A Learning Opportunity for Staff: Simulating an IT Department Review

Simulating an external department review at the imaginary Highhopes College gave IT staff at Skidmore College a very real opportunity for professional development

By **Justin Sipher** and **Gene Spencer**

Anyone who has served as an external reviewer of an IT organization can attest to the value of that experience. It not only offers an opportunity to help a peer organization but also provides a rich personal and professional development activity. In helping another institution, members of the review team learn about the challenges and possible solutions facing their peers. In addition, they can use the process as an opportunity to reflect on similar issues at their home institution.

Seeing another environment clearly, with nothing sugar-coated or hidden, is both fascinating and an invaluable learning experience. Because of your role as an outside expert, people at the host institution usually are quite frank, confiding their experiences, frustrations, hopes, and dreams. You do not have a stake in their political landscape, so people feel safe talking to you. They also believe your visit will have a real impact in addressing their ongoing concerns.

Unfortunately, few if any people working in our IT organizations have the opportunity to serve as a team member in a formal external review process. The request for assistance usually targets those in visible leadership positions, not the typical help desk analyst, application programmer, database administrator, network technician, or A/V special-

ist. Despite the lack of opportunities to deeply analyze another IT organization, those front-line staff might benefit most from participation in an external review.

While IT leaders generally recognize the value of various approaches to professional development, technical staff are usually most eager to build and refine the specific technical skills that closely affect their day-to-day responsibilities. On the other hand, many additional competencies (often referred to as soft skills, people skills, communication skills, relationship skills, political skills, or collaborative skills) contribute as much, if not more, to the success of an IT department in meeting its mission. Highly technical individuals too often view these critical competencies as a lower if not unnecessary priority.

Many of the problems uncovered in the typical external review are closely related to these other competencies—areas in which most organizations need to improve. What benefits might accrue if we could simulate the learning opportunity of a review process for more IT staff? What impact could this kind of professional development have on the effectiveness of an entire organization?

Skidmore College CTO Justin Sipher wanted to develop a staff professional development activity that would focus on the general issue of organizational effectiveness. He contacted Gene Spencer, whom he had met at the 2001 Frye Institute, for help.

Even an IT department of the best technical staff with top certifications and skills will not necessarily provide the most effective and appropriate IT environment for meeting the institution's larger mission. Improving effectiveness can significantly improve the organization's ability to meet larger institutional goals while also greatly increasing efficiency, improving workload, boosting morale, and enhancing campus satisfaction with IT services.

Sipher and Spencer agreed that the theme of organizational effectiveness could be explored in a workshop based on a peer review of a fictitious institution. Together, as explained here, we set out to develop a half-day program to take the 40 IT professionals at Skidmore through an experience simulating a standard external IT review.

Designing the Case Study

It was surprisingly simple to develop a set of parameters for the case study that would become known as Highhopes College. The organizational challenges identified in the case are typical of those encountered in higher education and have been experienced in one way or another at many institutions.

We set the scene at the fictitious Highhopes College as follows:

The CIO ("Carl") had been hired almost five years earlier from a neighboring university by the college's former provost, who gave him a mandate to "make a profound difference at Highhopes." While this was Carl's first position as a CIO (he previously served as the director of administrative computing), the search committee and campus administration felt he was well positioned to take this significant leadership step.

Unfortunately, Carl has lost some credibility with the new provost ("Paula"). The IT department is facing growing criticism from the faculty and students. As a result, the provost (who is still in her first year as the chief academic officer) is seeking help in improving the situation. Since she holds overall responsibility for IT for the first time in her career, Paula is concerned about the growing level of dissatisfaction being voiced by the campus community and the detrimental impact it may have on her strategic agenda for the college. The IT concerns are a major distraction for this new provost.

In the abstract, the issues raised are quite common. We tried to describe a situation not easily compared to Skidmore College because we wanted the staff to feel safe while engaging in deep conversations about the effectiveness of an IT organization. Nonetheless, parallels can easily be drawn between the case study and any individual institution—the themes are far too common. Obviously, Highhopes College does not intentionally describe a real institution; it simply reflects a combination of concerns existing at a wide variety of institutions.

To the extent possible, we designed the flow of the case study to parallel an actual review process. The review team would develop first impressions and then discover additional information as the process unfolded.

In the first step of the exercise, the participants reviewed a four-page document describing the initial contacts from Highhopes. The case started with a phone call from the associate provost ("Amanda"):

In the first call, Amanda briefly describes the situation at the college and for help with an external review that will benefit from "your outside perspective and expert advice." Apparently the new provost "had heard many of the faculty at her previous institution speak highly of the IT environment at Skidmore, and she would like to talk to you at your earliest convenience about a situation at Highhopes that concerns her."

