The Four Pillars: A Framework for Improving IT Management

An agreed-upon framework of competencies expected of managers supports the IT organization in its role of change agent on campus

By **Anne Scrivener Agee**

As information technology becomes increasingly central to the teaching, learning, and research missions of colleges and universities, the expectations of the IT department's customers continue to grow at a rate that far outstrips the growth in resources to meet that demand. As a result, managers in the IT organization—from the executives to the line-level supervisors—are asked to do more with less, to provide well-trained staff to deal with an ever-increasing variety of technologies, and to anticipate and plan for change on an almost daily basis.

In such an environment, technical prowess is not enough to succeed, for the organization or the individual. Technology managers frequently discover that getting the job done through others requires a completely different skill set from the technical expertise that got them the job in the first place, a skill set in which they don't get much training. When a top-notch systems administrator is tapped to head the department, or an outstanding programmer is asked to lead the project team, their work days are suddenly filled with concerns about staff development, new state regulations, the intricacies of purchase orders, writing and presenting coherent reports for senior management, and creating disaster recovery plans. It's enough to make them long for a quiet cubicle and a couple thousand lines of code to debug.

If IT organizations want to succeed, it is in their interest to become proactive about developing and enhancing
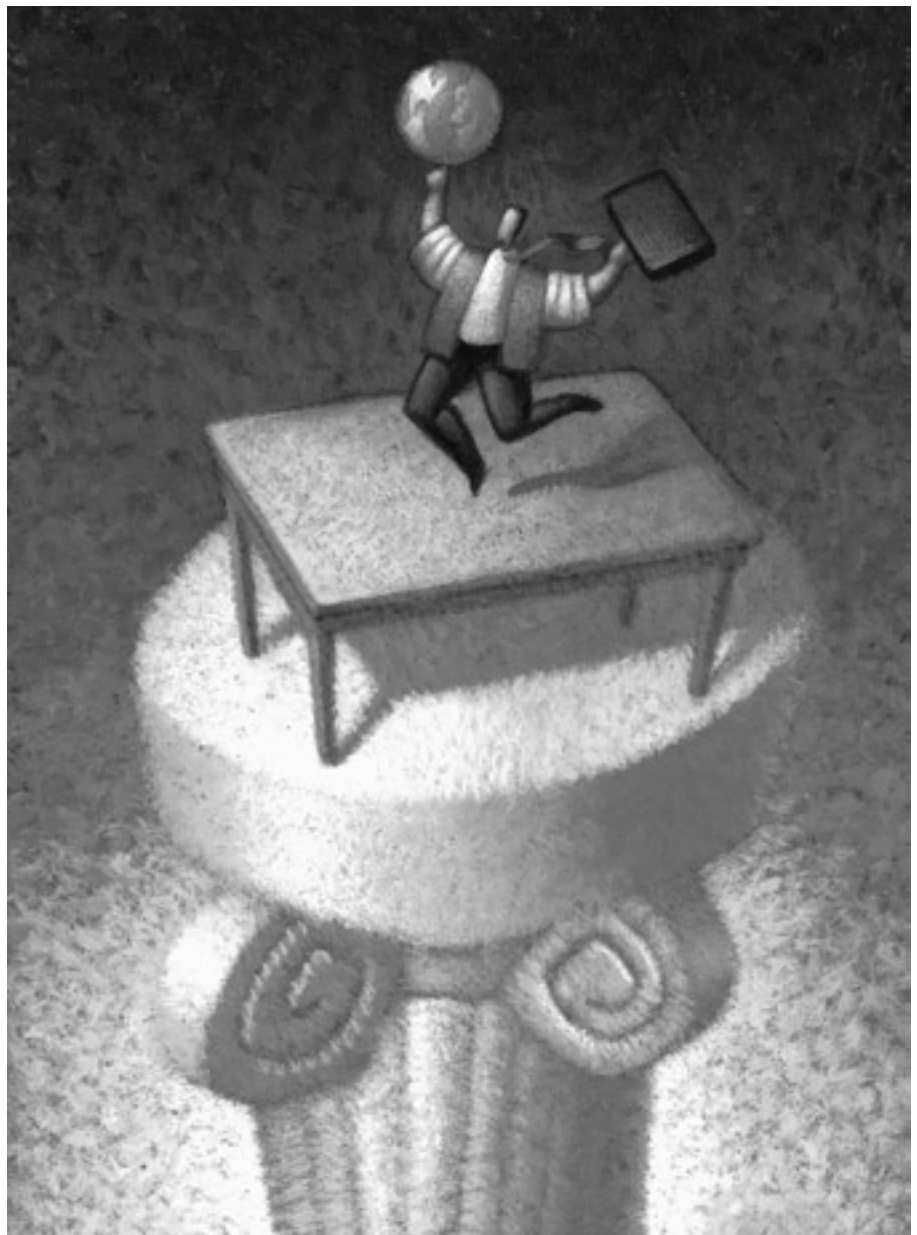
the management skills of the people who run their units. The Information Technology Unit (ITU) at George Mason University has made such a commitment. The ITU consists of nearly 300 professional staff and librarians and several hundred student workers on four campuses, with about 70 managers at various levels. For the past five years, the ITU has held regular management retreats and other professional development activities designed to improve management skills.

