LEADERSHIP (Views from the Top)

Strategic Partnerships

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.

Ronald K. Machtley, President

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

Leading an institution requires creating an environment in which a complex organization can function effectively and then empowering the institution to become the best in its class. The CIO should know there are three essential elements for leadership. First, there is no substitute for sound strategic planning. It is an absolute prerequisite for success. An institution's strategic plan must be well-defined, must be understood by the entire organization, and must have comprehensive ownership throughout the organization.

Second is innovation. The institution needs to cultivate the spirit of continuous innovation throughout the entire organization and sustain that spirit by making it part of the culture. The leadership team needs to appreciate that sometimes it's actually disruptive innovation that differentiates the organization from its competition and gains it the competitive advantage.

And third is talent. The fusion of talent with the organization's values and goals, the irreplaceable human capital, enables the institution to achieve its desired outcomes.

What two things does a president need from a CIO?

A CIO must be a creative leader and value-initiator, not a functional specialist. The CIO serves as a change agent to drive strategy, but the CIO also needs to be an active participant in developing the vision and strategy. Technology touches everything in the college or university, which gives the CIO an ideal perspective on how the organization can use technology as a tool to optimize program results and deliver increased business value. A CIO should be a force for change within an organization and be proactive in capitalizing on industry trends that open the door to new opportunities.

In addition, the CIO needs to serve as an effective advocate for the strategic value of IT efforts and investments. The CIO needs to develop appropriate business metrics for his/her portfolio of IT programs and services in order to convey their importance in giving the organization a competitive advantage. In today's budget environment, every investment must be considered based not only on its initial cost but also on the marginal return. With technology changing so quickly, it is often very difficult for a president to fully understand the value of a new IT investment, particularly when it will require multi-year updates.

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

The one thing I would like to have an influence over is our embrace of the ever-accelerating rate of change in technology. We live in an Internet-fueled era in which technology has a life span of about eighteen months. Our students were born digital and have grown up as savvy technology consumers; they're remarkably adept at navigating a steady stream of increasingly sophisticated tools. But not everyone is equally prepared for this rapid rate of change.

Technology now permeates the organization through many different channels and not just through the traditional IT channel. The “consumerization of IT” is what Gartner has termed it. What some of our constituents don't yet understand is that they need to become more proactive partners in their own grasp of emerging technologies and that the institution needs time to build an ecosystem that can adapt, integrate, and support any new technology as well as provide education and training to the campus communities.

Arthur S. Gloster, CIO

What three things should any president know about information technology?

First, the level of IT spending should correspond to the level of IT services. An institution simply cannot afford to under-invest in IT initiatives if it expects to move to the head of the curve—or even to maintain its current position on the technology curve. When that happens, a gap develops rapidly—one that is extremely difficult to bridge. The lost opportunities that ensue sometimes become the unfortunate legacy for an IT organization. A CIO should take on the role of cost-cutter, keeping a steady eye on well-managed budgets and improving processes that eliminate or reduce unnecessary costs. However, the CIO's counterpart role must be to lay the IT foundation for institutional innovation.

Second, matching IT responses to institutional challenges is an enterprise-wide effort. People, processes, and technology are all critical to solving institutional problems—but what is really needed is collaboration across all divisions within the organization.
Finally, collaborative partnerships with those industry-leading technology companies of choice will do more for positioning the institution out in front than will traditional contractual vendor relationships. True partnerships are a win-win for the institution and the industry, and these partnerships are key for maintaining the leading edge for both.

What two things does a CIO need from a president?
First, much of what a CIO does concerns short-term outputs and delivery today. What the CIO needs from the president is consistent support and the flexibility to invest time and resources in pilot and proof-of-concept initiatives that advance the long-term game plan. Not everything will be successful and ultimately return value to the institution, but when you want to find gold, you have to pan for it.

Second, we’ve talked about the institution making strategic investments in technology and about the critical levers for success being people, processes, and technology. There is another investment strategy the president must buy into: people. The president should understand that different organizations operate at different maturity levels. Guiding an organization through those different maturity levels takes ongoing commitment and resources. It’s not a process that ever really concludes.

What is the one thing you would change in your institution, if you could change only one thing?
Building the right kinds of relationships with everyone in an organization is always a challenge; it is also a journey to be worked on over time. The CIO needs colleagues to understand that he or she is on their side and working in support of their agenda—to see that the CIO’s goals are actually common goals. I’d like to be able to move my relationship with all of the university constituents to the level where they truly believe that and become sponsors of the cause. The CIO is responsible for a service organization and is reliant on strong relationships to support the organization’s forward momentum.

President Machtley has developed strategies that encourage his senior staff to work together in achieving goals shared among the vice presidents. This ensures a spirit of cooperation and team-building across areas of responsibility, leading to the success of the IT department as well as other units of the university. In a career spanning four decades, I have found that a CIO is most successful reporting to a technology-savvy president—such as we have at Bryant.

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