“Something Completely Different”

Many of you may recognize the title of this column from the first Monty Python’s Flying Circus movie (I am a fan). Here it refers to my somewhat tortuous path through the labyrinth of higher education during my transition from professor to the central IT organization. “Let me explain” (from the movie *The Princess Bride*, of which I am also a fan).

I received my PhD in Mechanical Engineering in 1978 from UC Berkeley and joined Colorado State University (CSU) as an Assistant Professor in Mechanical Engineering. I tremendously enjoyed teaching and research, and I served part-time as the director of WESTNET from 1985 through 1996, when WESTNET ceased providing networking services. In 1996, I returned to teaching and research full-time. However, in 1997, another opportunity presented itself, and I moved on to the central IT organization, which suited me well as I had become enamored with technology. I provide below some of the insights and wisdom I have garnered, mostly from others, during my IT odyssey.

*Never let your technical people rule your policy space.* This is the first lesson I learned from my predecessor: a CIO makes decisions based on functional, institutional needs and not based on technology. Technologists should provide advice on how things are done, or best done, and not so much on what is to be done (unless, of course, something is impossible, in which case they should help define the possible).

*Call in OEO immediately.* This is another lesson from my very wise predecessor. In any instance where inappropriate conduct *may* be involved, call in the Office of Equal Opportunity immediately and let them deal with it—never try to deal with such issues internally.

*The most important thing we do is hire exceptional people.* Hire smart, capable, and self-motivated people first, and hire excellent technologists second. There is an old adage that one “hires on competence and fires on attitude.” I had this backwards early in my career, much to my regret. I since learned to hire only those who have the best attitudes to fit into an exceptionally talented and productive department.

*The best expenditure of your time is on the best people.* I have learned to spend most of my time, energy, and effort developing, encouraging, and nurturing our best people, yielding the greatest benefits from time invested. Productive people produce the most and best results; trying to deal with “problem” employees can be very nonrewarding. Conventional wisdom is that in a state-classified personnel system, it can take up to two years of assiduous and strenuous effort to terminate an underperforming employee, and some have hung on for a decade or more. Of course, terminating a really bad employee can tremendously improve morale and productivity in a single department, so wise choices must be made as to when that threshold is crossed.

*“Group think” and trust are wonderful things.* If you hire the best people, getting a group together to analyze and strategize often exhibits a “whole that is greater than the sum of the parts,” deriving from diverse opinions (being careful to ensure that “group think” is not “same think”). A CIO’s best approach in a group is to ask the right questions parsimoniously, at the appropriate times, to ensure the meeting stays reasonably on track. It is very important to “get and stay out of the way” when things are going well. However, you must always be cognizant not to let “the perfect get in the way of the good.” A CIO should define “good enough” and have staff move on to other, more important activities when the “good enough” threshold has been exceeded.

*Know the difference between a boss and a leader.* It is said that the difference between a boss and a leader is that a boss says, “Go,” whereas a leader says, “Let’s go.” An experienced leader ensures that everyone knows the reasons for going, and a truly wise leader makes the staff think that going is their idea.

*Generally, you get what you ask for.* We generally do get what we ask for, and my experience is that we often do not ask for enough. Asking for extraordinary effort for specific projects, even extended projects such as ERP implementations, is a tactic to be used when needed and is a good culture to engender in staff. But also be cognizant to avoid burnout.

*Minimize complexity.* I learned this two-word summary of a CIO’s job from my friend Kelly McDonald at Brigham Young University. Wonderful!

*Take good risks.* All too often in higher education, we try to avoid risks. After three or more implementations of major administrative IT systems, I have learned that any approach involves risks. A better approach is to realize that there are good risks and bad risks. Rather than avoiding risks, we should seek out good risks. I try to do a thoughtful risk assessment and to accept risks institutionally and personally rather than paying a lot of money to pass risks on to a vendor (the “one throat to choke” risk-avoidance syndrome).

*Find solutions.* I strive to bring solutions, not problems, to the table. I try to solve problems by bringing the right groups together to address problems, seek solutions, reallocate budgets, and “suck it up” in my own unit, whenever possible. I never “cry wolf” and have earned great credibility with the upper administration at CSU because of this attitude. When I do ask for something, they know that I have done my best to...
“make do,” and that I have exhausted all alternatives before asking for their assistance (think budget requests).

Earn bona fides. Having bona fide credentials (e.g., an earned doctorate) and rising through the ranks in the professoriate lends a great deal of credibility when interacting with faculty. I am “one of them” (sometimes I have to remind them gently of this), and I understand their stresses, pressures, and individuality.

Do something significant every year to make faculty more productive and/or more effective, and let them know about it. This one is self-explanatory.

Ask three questions. I consider Peter Drucker to be perhaps the greatest management theorist of all time (I used to teach Drucker’s approach in my mechanical engineering classes). He urges any manager to periodically ask three questions:

1. Are we doing the right things—that is, are we proceeding along the correct strategic path?
2. Are we doing things right—that is, are we operating as efficiently as possible, are operations effective, and how can operations be improved?
3. What can we stop doing so that we can start doing more of the right things and do the things we are doing better, where most needed? In higher education, it is deucedly difficult for us to stop doing anything, but if we don't, we lack sustainability and are unable to modernize our operations.

I ask “Drucker’s Three Questions” of my managers annually, sending them and their lieutenants off-campus to a one-day retreat to answer them. This is our way of ensuring continuous improvement in our environment.

Follow three rules. These are not absolute, even though I refer to them as rules. Instead, regard them as guidelines, but always do what is best for the institution, even if doing so violates one of these rules:

- Rule #1: Never give up revenue, but also be completely transparent; do not hide budget information.
- Rule #2: Never give up cost savings; instead be completely transparent and ask to repurpose it.
- Rule #3: Never give up space; instead be completely transparent and ask to repurpose it.

Optimize your mistakes. Avoid making big, expensive mistakes for initiatives that are extremely significant by spending enough time convening the group, collecting information, analyzing, and especially, checking with peers. For initiatives that are less significant, where mistakes are not as debilitating, spend far less time, but always check with peers. When a mistake is made, acknowledge it, conduct a postmortem, and learn from it.

Heap praise. Praise your staff to the point of being silly. For example, I have been known to stand before them and deliver a “mile-high salute,” extolling their virtues. But always be sincere (they can tell), and do not overdo it.

Measure outputs, not inputs. The outputs should be measured as close as possible to the point of service, the end point.

Consider all sides. My mentor Tom Gorell advised: “Remember, there are at least two sides to every story.” When analyzing issues, ensure you explore all facets and collect facts. Then, write the facts onto a whiteboard, and get the participants to agree on them. Finally, after making a decision based on those facts, explain your rationale for the decision.

Do what you can, with what you have, where you are. These words from Teddy Roosevelt are wise and brave words by which to live, manage, and lead. Another exposition of this principle is, “Be the best that you can be.” Manage and operate within your means, consistent with institutional culture, commitment, and resources. Do not ask for resources out of bounds for your institution. And then sleep well at night with a clear, unalloyed conscience. At the same time, ensure you innovate, to be the best that you can be (see Drucker’s third question).

During my IT odyssey, I have been truly blessed to work with wonderful people, who do amazing things, and contribute to the overall benefit of my institution. Finally, I note that my title also encompasses “dean of libraries”—but that is another story, for another day.

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