Articulating Expectations for Managers

In reviewing the outcomes from one such retreat in the spring of 2004, the CIO, Dr. Joy Hughes, concluded that overall management could be improved if the expectations of managers were more clearly articulated. She drafted an initial set of leadership and management expectations, which she then vetted with her senior management. She appointed a development team to drive the project forward with representatives from each of the ITU divisions—University Libraries, Technology Systems, and Instructional and Technology Support Services. Team members were selected on the basis of their organizational, analytical, and interpersonal skills. As deputy CIO, I agreed to chair the team.

Using the CIO's draft as a starting point, the team reviewed many existing compilations of managerial competencies, of which there is no shortage, and noted many common themes. They realized that the major challenge was not identifying competencies but rather engaging in a process that would ensure buy-in from managers throughout the organization. The team therefore spent considerable time gathering input from ITU managers as to the competencies critical to success and determining how these competencies could be expressed and organized in a comprehensible, usable, and valid way. The team decided that just presenting a long list of skills would be too daunting. The end result, after a year of research, drafting, and discussion, was a set of competencies entitled The Four Pillars, a workable—and

> **The major challenge was not identifying competencies but rather engaging in a process that would ensure buy-in from managers throughout the organization**

memorable—framework for a managerial development program.

The Four Pillars are

- Knowing the Organization
- Leading and Managing People
- Managing Resources
- Communicating Effectively

The Four Pillars Explained

Knowing the Organization involves developing knowledge and understanding of current policies and operating procedures to ensure that unit activities are effective and aligned with the larger goals of the ITU and the university. This pillar includes competencies related to university and Commonwealth of Virginia policies and procedures; the vision, mission, and goals of the ITU and the university; and the university's strategic plan.

Leading and Managing People entails developing skill in providing feedback and direction for staff, assuring the satisfaction of customers, and creating a collaborative environment that encourages initiative and problem-solving. Within this pillar are skills related to performance evaluation, staff development, team building and collaboration, and customer relations.

Managing Resources concerns understanding the tools and processes for planning to meet specific goals and place efforts in the larger context of strategic initiatives. This pillar includes skills in planning, project and budget management, information management, change management, and organizational performance assessment.

Communicating Effectively includes

building skills to foster smooth and satisfying interactions among staff and with customers. Here the competencies include managing meetings, listening, constructive feedback, effective presentation, and written communication.

To assist managers in setting priorities for skill development, the skills within each category are divided into two levels. Level-one skills require knowledge and understanding of basic concepts and procedures. Level-two skills require more experience, analytical thinking, or evaluation. All told, the Four Pillars include 109 skills important to managers.

For example, the Leading and Managing People pillar includes four categories: Performance Evaluation, Staff Development, Collaboration and Team Building, and Customer Relations. The level-one skills for staff development are:

- Identifies staff members' strengths and delegates tasks appropriately.
- Uses rewards and recognitions effectively to recognize staff contributions.
- Encourages professional development within resource constraints.
- Directs staff having difficulties with personal and professional life to appropriate resources.

The level-two skills for staff development are:

- Recruits, develops, and retains a diverse and qualified workforce in an equitable manner.
- Employs varied approaches to getting work done.
- Expands individual staff responsibility with assignments that increase discretionary range and scope.

For customer relations, the level-one skills are:

- Actively promotes the ITU Customer Service Guidelines.
- Uses a regular process of service evaluation from all customers.
- Identifies customers and understands their needs.
- Identifies customer concerns and collaboratively develops solutions.

The level-two skills for customer relations are:

- Analyzes customer input to improve services.
- Proactively anticipates customer needs.

■ Seeks continuous improvement in quality of services, products, and processes.

The full set of competencies is available online at <http://pillars.gmu.edu>.

Using the Four Pillars

Having identified a framework, the development team set out to help managers use the framework effectively. The team provided tools to support and models to illustrate various uses of the Four Pillars.

For instance, the Four Pillars Web site contains a competency planning grid to help with self-assessment or professional development goal setting. Using the grid, managers can rate their proficiency (from novice to master) in each category. (If they are exceptionally brave, they can ask their staff to provide upward feedback by rating their proficiency.) Similarly, supervisors can use the grid to work with managers to determine priorities for professional development. A sample section of the grid appears in Figure 1.

