Grit

What does it take to address the 2013 top-10 IT issues and be a CIO? Grit.

Grit, it seems, may be as essential as intelligence.1 People with grit persevere. They have a passion for their goal. They invest effort, in spite of setbacks, to accomplish long-term goals—goals they believe are worth having. A person with grit approaches accomplishment as a marathon; their advantage is stamina. Excellence and achievement take time. New skills must be developed.

In this issue of EDUCAUSE Review, University of Nebraska–Lincoln CIO Mark Askren writes about the CIO career: “Information technology matters . . . a lot . . . . The opportunities for CIOs to make a difference at their institutions have never been greater. This is the IT position that drives change, makes investment decisions, collaborates with regional and national leaders, and ultimately shapes the future of technology integration.” Askren quotes Tracy Schroeder, Vice President of Information Services and Technology at Boston University, who states that a CIO needs “some courage, even stubborn hope.” In a word, being a CIO takes grit.

Grit is required because there is so much at stake. In the article on the top-10 IT issues for 2013, the EDUCAUSE IT Issues Panel observes: “Presidents, chancellors, and provosts are eager to use technology to help inform and transform postsecondary education.” The panel lists four strategic priorities for information technology:

1. Contain and reduce costs
2. Achieve demonstrable improvements in student outcomes
3. Keep pace with innovations in e-learning, and use e-learning as a competitive advantage
4. Meet students’ and faculty members’ expectations of contemporary consumer technologies and communications

Achieving any single one of these priorities would be a tall order. It isn’t just that each one represents a large, complex issue. It is that so much of any solution depends on factors outside the CIO’s control. But grit is all about persisting in the face of challenges.

Addressing today’s IT issues—and today’s higher education issues—requires many of the competencies that higher education and management programs are designed to develop: critical thinking, problem-solving, analysis, and decision-making. Creativity and innovation are also needed, along with a range of interpersonal skills such as leadership, teamwork, collaboration, and communication. Some of these interpersonal skills may be linked to what Paul Glen and Maria McManus, the founder and co-founder of Leading Geeks, call “contraxioms”: contrasting axioms that give rise to different worldviews. In their article in this issue of EDUCAUSE Review, they explain: “For technical people, work is all about solving problems . . . . Non-technical people, on the other hand, tend to think that work is about achieving a vision.” The authors say that “geeks and non-geeks” need to collaborate more if colleges and universities are to face their challenges.

Beyond competencies and interpersonal skills, institutions are looking for individuals who have a set of intrapersonal competencies. For example, people with a “growth mindset” believe that their ability and competence will grow with effort. They realize that there will be bumps in the road, but they believe that with persistence and effort they will achieve success. Those with a growth mindset also tend to worry more about improving their ability than about proving it. They value learning over looking...
Perhaps developing this “growth mindset”—which distinguishes those with grit—should be a key focus of professional-development programs.

Finally, CIOs must have a passionate belief in the importance of higher education. Askren quotes Kevin Morooney, Vice Provost for IT and CIO of the Pennsylvania State University: “Even on the toughest days, I go to bed knowing that good and important things happened that day for Penn State, the state of Pennsylvania, the United States, and the world. That’s not just fluff—it’s the truth. The painful days still make a positive mark on the world. And the great days? I can hardly imagine any feeling more joyous than to have an uplifting day at a place that is making the world better.”

To realize our vision of higher education in the connected age, not just CIOs but the IT profession as a whole will need grit. In this connected age, data, collaboration tools, and communities can come together in ways never before possible. Independence is giving way to interdependence. But ensuring that our future is better than our past will require tenacity and perseverance—in short, grit.

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