Amanda sets up a call with the provost, who will describe the situation in greater detail. Paula is growing tired of spending far too much time on issues related to technology and needs to move beyond current problems such as the age of faculty computers and the unresponsiveness to classroom emergencies, as well as the overall lack of transparency in IT decision making. Students are concerned with service quality on the residential network. The library is frustrated with grossly inadequate technology and a "lack of true partnership from IT." Various members of the president's cabinet have expressed concern about the ERP system and the frustrations expressed by the frequently traveling staff in admissions and advancement. Everyone wishes IT would communicate more and that the campus had a good understanding of how decisions are made. In the face of such criticisms, Carl's staff understandably suffers from low morale.

Developing Initial Impressions

Based on the case study's descriptions of these early conversations, we asked the participants to discuss the issues in groups of five to six people

each. We designed the groups to mix the Skidmore staff across their typical organizational lines, and we asked them to "leave your titles at the door." Each group possessed the same initial information about Highhopes and was asked to develop their first impressions of the situation with the help of some thought-provoking questions:

- What can you tell from the information you already have?
- What underlying issues or structural problems can you identify?
- What additional information do you think you will need?
- Whom do you want to talk to on the visit?
- What can you identify as the major strengths and weaknesses of the IT organization?
- What should be the major areas of focus for the report based on initial observations?

After reading the overview, the groups quickly engaged in discussions of the issues as they saw them. We observed early conversations focusing on typical frustrations: lack of support from the faculty, a new provost who did not fully grasp what it meant to provide leadership for IT, insufficient resources to satisfy all campus needs, low morale, and a CIO not providing the appropriate leadership.

At the same time, the exercise clearly underscored the provost's perspective and described a conversation that frequently takes place at conferences of other professional groups (such as chief academic officers):

Paula has been perplexed for some time, and she recently asked for feedback from her colleagues at the Midwest Regional Deans Conference. Many there shared their own frustrations with the cost of IT, its lack of responsiveness to changing campus needs, and the faculty need for more support. In many cases, they noted the irony of an IT department that manages changing technology while appearing unwilling to change themselves. Finally, the theme of "insufficient communications from IT" is a complaint at nearly all institutions. Paula found a lot of emotional support from her colleagues at the conference but came away

feeling that the situation at Highhopes was much more distressing than she originally thought. Based on her comparisons, she believes that the Highhopes IT operation is reasonably well-funded and appropriately staffed. But why is Carl's organization experiencing below-average results?

As this sample text shows, the case provides a learning opportunity for the workshop participants to examine a situation from multiple perspectives, specifically those outside the typical IT organization. The provost's real concerns are difficult to dismiss when heard in the provost's own words. From her perspective, complaints from the faculty cannot simply be ignored because they will ultimately derail her larger agenda for the college. If nothing else, collegial conversations must bring these issues to a better level of understanding and institutional priority setting.

The case also makes another important point: an outside review team can develop a cohesive and rational view of the situation by simply listening deeply to the campus community, distilling the fundamental truths in what people say (and have been saying for quite some time). By showing a willingness to empathize with people's fundamental perceptions, concerns, and opinions, a review team can invite a level of openness rarely granted to outsiders. Highhopes College's problems might have been avoided if this "deep listening" were part of the IT organization's ongoing approach.

Experiencing the Campus Visit

At this point, the exercise turned to the review team's campus visit. Each group received a one-page overview describing the overall format of the onsite meetings and open forum sessions, the initial meeting with the provost and president to set the agenda, the need to hear from all interested parties, the need for a report that would be publicly distributed, and, above all, the need for strict confidentiality in the process. In addition, the issue of resources available to the IT organization was squarely addressed from

the viewpoint of the senior staff, who must carefully weigh the allocation of resources at the institution:

Sensitive to the fiscal realities in their environment, you indicated to the president and provost that your public report would not simply articulate the need for significant increases in resources (staff, space, budgets, etc.). Your review would first need to determine if the current resources were being most effectively utilized; from your early analysis, you believe they are not. Once they are more effectively managed, the college will be in a position to set priorities for the most important services. Only then could the IT organization make a reasonable argument for additional resources. The president and provost thanked you for your realistic approach, because suggestions that they "throw money at this problem" would have little impact other than stifling progress.

Next, each of the six groups received additional information that would have been gathered from their meetings during the campus visit. Unlike the previous phases, each group was not given the same information. Instead, each of the six documents focused on a different aspect of the overall IT environment. This approach provided a significant learning experience, as the issues presented were not those identified in the earlier assessments. Rather, we designed the separate documents to encourage everyone to think beyond the symptoms, making the point that existing organizational systems needed to be more fully understood as possible root causes of many of the prevailing problems.

