Meditations of a CIO Yogi

My first CIO role, at the University of San Francisco, was unexpected both for me and, I think, for everyone around me. Brought about by very sad circumstances that I won’t describe here, my new position was trial by fire, sink or swim, or whatever metaphor of that nature one might choose. So to get help, I took the very first opportunity that came my way: a new/prospective CIO pre-conference seminar at the EDUCAUSE annual conference that year.

Along with ideas about focusing on outcomes, triaging urgent issues, and communicating effectively, one message stuck with me most clearly about the CIO role: if you want to maintain your integrity and do what is best for the institution, have your resume ready and don’t expect to stay long, at least not in any one place. Granted, what I heard may not have been exactly what was said; I was feeling pretty insecure at the time. But this message was the tenure for a CIO in industry was three years on average, as well as by my own observation that five years was a good solid tenure in the ranks of higher education leadership, and ten was exemplary.

So I wondered, how long would I last? Would I make it through three years? Five? I found it hard to think beyond that. I worked intensely—I don’t think I slept for the first two years—to both put out fires and stay afloat. My motivation was threefold: commitment to my institution’s mission; excitement about the opportunity to stand up for our work, which fortunately overwhelmed my personal worries on an almost daily basis; and (I admit) fear of failure. And something surprising happened.

Seven (!) years went by. Both improvements and mistakes were made, but overall, there were more of the former than the latter. Then one day, I received a call from another higher education institution (actually, from the recruiting firm for that institution), wanting to explore the possibility of my coming there as CIO. I had already been in my current job longer than I expected, and here was an opportunity to intentionally double-down on the surprising assignment I had been given years earlier. After many family conversations and the proverbial gut-check, I took the opportunity. I have now been working with a similar drive for nearly another six years.

Still, as the end of my fifth year passed, I started to wonder: What happens next? Is my credibility spent? Do I still have what it takes to be in this position? How has the role changed since I began twelve years ago, and have I kept up? Am I running out of steam?

Around that same time, I took up yoga. Hot yoga, to be specific—I guess I just prefer to make things as difficult as possible. In my second class, the instructor commented that she had been doing yoga for ten years when, one day, she tried the triangle pose in a new way (keeping her outside hip pulled in). This variation opened up the pose for her in a way that changed her practice. She emphasized that new things can be learned at any point if you just stay in that hot room, looking for an opening, with calm determination and focused breathing. Even after practicing yoga for thirty years, you won’t know it all. There will always be a challenge, always something new to learn.

Hearing this, I had a very geeky thought: maybe IT leadership can be like yoga. IT leadership is not a sprint, but it’s also not a marathon. It’s a process of continuous change, exploration, and discovery made possible only through discipline, commitment, and boundless energy. Some days the best you can do is show up and stay in the room. Other days, if you are looking for it, you may find a new opening and break through.

This is not an either/or argument, however. I am not saying that my first IT leadership training was wrong, because it wasn’t. What I am working on learning now is how to sustain the integrity that comes with a fresh perspective, even as my perspective becomes more mature. Sustaining the newness is just as important as gaining the insight that comes from experience.

This year, I have been asking myself a question posed years ago, by a seasoned CIO, on the EDUCAUSE CIO mailing list: “What would the new CIO do?” Having been at his institution for a while, he challenged himself with that question, and he recommended the experience to others. Asking myself this question has helped me to step back and take another look, and has even changed my approach at times. In some cases, the reasons why I should not do what the new CIO might do are abundantly clear; in other cases, the path in a new direction is equally clear, if challenging.

While we speculate about the evolving role of the CIO in higher education—whether CIOs should or will become chief...
digital officers, managers of utility services analogous to facilities operations, or (most likely) some complex combination of both—we need to consider how we can sustain ourselves and grow as leaders. How do we cultivate patient, statesmanlike good judgment while remaining willing to make dramatic change? How do we lead from a sense of possibility rather than from a fear of failure? How do we stay in the hot room—and it does get hot!—with calm determination, and focused breathing, long enough to find the opening in ourselves and our organizations?

Perhaps by giving some time to these questions, we can also gain new insights into the kinds of support that our IT team members need to sustain their energy, commitment, and calm amid the calls for change coming from many directions. They need us to lead not only with our words, but also with our example.

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