You can’t just report your work and expect your client to dig out the value and benefits. Focus is something you will have to think out and make sure all your authors understand. Now, staying in this general thought, what is the expected utility of this report?”

“What do you mean?” He put down his fork, took out a pad, and began taking notes.

“I mean action. After reading this report, what do you expect your reader to do? Smile and nod introspectively, run out and close a bunch of valves, or change completion strategies on all future drilling? Meaning, think about things and probably do nothing, make immediate changes, or change future operations. A successful report should point out or point the way to financially beneficial action or actions.”

“Ahhhh, I hadn’t thought about any of this. This stuff is really good.”

At this point I began to feel like a tent-revival preacher bringin’ the light. “Good. Next. Who is the targeted audience? Meaning, the money guys, the decision makers, the field engineers, etc.?”

“Well, all of them. But does that make a difference?”

“Targeting your audience makes the difference. The audience’s expertise defines how you write. Since you anticipate a broad-based audience, not just technically competent engineers and scientists, you have to write at a level they all will understand, at least for some parts of the report. For example, a report covering this much work should begin with a two or three page executive summary. It’s written to reach the money guys, meaning, it should be void of jargon and overtly stress the problems, solutions, values, but mainly benefits of this project and your work. It should not stress methods, even though 95% of your time was on methods. That’s for the main body.

“Since the summary is what the money guys read, it’s your marketing and sales section. It should market what you did through its benefits, cost-effectiveness, how much work remains, and how clever you would be in attacking those problems. That’s a tall order for two or three pages and that’s what makes it the hardest section to write. But this is probably the only section that the money guys and decision makers will read, and this is your only chance to impress them... I see a furrow in your brow. Recognize that most scientists and engineers are poor at marketing their work. They assume that the quality of their work sells itself. It doesn’t. The people you need to impress don’t read between the lines; they read the bottom line, OK, next question. Do you have any background information already prepared, meaning, outlines, notes, figures, graphs, etc.?”

“Well... we have monthly progress reports; that’s about it.”

“OK, they’ll be really helpful if they are thorough. I’ll talk about this a little later. Next, how long do you want this report to be?”

“Again, that’s something I had not thought about. Is it important? In the past we just wrote until... ahhhh... we were done.”

“As I said earlier, planning is critical. Having a target...
length, which can be modified, is part of planning. Otherwise, people don’t write until they’re done, they write until they run out of steam, get bored, or are pulled from the project. That means the text can be long-winded and boring or terse and confusing. Imagine how your readers feel, assuming they stay around, reading this quality of writing. Remember what happened when you read your old reports?

“Yes, I couldn’t read my own writing.”

“Hmmmmmm,” I thought. Forget the tent revivalist. Now I felt like a cartoon hero arriving just in time to save the day. Jokingly, I said, “That’s OK, your thesis adviser said the same thing, but he passed you anyway.” We laughed—situation defused. “You do understand that part of what I am doing here is expanding your thoughts on preparation. Sweating during the planning will make the writing go much easier. Because we’re starting to run a little bit long, let me add a few more questions for your notes and then give you the next few steps in your strategy. You can call me later with any questions. What are the estimated resources that you will devote to this project? Specifically, man-hours, and are they really adequate to do this task? Make sure you have the necessary time and people committed. In that same vein, are there any drop-dead deadlines? For example, is this report supposed to be on the client’s desk by a certain day or you will start paying late fines? What software will you be using? This is not a problem if everyone is using the same products and the same versions. It can be a problem if different products are used. Despite their promoters, software products are not 100% compatible. When it comes to technical word processing with figures, tables, equations, Greek letters, symbols, etc., it will save hours of hassle if you make sure all your authors use the same software. The same is true for text, tables, figures, etc. You must choose one format style that all authors will use. Otherwise, when compiling the report, someone will have to reformat each contribution, a long and tedious job. Here are my suggestions:

“Put one person in charge. This head person (HP) has to have final authority over everything. That includes organization, deadlines, assigned writers, final wordings, etc., everything. It will make preparing this document much easier and much smoother if you use a benevolent despot approach rather than a democracy, oligarchy, or anarchy. Unfortunately, whoever is HP will have a lot of work, so make sure you throw a party for him or her after this work is done.

“Once the HP has been tapped, he or she must have a meeting or teleconference with all the writers and discuss the topics I have mentioned. This includes focus, utility, etc., of the report. This meeting serves a few purposes. It gets everyone on the same page and primes them for the tasks ahead. It also makes sure that the HP has all the people lined up.

“Next, the HP must write a realistic schedule.

“Next, the HP makes an outline. Here is where those monthly reports are critical. Giving the proper weight and emphasis to each topic is the mark of a good outline. No matter what you feel about outlines, they are necessary in multi-author reports. I won’t waste your time giving you all the reasons. At this point, the outline should have only two levels of details, chapter titles, and section titles. In addition, the outline should include who writes what. Writing assignments are the HP’s choice and are not a topic of dispute. The outline should then be distributed to each assigned writer. The writers can then make suggestions for changes, modifications, improvements, etc., to the outline but not the assignments. In addition every writer will add one more level of detail (in other words, content) to every section assigned. Also, if a writer needs something from a contributor or contributors, this is the time to line up contributors. The writers will then return the annotated outlines to the HP, who will update/upgrade the outline, weighing the suggestions and including the added level of detail.

“Assuming that I am part of your editing team, the leader will forward the outline to me and any other editors for comments, suggestions, etc. At this point editors are most like your client. They have not lived one-on-one with this project for the past 18 months. Editors can give an objective view of the outline and see if the outline really captures the values and benefits of this project. After examining the outline, the editors will return it to you and we will schedule another meeting to discuss editorial comments. I recommend that we have a short, one-hour course on persuasive report writing before your people start writing.

“After this meeting, the HP will revise the schedule and send it and the final outline to all the writers. Now the writing must begin. Remember, you’re always a marketer for your work.”

Our luncheon meeting was now over.

Epilogue: I got the contract. My friend and his coworkers wrote their report. I helped with the outlining, the editing, the revising, and gave a two-hour short course on persuasive writing. My friend later told me the client was overwhelmingly pleased with the report, especially the quality of the presentation. The client hired my friend’s group for the follow-on work. Maybe we should change the adage to “well-organized chefs make great meals.”

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