The global financial and economic crisis, which began late in 2008, has presented higher education with challenges not seen in generations. Endowments have fallen sharply. State funding agencies have announced deep cuts. Colleges and universities are responding to the recession with varying levels of budget reductions, hiring freezes, and travel bans. And the general consensus is that we are in this for the long haul, with further cuts and restrictions anticipated for the rest of 2009 and beyond.

Information technology units, like all other parts of the institution, are required to take a proactive approach to meeting these challenges. IT leaders need to respond directly and immediately to their individual campus situations. But IT leaders must also move beyond the short-term issues to make the most of the crisis situation and to take advantage of the opportunities presented—by examining business processes, making the right changes, and becoming more streamlined and more effective. Making cuts and adjustments strategically, and not simply responding with quick fixes, will be important to the long-term health of all IT organizations.

Campus leaders are also looking to see how IT can help the institution remain viable and competitive in the face of falling state subsidies, decreasing financial aid and endowment income, and increasing enrollments. The effective use of technology can enable better access to education, improved learning, and more efficient business processes and operations—all of which are important to an institution’s future. IT leaders must be prepared to think and act beyond the needs of the IT unit in support of the broader mission of the institution.

Today, the prevalent advice to “never waste a crisis” points IT leaders directly to the opportunity to develop stronger IT organizations. IT units are made up of people—people who are all living in a climate of uncertainty and, for many, worry and fear. These same people are the ones whose work, ideas, inspirations, and creativity are precisely what will help institutions not only get through this economic downturn but also thrive in the future. John Kenneth Galbraith said: “All of the great leaders have had one characteristic in common: it was the willingness to confront unequivocally the major anxiety of their people in their time. This, and not much else, is the essence of leadership.” Being able to motivate people to do their best and to contribute to the common good, when they are worried about losing their jobs and paying their bills, means that IT leaders must directly confront what is feared: the uncertainty of our times. It is human nature to expect the worst, to be doubtful. But IT leaders, by being confident in what they do and by maintaining a positive demeanor and a very clear vision, can inspire others to bring their best to the table.

To make the most of this crisis is to embrace and model the characteristics of outstanding leaders. IT leaders need to be optimistic and confident; this inspires others. They need to be positive yet realistic: staff need to understand both the good and the bad. IT leaders need to communicate often and with candor: being honest and forthright earns respect. They need to show empathy: understanding the situation of others can lead to better and more productive relationships. They need to delegate: a leader who tries to control everything not only will alienate staff in a crisis but also will get so bogged down in detail as to lose sight of the vision. IT leaders need to inspire and not command: this helps others to work from their own initiative. Finally, IT leaders need to understand that people want to feel valued and that when staff are empowered to apply their best work to the situation at hand, the institution reaps the benefits of their vast knowledge and ultimately becomes a better organization.

Good leaders will instinctively reveal the strengths, praise the successes, and build the confidence of the people with whom they work. These are the IT leaders on whom we will depend during today’s economic crisis—and beyond.

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