To foster integration of the competencies into hiring practices and performance reviews, the Four Pillars Web site shows a sample performance plan incorporating managerial competencies and a question bank of behavioral interview questions. These can help identify managerial candidates who possess the kind of competency sought for a particular position.

The development team also explored the online learning modules available at the university. They mapped specific modules to various competencies within the Four Pillars to make it easy for managers to use the online learning tool for their own development or to make assignments of modules to their staff members who want to improve their skills.

Finally, the team compiled an online matrix of resources for each of the Four Pillars. The matrix shows materials available on the Mason Web site, workshops and courses offered, online training available, print and media materials, and other resources such as state programs.

Benefits of the Four Pillars

For individual managers, the Four Pillars framework provides an opportunity to assess individual competencies, plan for professional development, rewrite position descriptions, and get feedback on performance. For the organization as a whole, the Four Pillars can help with recruiting managers who understand the expectations—because ads for managerial positions in the ITU can reference the Web site—and with orientation of new managers. The Pillars can also support more coherent and consistent planning of professional development activities for the unit.

As an organization, Mason's ITU has used the Four Pillars to identify topics for short presentations at monthly managers' meetings, as well as focus areas for day-long managers' retreats. In recent months, for example, the ITU managers' group has had guest speakers give a short lesson in writing effective nomination letters for staff awards, an introduction to project management, a plan for preparing

Figure 1						
Sample Section of Competency Planning Grid						
Competency	Level Achieved	Proficiency (1=Novice, 4=Mastery)				Development Plan
		1	2	3	4	
LEADING AND MANAGING PEOPLE						
Performance Evaluation	Level 1. Makes sure staff understand evaluation criteria and evaluation process; works with staff to articulate clear performance plans and goals.					
	Level 2. Works with staff to rewrite position descriptions and performance plans as organizational change occurs; follows up throughout the year to ensure that goals are appropriate and are being attained.					
Staff Development	Level 1. Identifies staff members' strengths and delegates tasks appropriately; uses rewards and recognitions effectively to recognize staff contributions; encourages professional development within resource constraints; directs staff having difficulties with personal or professional life to appropriate resources.					
	Level 2. Recruits, develops, and retains a diverse and qualified workforce in an equitable manner; employs different approaches to getting work done; expands individual staff responsibility with assignments that increase discretionary range and scope.					

for performance evaluations, and an overview of how to monitor online training.

In preparation for the managers' retreat in the spring of 2005, all managers were asked to identify the one area within the Four Pillars that they most wanted to learn more about. The top choice, by a wide margin, was staff development. The planning team for the retreat brought in a consultant to do a workshop on coaching that included a variety of activities, such as small-group discussion, simple writing exercises, and role-playing vignettes performed by actors from the GMU-TV Players to help the ITU managers improve their skills in staff development. The ITU managers felt that this retreat was the most successful of all similar activities the ITU had hosted because it directly addressed a priority they had identified and provided practical ways to take staff development beyond just sending someone to a training class.

Clearly, good management is not relevant only in the IT organi-
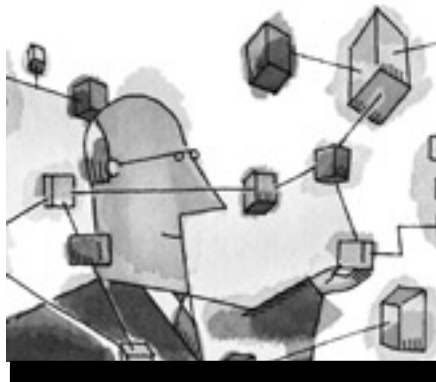
The particular skill sets included in the Four Pillars are probably less important than having an agreed-upon framework

zation, but perhaps it is more often overlooked there because of the natural tendency to stress technical requirements for jobs in that area. Articulating and sharing expectations about managerial competencies helps make them a valued part of the organization's culture, embedded in position descriptions and performance plans. Even for staff who are not managers, the Pillars provide a clear set of expec-

tations and resources for developing skills for management positions to which they aspire.

The particular skill sets included in the Four Pillars are probably less important than having an agreed-upon framework. George Mason University's IT managers had reasons for including all of these skills, of course, but that doesn't make them the perfect set for every organization. Other institutions might add or subtract skills or organize them differently. What matters is having an acknowledged framework on which the organization can build. An IT organization that clearly values good management helps staff members enhance their effectiveness and job satisfaction and positions itself to fulfill its role as a change agent within the university. At George Mason University, the Four Pillars help the ITU meet its potential in that role. *e*

Anne Scrivener Agee (aagee@gmu.edu) is Deputy CIO and Executive Director, Division of Instructional and Technology Support Services, George Mason University, Fairfax, Virginia.