

Growing the Next Generation of Leaders

Aspiring IT leaders can take specific steps to develop their skills and help their colleagues grow

By **Rebecca Gould, Elizabeth Unger, and Annie Bacon**

Aspiring IT leaders need to be well-prepared for the interviews and discussions that are critical to landing that first real leadership job. They will be asked about themselves, their experiences, and how they see the future, and they will encounter some or all of the following kinds of questions:

- Why do you want this job?
- What do you see as your future in our IT organization?
- What are your strengths and weaknesses?
- What unique skill do you bring to our organization?
- How have you followed through on your goals?
- How would you communicate the process for handling a security breach?
- How would you decide to outsource an application? Walk us through your thought process.
- What is the next killer app?
- How would you grow the next generation of IT leaders?

Being able to answer these questions well and convincingly is an important part of the process of obtaining that first leadership job. Preparation for the role happens formally and informally as an aspirant's career develops. Education, job assignments, professional networking, and mentoring all contribute to the development of a new leader. Whether your organization grows talent internally or searches outside for

the next supervisor, manager, or CIO, everyone in the organization can participate in developing the next generation of leaders. We have some suggestions on how to help the profession, and your colleagues, grow.

Skills Needed

Many IT staff come from a technical or support background. Future IT organizations will need their technical background, but they will also be required to have skills associated with marketing, communication, budgeting, innovation, management, leadership, strategy, and vision. That means soft skills such as relationship-building will be as important as technical skills for future IT leaders. As one moves

into leadership positions, technology becomes less the focus—what's important are the organization and its mission, users, and IT as a strategic tool for solving problems. Being able to converse at all levels of the organization (with senior leaders, peers, and staff) in a common language that supports institutional objectives¹ is vital for personal and organizational success. Timothy Chester calls this environment a "strategic" culture,² but whatever the term used, this mindset needs to be articulated and modeled for future IT professionals and leaders.

The skills needed for the next generation of IT leaders include attributes necessary to success in any leadership position, regardless of the business or



discipline. All leaders should be able to think on their feet, learn quickly, and have the emotional intelligence to exhibit grace under fire. The next generation of leaders must also be able to solve cross-disciplinary problems, take ownership of issues, readily admit mistakes, and move forward. New leaders should quickly become attuned to the dynamic needs of the organization, including the goals and modus operandi of administrators and users alike. IT leaders must

- identify campus partners in strategic planning who champion the use of IT as a strategic business tool,
- energetically pursue new knowledge and technologies,
- develop a global perspective on higher education and the role IT can play, and
- understand the upcoming generation of both students and workers, as defined by their online personas and use of resources.

IT staff already possess the skills of scientists, technicians, process analysts, and knowledge workers, but future IT leaders must have business knowledge and skills as well. For universities, these include budgeting and financial management; understanding of the recruiting, admissions, and enrollment processes; understanding of faculty and institutional governance; knowledge of the institution's financial processes and situation; understanding of the research environment; knowledge of teaching and learning practices; outreach, and technology-transfer functions; operation of the physical plant, and much more. Why? Because future leaders must understand the organization's and users' needs thoroughly and intimately.

Future leaders might face extremely difficult management situations, including worst-case scenarios such as those at Virginia Tech in response to the shootings there or Tulane after Hurricane Katrina. To prepare for emergency situations or even for maintaining normal conditions in an environment of constant change, future leaders



need to be agile and ready to call upon both technical and leadership skills to deal with a crisis.

Our future leaders will also manage a multigenerational workforce, from those who understand main-frame computing to those who seek to harness the power of Web 3.0 to create an information-based communication environment. The new leader must learn to lead by guiding, listen without infusing personal biases, accept that risk and reward can be synonymous, and recognize that failure is sometimes inevitable.

Preparing Future Leaders

Current leaders must sustain an environment that fosters success, and not just because turnover among skilled IT staff is costly and disruptive. Future leaders will grow in an honest, trusting, and open environment. In an environment where the culture purposely cultivates staff and focuses on their development, mistakes can be made without reproach in the pursuit of innovation; the work is fun and challenging most of the time; and a work/life balance is encouraged.

Current leaders can build confidence in future leaders by providing pathways for them to achieve their next objective and by providing encouragement and guidance. Encouraging an aspiring leader to envision herself in a new position and providing some opportunities for brainstorming and role-playing can help an individual see the possible career paths that might be a good fit.

Mentors can work with staff not only to help them plan career paths and “learn the ropes” but also to smooth

out rough edges in non-confrontational ways. Supervisors unwilling to risk correcting or pointing out deficiencies or poor attitudes do a disservice to future leaders and their organizations. Current leaders need to help the next generation understand that they will not always be the experts; essential expertise might lie with their employees. As an additional benefit, staff who see others mentoring them and fostering their growth and development will be more productive and happier.

