Leadership for Constant Change

This issue of EDUCUSE Review focuses on leadership and celebrates leaders in the higher education IT community. Leadership can exist at all levels of an institution or organization. It does not come from a job title, nor is it self-appointed.

Leadership is adaptive: as the environment changes, so must leaders. Constant change may sound like an overused phrase, but it describes our world and higher education. We do not yet fully understand the meaning of the shift from an analog to a digital world. We believe that education is essential for individuals and society, even though we do not yet know how to provide enough education of sufficient quality at adequate scale to meet the need. Traditional financial models are unsustainable. Work, productivity, and employee-employer relationships are being redefined. In spite of all the challenges, the author Jim Collins argues that this may be “normal” rather than the “new normal.” Uncertainty and chaos are more common throughout history than is the calm we experienced in much of the twentieth century.

Particularly in times of constant change, we look for leaders—and try to understand what makes a leader. According to the writers in this issue, good leaders have similar traits: strong values, a variety of experience, analytical capability, and discipline.

Leaders catalyze change, not for the sake of change itself but for the sake of preserving fundamental values. A starting point for any leader is knowing who you are and what you believe in. Michael McRobbie, president of Indiana University, reminds us of higher education’s three missions: creating knowledge, disseminating knowledge, and preserving knowledge. This belief in the value of higher education underlies the commitment of all the leaders in this issue. CIO Bruce Maas states: “For me, higher education is a calling, [with] stewardship expected of us by students, parents, and the public.” That belief is essential. As Ronald Heifetz, Alexander Grashow, and Marty Linsky note in The Practice of Adaptive Leadership, there is no reason to exercise leadership or to take the risks involved unless one cares deeply.

Leadership also requires a variety of experience. CIO Michael Ridley observes that the different backgrounds of IT leaders nurture the expertise and skill sets that are essential for success. The other participants in the panel discussion similarly cite the value of the interplay between their degrees and the range of their experiences. Indeed, in uncertain times, it may be the diversity of experience that allows people to see alternatives and new models.

Heifetz, Grashow, and Linsky state: “The answers cannot come only from on high. The world needs distributed leadership because the solutions to our collective challenges must come from many places.”

Analytical capability is also cited as critically important. Setting the right direction, or developing the most effective plan, hinges on data and analysis. Collins illustrates this point in his book Great by Choice by contrasting several myths with his findings. For example, he asserts that it is a myth that successful leaders in a turbulent world are bold, risk-seeking, creative visionaries. Rather, “they observed what worked, figured out why it worked, and built upon proven foundations.” Also, successful leaders aren’t always fast in their actions; they “figure out when to go fast, and when not to.”

Values, experience, and analysis morph into leadership when combined through
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discipline. Keith McIntosh quotes Colin Powell: “A dream doesn’t become reality through magic; it takes sweat, determination, and hard work.” Leadership requires discipline to take the best from traditions, history, and opportunities and create the future. Although leaders may not need to know everything, they need to understand how things are related. And discipline is required to balance individual strengths with organizational needs. CIO Theresa Rowe uses the term “competency portfolio,” which refers not just to recognizing and developing individual competencies but also to understanding and evaluating the strengths and weaknesses in the IT organization.

Finally, as McIntosh posits, leadership means helping other people do their job well. Leadership often takes the form of making a difference through others. He suggests a question all leaders should ask: “What is your leadership legacy—what have you done to further the IT community within higher education?”

We must take the best from our traditions and our experience so that we can adapt to constantly changing circumstances. Leadership is about more than power or authority. It is about values, experience, analysis, and the discipline to change what we need to change. As Collins notes: “We cannot predict the future. But we can create it.”

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