Aligning Expectations: 3-2-1

To highlight “views from the top”—both from the top of the institution and from the top of the IT organization—and to explore how the IT organization can best align with and support the institutional mission, this Leadership department column asks three questions of the president and three similar questions of the CIO.

Linda M. Thor, President

What 3 things should any CIO know about leading an institution?

First, the CIO needs to understand and fulfill the president's expectations, particularly as they relate to fulfilling the institution's vision and mission. Next, please—no surprises! Surprises can be especially disconcerting with issues that involve a financial stake. The solution is for the CIO to provide regular briefings and updates to the president on all technology-related matters. Finally, the CIO should bring the president ideas for improvements, ideally on a continuous basis. These could be information about new technologies or ways to streamline existing technologies. They could also take the form of innovations that could be implemented to reduce costs.

What 2 things does a president need from the CIO?

The CIO should learn to anticipate the president's needs. This would include the preparation of routine briefings about expenditures and equipment, plus updates about anything that could significantly affect the institution. Second, I would also encourage all CIOs to think more strategically about their role throughout the institution. For example, the CIO can suggest ways to positively influence teaching and learning through technology innovations. If there is going to be a technology update or conversion, what is the timeframe of the rollout so that students, faculty, and staff can be notified and adequately prepared? The president needs to know well in advance.

What is the 1 thing you would change in your institution regarding information technology, if you could change only 1 thing?

In an ideal situation, there would be better operability of technologies for more integrated communication across the entire institution. For example, personal productivity could be enhanced with seamless calendaring between remote sites or sister colleges. This requires both hardware and software solutions.

Edward C. Kelty, CIO

What 3 things should any president know about information technology?

Presidents should know at what level their IT department is functioning. Is it operational (i.e., just keeping things running), or is it a strategic partner (i.e., helping to transform the institution), or is it somewhere in between the two? If an IT department leans toward the operational end of the scale, a president shouldn't expect it to act like a strategic partner. If the president desires to move the IT department from an operational function to more of a strategic role, that will necessitate an investment of time, resources, and people. And like most investments with solid returns, the transition to a strategic IT department is a process that does not happen overnight.

The second thing the president should know is that it is important to model appropriate uses of technology for increasing personal productivity, for communicating, and for making data-driven decisions. This in turn sets the tone for the employ-
ces of the entire college or university. Regarding personal productivity, I’m referring to things as simple as knowing how to filter e-mail, using IM, or being proficient with a mobile device for prompt and rapid communication.

Third, it’s important for the president to understand the funding requirements of an IT department. Effective information technology requires the appropriate capital and operational allocations. Additional services and responsibilities cannot be added to an IT department without some corresponding resource allocations or a reduction of previously supported activities.

What 2 things does a CIO need from the president?
The CIO needs a clear direction regarding what the president expects of the IT department now and into the future—and in what format and how often the president wants updates on those directions. This may seem simple, but unless it’s discussed, both parties could have different expectations, leading to unnecessary friction and misunderstandings.

The second thing the CIO needs is for the president to understand the IT department well enough to have realistic expectations about what the IT department can and cannot do—not technically but on a higher level. Does the IT department have the ability to adapt and change to take on new initiatives? Does the IT department have the depth and breadth to support change without disrupting existing systems? Without this understanding, presidents won’t know when they can use their IT department to advance initiatives or when to look for other resources.

What is the 1 thing you would change in your institution, if you could change only 1 thing?
There will always be things that can be adjusted; however, at the moment, there’s no one big thing within the institution that I think requires substantial change. Several external factors—such as the economy and the reductions in state funding—are a concern. But I hope that in the coming year, the economy will start to stabilize so that we can continue to focus 100 percent of our efforts on teaching and learning.

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