While a job search that ends in successfully landing a new position is usually cause for celebration, aspiring leaders should understand that *not* getting a coveted position might be a good thing. If, after looking at the management philosophy and style of the hiring administrator, you see that your style differs substantially, the choice was the right one for both of you. Also, being selected for a high-level position too early in your career might weaken your long-term development by “positioning [an] inexperienced professional to blunder into mistakes that should have been made at a lower level.”³

IT involves frequent and relentless change. The next generation of leaders must understand how change happens and endures and that over-communicating, building coalitions, and celebrating individual and team efforts⁴ are part of a successful change process.

Higher education is facing major changes, perhaps the largest since the post-WWII move to mass-production-oriented education. These changes are already evident in business and industry with the movement toward service-oriented mass customization. Higher education is next, and future IT leaders must be ready to support their institutions.

It seems like such a simple thing, but for future leaders there is no substitute for experience—the experience of meeting deadlines, sometimes missing deadlines, and having budgetary control for some aspect of the IT operation is crucial. They need to have given well-conceived and polished presentations in front of large groups, to have

communicated about highly technical issues in low-tech terms, and to have communicated effectively with members of the university community from custodians to chancellors.

Honing Leadership and Management Skills

Most CIOs and IT leaders agree that the community must work deliberately to develop talent among the IT staff, not wait for it to appear. However, responsibility for professional development also lies with the individual. There is no one right way for would-be leaders to hone their skills, but rather a multitude of strategies that will support a transition to leadership roles. The following suggestions are based on the authors' 80 years of collective experience.

■ Formulate a personal vision for the future of IT.

Vision and creativity are critical for leaders. Decipher what will be needed. Understand the role of IT in higher education and how IT can transform business practices—but remember, technology is never the issue. Work situations that encourage reasonable risk-taking bring the staff's creativity to the fore. Criticism-free thought sessions help those with latent ability envision solutions and strengthen that ability.

■ Master the concepts of technology transfer.

The transfer of intellectual property and prototype products from the institution to a commercial venue involves a broad collaboration with researchers or developers, sponsored projects, central administration, and others in the university. Technology transfer is often touted as important to institutional competitiveness. IT gets involved when the products include software, firmware, or hardware, or when the IT unit provides storage, computing power, or a robust network in support of the projects. Future leaders must understand intellectual property protection, nondisclosure agreements, contracts with development centers and incubation sites, data retention, manuscript embargos, and more.

With the rise of China and India as global economic forces, the concept of intellectual property as defined in the United States may change. Future IT leaders must remain cognizant of these changes and their potential impact on the institution's products.

■ Measure effectiveness.

The IT organization's accountability is increasingly important—to students, parents, faculty, staff, the central administration, the board of regents, the state, and so on. Strategic planning helps channel IT resources for the good of the whole university.

Measurements of effectiveness—typically time and money—are couched in terms of return on investment, along with quality and productivity metrics. As output measures to represent value are developed, you must be prepared to collect or manipulate data to meet those needs. You should understand the motivations for accountability and anticipate data and reporting needs for the central administration and beyond, including consumers of higher education and their parents.

■ Develop powerful communication skills.

Practice giving presentations, answering questions, and listening intently. Listening is one of the most-overlooked and neglected communication skills. Jargon and an overabundance of detail will bring communication with non-IT people to a halt. Learn to communicate effectively in common language, with common analogies, and concisely. These skills will help you attain your strategic goals for the organization.

■ Strengthen your emotional intelligence.

Daniel Goleman, in his analysis of outstanding leaders, found that emotional intelligence—characterized by self-awareness, self-regulation, motivation, empathy, and social skill—was twice as important as technical ability or IQ in achieving excellent performance.⁵ In the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, for example, the president of Tulane was routinely cited for his leadership

skills and use of technology to navigate through what appeared to be insurmountable obstacles to achieve recovery for his university.⁶ When faced with the impossible, future leaders must find a way to succeed. Emotional intelligence can help them, and it can be learned.

■ Articulate a process for decision making.

A host of tools exist to support and guide the process of making decisions, but no one tool is perfect for every situation. Part of decision making includes asking tough questions, collecting appropriate data, and using research, including market research, to make difficult choices. You can pull these elements together to establish your own process for making decisions.

■ Hone your soft skills.

Relationship management—building, maintaining, and repairing relationships, along with networking inside and outside the organization—is a critical skill. Practice your soft skills by chairing university-wide committees, handling conflicts among employees, and evaluating employee performance. Seek feedback to help you identify your weaknesses and address them.

■ Consider getting additional formal education.

