

RETURN TO MARS: STRIVING FOR THE HEAVENS

The Organization

Since its founding in 1958, NASA has pushed the boundaries of human exploration, put footprints on the moon and tire tracks on Mars. Along the way, NASA has pioneered new technologies that have improved people's lives. NASA's Training Academy is a learning organization that serves project practitioners by providing products and services that manage risk, maximize human capital, develop high performance teams and promote mission success.

The Need

Following the mission failures of the Mars Polar Lander and Climate Orbiter, NASA was an agency in transition. Their ability to manage projects in a "faster, better, cheaper" environment was questioned by both the public and NASA leadership. The solution sought was better and more "real-world" project management training. NASA's training academy (APPL) challenged Palatine Group to develop a customized e-learning solution for continuing education and professional development to close specific competency gaps that affected performance results and to complement face-to-face training. The self-paced courseware was to be targeted to project managers who could benefit from a uniform, highly interactive case-based experience. The client's vision was to change the paradigm of learning.

The Customized Solution

Using NASA Jet Propulsion Laboratory's extensive project archives, as well as conducting new interviews with the historic team of Pathfinder

engineers and scientists, Palatine was able to recreate the mission that landed the first autonomous ground vehicle on another planet. Return to Mars: Leading a Complex Project blends documentary footage, sound, animation, interface planning—and even Leonard Nimoy—into 14 hour-long episodes, 40 flash movies, and over 350 screens. The simulation assigns users to a project (subsystem) within the Mars mission, where they are responsible for key decisions, and challenging scenarios right out the original project plans. Palatine added a wealth of quizzes and essay-type activities to build competencies, along with job aids and other tools essential to project management. The simulation gets progressively more challenging with each episode. By visiting other project areas within the program, users learn how the rest of the team was transforming constraints into opportunities, maintaining the highest levels of performance and commitment, and significantly reducing mission risk. The client found the solution a compelling context for aggressively developing the skill sets of NASA's middle managers and advanced project managers.

Impact

The simulation is still being used by over 1,000 project managers within NASA and externally. Benefits include: providing a structured approach and framework for making better management decisions, particularly in a high-risk environment like space flight missions. Since users were able to simulate a real project, they come away with skills and information that they can immediately apply to their own projects.

About Palatine Group

Founded in 1976, Palatine Group is a leader in Project Leadership and Project Management simulations and technology-based learning solutions. For 30 years, Palatine has helped its clients accelerate their organization's performance, providing measurable results, along with increased profits. Palatine has trained over 50,000 managers, and is the first private company to launch computer-based business and project management simulations.