These six key issues are fundamental to most external reviews and equally relevant for Highhopes. Each issue was briefly described in a two-page document, and the participants were given several thought-provoking questions to assist in starting the conversation that would ultimately result in each group's recommendations to the provost. The six key issues were:
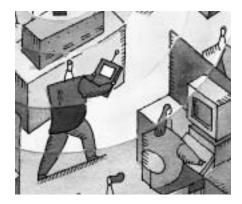
- *Organizational structure*: the former IT organization (prior to the CIO's arrival) and the structure that Carl

developed in response to the needs at the time.

- *Governance*: the IT reporting relationships within the campus hierarchy and the advisory committees in place.
- *Standards*: the technologies implemented for the community, the replacement processes, and the ways in which support is provided across constituent groups.
- *Administrative applications*: the new ERP system implemented by the campus under the leadership of the CIO, the retooling of skills, and the understanding of who "owns" this central system.
- *Organizational culture*: the IT reorganization (now five years old), changing leadership within IT, and the organization's varying views on leadership, customer service, performance management, and project management.
- *Academic innovation*: the current state of academic technologies, staffing to support front-line technologies (versus new innovations), interactions with other campus units that have seemingly parallel responsibilities, and the guidance of the Faculty Technology Committee.

Reviewing Results and Making Recommendations

Each group's presentation of findings made it clear that they had grasped the complexity of the overall campus situation and understood that the Highhopes environment could not be easily segmented into these six distinct issues. The groups identified ways in which the major elements of the college's environment spanned several of these key areas. For example, the consolidation and reorganization of staff and services upon the CIO's arrival (bringing together organizational elements that formerly reported to different vice presidents) was seen as playing a key role in organizational structure, organizational culture, and governance. Similarly, the institution's implementation of the new ERP system contributed to the discussions of organizational structure, standards, and governance, as well as the obvious consideration of administrative applications.

We intentionally designed the case to show how seemingly separate issues intertwine into a complex system. Fixing a problem in one part of the system can create consequences that unintentionally worsen the overall situation. Yet, the group's ultimate task was to recommend a course of action.

Time constraints in the exercise did not permit development of an actual report. Nonetheless, the group presentations centered on many common themes that would help the provost improve Highhopes College's situation. The groups also found significant areas of disagreement. They approached their separate areas from different perspectives, of course, and discovered during the process that the other groups received information that they did not have. While the time limitations did not allow us to work through these differences of opinion, the greatest lesson of the exercise might have been that the issues are not as simple as one might believe from a limited perspective.

Workshop Outcomes

We perceived the Highhopes College exercise to be an overwhelming success, as did the IT leadership team. The staff engaged deeply in the exercise and seemed to relish the opportunity to critique the environment at Highhopes College. As we had hoped, the exercise facilitated a conversation about organizational effectiveness in a safe environment while also providing a guide to discussing real issues within their own environment.

At the close of the workshop the group was asked to evaluate the effectiveness of the exercise. The participants indicated that they valued the opportunity to see the big picture of institutional perspectives at a similar institution. They also appreciated being divided into six different groups, allowing each to focus on a separate aspect of the issues at Highhopes. Because these groups spanned Skidmore's organizational boundaries, individuals who might not otherwise interact focused together on issues beyond their normal areas of responsibility. They also appreciated how one's perspective could change in such an exercise, as the original observations pointing to an ineffective CIO were not as conclusive as initially thought ("the cloud over Carl's head lifted significantly").

The group provided excellent suggestions to improve the workshop. First, they noted that the exercise could effectively use a full day (rather than the one-half day). They also requested an opportunity to better understand the disparate information given to all of the groups during the final breakout so that they could more fully appreciate the impact of otherwise unknown information. Finally, the group suggested that we incorporate more quotes from the key stakeholders in the breakout phase, or even consider adding simulated or taped interviews with "key members of the Highhopes community."

The overall experience was extremely positive and provided a foundation for further organizational work. Sipher and his leadership team are committed to sustaining the momentum created during the exercise. Their colleagues are more aware of the need to think broadly about their work, understanding that organizational ineffectiveness can seriously limit a department's success despite its dedicated and talented staff. Their organization can now move deep conversations from the safe confines of Highhopes College to the real world of IT at Skidmore College. *e*

Justin Sipher (jsipher@skidmore.edu) is Chief Technology Officer at Skidmore College in Saratoga Springs, New York. Gene Spencer (spencerg@ptd.net) serves as an organizational development consultant to higher education IT and library organizations. He is situated in Danville, Pennsylvania.