Building a Reputation through Accomplishment

By Greg Malone

In October 1996 I was given the opportunity to create the Office of Computing and Information Services (OCIS) at Dalton State College (DSC). As the institution moved into its thirtieth year of operation, DSC was staggering under the impact of implementing two new relational database systems without the support of an information technology department. In addition, new technology was beginning to be introduced on the campus in both academic and administrative areas, and it was clear that better coordination and planning was needed. One of my primary concerns coming into the position was how to establish a positive reputation for the new department.

As an individual, as a department, and as an organization, we all have reputations that we have earned or that have been ascribed to us by our colleagues and constituents. Once earned, a reputation tends to remain relatively constant over time, only gradually changing for the better or worse unless affected by some significant event. Following the idea that reputations are built through successful accomplishments, I developed a strategy for OCIS based on the following four principles:

1. Clearly define the product and service.
2. Focus on projects that can be delivered on time whenever possible.
3. Keep multiple projects moving forward simultaneously when resources are scarce.
4. Find and take advantage of win-win situations.

The first principle is to "*clearly define the product and service.*" In my case, I came to DSC with fifteen years of computer-related experience and thus with an overall vision of what services the new department should provide. I spent much of the first four months meeting and interviewing key personnel at the institution to ensure that my vision was appropriate. After discussing issues such as centralization vs. decentralization of services, standard vs. nonstandard hardware and software, and specialized vs. general-purpose computer labs, I developed a mission statement and scope of services for the department. Next, these two documents were matched up with the skill-sets of the departmental employees to create an organizational structure to deliver products and services. Employee job descriptions were defined, and all employees agreed to changes in their duties to fit the new structure. The review of the organizational structure demonstrated a need for additional positions in the department and was used to determine the technical qualifications for those positions. Finally, the interview process was used to generate lists of critical projects for the institution.

The next principle is to "*focus on projects that can be delivered on time whenever possible.*" In most organizations, the list of critical projects is long and resource-intensive. Thus the first step is to work with the senior administration and department heads to prioritize the projects. At DSC, we informally agreed that the department would focus on those projects that were deemed most likely to succeed and that would have a broad impact across the campus. The goal was to develop trust and earn the respect of the campus by successfully delivering a small number of highly visible projects.

We focused on two projects. The first was the standardization of the hardware and software being used in the eight general-purpose computer labs, which contained 186 computers. OCIS assumed the responsibility for managing and maintaining all eight labs. Members of OCIS listened to the concerns of the instructors teaching in these labs and assessed their needs. The two most common concerns were that the same software was not available in all of the labs and that instructors seldom found the computers in the same condition from one class to another. OCIS thus implemented a process we call "lab cloning," in which all the general-purpose labs are set up to contain the same suite of software, locked-down desktops, and ghost images for quick reconfiguration when problems occur. Faculty and students can now move freely from lab to lab based on availability, and the computing environment is stable. In quarterly meetings, faculty discuss new software needs and the introduction of new technologies. Faculty and student satisfaction with the computer labs improved tremendously after this program was implemented.

Our second project was the implementation of a system to allow faculty to advise and register students via the Web. Through a collaborative partnership with Gainesville College, another University System of Georgia (USG) institution, we developed a special advising Web page, which contained all the student information that advisers previously had received in computer printouts or had maintained in file folders in their offices. In addition, the manual registration procedure was converted to a Web-based registration process. The new process reduced the amount of time students had to spend standing in lines and eliminated the need for students to return to advisers' offices when classes were closed. The next phase of the project will provide students with the ability to register for classes, receive grades, and inquire about financial aid or admissions status online. This phase will be implemented as soon as the policy defining students qualified to register via the Web is developed and approved by the institution.

Possibly the most difficult principle is to "*keep multiple projects moving forward simultaneously when resources are scarce.*" Several projects on our list required immediate attention due to internal and external forces. As a member of the USG, DSC was required to implement a number of technology-based system initiatives. At the same time, the institution was faced with a multitude of operational issues associated with the recent implementation of the Oracle-based Banner Student and Financial Aid Systems. We divided our critical projects into three groups: (1) those required to conduct daily operations; (2) those needed to improve operations and decision-making capabilities; and (3) those associated with the development of new technologies to support current and future business strategies. Projects in all three categories were prioritized, and overall priorities were assigned. Resources were allocated to work on the highest-priority projects in all three groups. Adjustments in resources for each group of projects were made weekly based on project deadlines and on overall campus priorities, with two to four hours per week reserved for lower-priority projects. This method of managing the projects ensured that no group projects were left unattended and that scarce resources were allocated appropriately.

The final principle is to "*find and take advantage of win-win situations*"—a strategy commonly used in business and industry. The partnership with Gainesville College is an example of the use of this strategy. Since the two institutions are of similar size and operating philosophy, we have collaborated on a number of projects. This partnership has allowed both institutions to accomplish tasks that would be difficult to do if handled independently. OCIS has also utilized this strategy with the department's student workers. Students who want to work with hardware, software, networking, or other services provided by the department are given an opportunity to learn those job skills. If a student demonstrates the ability to acquire these competencies, he/she is given ample chance to put those skills to work through our help desk and other departmental projects. This process allows the department to undertake a wider array of projects than could otherwise be performed by the professional staff. The students gain valuable hands-on work experience, as well as job referrals and references from OCIS when they leave the institution. The importance of this strategy to small- and medium-sized institutions cannot be overstated.

I would like to report that this four-principle strategy was employed without problems or criticism at DSC, but that would be untrue. During our first year, almost every service provided by OCIS was favorably received by the campus community. I often refer to this as our "honeymoon period" and attribute much of this goodwill to the pent-up demand that had led to the creation of the department. By contrast, the second and third years of operation have presented a number of challenges, resulting in a few dents and scratches in the department's reputation. Overall, however, the department continues to receive a high level of support from the senior administration and the campus community as a whole. Our success in establishing this reputation has been due to a number of variables, including the availability of funding, the quality of the professional staff and student workers, and the consistent support of the senior administration. I firmly believe that the key contributor to the department's favorable reputation has been its accomplishments achieved as a direct result of the four principles of the planning strategy. If you haven't mapped out a strategy of your own for yourself, your department, and your organization, I encourage you to do so today.

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