Myriad degree and certificate options can expand your skill set and broaden your perspectives. In addition to traditional computer science, engineering, or ITS degrees that many IT professionals consider important, you could pursue nontraditional courses of study such as learning theory, business administration, or human resource management.

■ Get experience.

Experience matters when it comes to successful IT leadership. Just as IT leadership in the commercial sector requires an understanding of sales, marketing, or product development, IT leadership in higher education requires experience with faculty and students, an understanding of how higher educa-

Further Resources

Study the Occupational Information Network Resource Center and O*NET OnLine (<http://online.onetcenter.org/>) for comprehensive information on occupations, including key attributes and characteristics. For each job family, occupation, or discipline, the site offers a listing of job titles, tasks, knowledge, skills, ability, work styles, interests, and more. Read the descriptors carefully and use the data to identify necessary skills for your next career move.

To become well read and stay abreast of the field, consult the following:

Thomas L. Friedman, *The World is Flat: A Brief History of the Twenty-First Century* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2005)

Malcolm Gladwell, *Blink* (New York: Little, Brown and Company, 2005)

Seth Godin, *Small Is the New Big* (New York: Penguin Group, 2006)

Cynthia Golden, Ed., *Cultivating Careers: Professional Development for Campus IT* (Boulder, CO: EDUCAUSE, 2006), <http://www.educause.edu/cultivatingcareers>

Linda A. Hill, "Becoming the Boss," *Harvard Business Review*, vol. 85, no. 1, 2007, pp. 48–56

Eamonn Kelly, *Powerful Times: Rising to the Challenge of Our Uncertain World* (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson Education, 2006)

tion works, and knowledge of the issues and problems facing our institutions. Experience helps you identify what really matters. For example, spending time and money on e-mail for students when it has become a commodity service argues in favor of not providing it. Universities should also consider the recruiting value of VoIP, YouTube, and growing social networking sites such as Facebook and MySpace.

■ Read widely, and well.

Read the literature for the IT field, including peer-reviewed and popular articles. Discover the issues of the day and the future. Make sure to read the literature of higher education, too. A daily skimming of the headlines in *The Chronicle of Higher Education* or the various other news organizations is critical to staying on top of what is happening in higher education. Read outside the IT discipline, too, and consider the resources listed in the sidebar.

■ Keep abreast of the latest technology.

Take advantage of conferences, cor-

porate contacts and events, webinars, literature, and other resources. Participate in discussion boards, e-mail lists, and social networking sites with other people interested in a relevant specialty. Learn from consultants and vendors while maintaining a healthy skepticism. Understand the dangers in depending blindly on consultants and the need for diligence to avoid conflicts of interest and questionable business ethics.

■ Focus on the big picture.

Consider the way forward and how to add value to your institution, and to society, through the IT enterprise. Take a broad look at the impact and the role of your unit within the organization, the community, and society. What legacy will you leave at your institution? Consider this question often to assure that you are contributing to the organization and growing your leadership prowess.

Conclusion

So what is the next killer app? How would you make the decision to out-

source an application? How would you grow the next generation of IT leaders?

If we prepared our staffs (or ourselves) appropriately, the responses to these questions would demonstrate their skill and knowledge and provide a glimpse into their thought processes. They would answer every question by looking at the broader issues facing higher education. They would put their answers in the context of current tools, the state of IT, and business conditions with some insight into likely future events. And, they would probably be great hires as future IT leaders. *e*

Endnotes

1. S. Georgia Nugent, "The Ivory Tower of Babel," *EDUCAUSE Review*, vol. 42, no. 2 (March/April 2007), pp. 6–7, <http://www.educause.edu/ir/library/pdf/erm0724.pdf>.
2. Timothy M. Chester, "A Roadmap for IT Leadership and the Next Ten Years," *EDUCAUSE Quarterly*, vol. 29, no. 2 (April–June 2006), pp. 56–60, <http://connect.educause.edu/Library/EDUCAUSE+Quarterly/ARoadmapforITLeadership/39975>.
3. Carole A. Barone, "Timing, Transitions, and Careers," *EDUCAUSE Review*, vol. 41, no. 5 (September/October 2006), p. 144, <http://net.educause.edu/ir/library/pdf/erm06517.pdf>.
4. Rosabeth Moss Kanter, "The Enduring Skills of Change Leaders," *Ivey Business Journal*, vol. 64, no. 5 (May/June 2000), pp. 31–37.
5. Daniel Goleman, "What Makes a Leader?" *Harvard Business Review*, no. 1, 1998, pp. 93–102.
6. Scott S. Cowen, "Be Prepared; After Katrina: 2 Presidents Reflect," *Chronicle of Higher Education*, vol. 52, no. 33, April 21, 2006, p. B12(3), <http://chronicle.com/weekly/v52/i33/33b01201.htm>.

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