The Next-Gen IT Leader

By Brandon Bernier

Brandon Bernier is the recipient of the EDUCAUSE 2015 Rising Star Award, which recognizes higher education IT leaders whose records reflect ongoing and exceptional growth in contribution to the profession and increased levels of leadership and responsibility. The award is sponsored by Moran Technology Consulting, an EDUCAUSE Silver Partner. Bernier received the award for his development of innovative service models; for collaborative leadership in establishing professional development opportunities; and for cultivating effective teams and partnerships to advance technology and its impact in higher education. Bernier is Director, User Services, Division of Information Technology, at the University of Wisconsin-Madison.

The old saying is true: What got us here won’t get us there. Higher education is experiencing significant disruption, and those of us in the profession are watching as institutional models that have existed for centuries are coming into question and as colleges and universities look to adapt to an ever-changing landscape. Accountability demands from legislators, taxpayers, parents, and students have risen to new levels while costs for institutions continue to rise as well.

In his EDUCAUSE Review article “The New Leadership Challenge,” Michael Kubit, deputy CIO at Case Western Reserve University, highlights the collision course ahead for the IT field: the higher education landscape is changing radically at the same time that a large number of CIOs are planning to retire in the next five to ten years. Many in the IT community agree with Kubit, who asks: What will happen when our current leadership ranks retire? How will we as a community find the next generation of leaders who will help guide and influence not only our IT areas but our campuses as a whole? Kubit correctly states: “IT leaders must develop a new set of skills.” This is important for current leaders, but it is even more critical for the next generation of IT leaders.
Leadership @ All Levels
As we move forward to face our challenges and innovate new opportunities, we will need help from leaders at all levels of our IT organizations. Many in our professional community share the perspective that leadership is not about a title but is, rather, about a series of disciplines, characteristics, actions, and perspectives. Leadership can take place at all levels—from front-line staff to managers to CIOs. Imagine how great we can all be if together, we are acting as leaders on our campuses.

Those in leadership roles and those aspiring to be in those roles should consider that much of leadership is about role-modeling, on a daily basis, the behavior that you want those around you to embrace. This applies not just to top IT officials. All team members have the ability to affect everyone around them, including the campus partners they work with and the customers they serve. As we look to develop and support the next generation of IT leaders, it will be important that as a community, we role-model behavior so that others can see we not only talk the talk but also walk the walk.

Mission-Focused
We are privileged to work in an environment where what we do has such a dramatic impact on our campuses, our states, and our society as a whole. Every day in information technology, we help students to achieve success in the classroom, we enable faculty to make great discoveries, and we support our colleges and universities to reach the citizens of our states and countries in ways that weren’t possible before. What we do matters, and that is a powerful statement. Now, more than ever, it’s important that aspiring and future leaders focus on these perspectives. Over the next decade, budgets will continue to shrink, accountability demands will continue to rise, and the ongoing pressure to do more with less will only increase. In times like these, we need to focus on the right things instead of trying to focus on everything.

As we move forward, we can no longer concentrate on technology for technology’s sake or provide enterprise services that act as a utility. We require more leaders who will put additional emphasis on how information technology can enable our colleges and universities to reach their academic, research, and outreach goals. These leaders will need to find ways to embed themselves within the faculty and student ranks to ensure that we are developing and delivering solutions that meet current and future needs.

We also should remember that one of our main purposes in higher education is to develop students who can become successful in their future endeavors. We must continue to find ways that IT community can enhance both the classroom and the out-of-classroom experience for students. This starts with academics and the learning environment, but it extends to other realms including student life, housing, career services, and student organizations. Additionally, our ability to provide students with jobs and internships in areas ranging from traditional technology roles to business and education can be valuable as a way for students to gain experience, while also connecting all of us as professionals in a deeper way to the mission of what we do.

Next-gen IT leaders will need to find ways to innovate and develop services that align to the mission of the higher education institution. Developing and tracking metrics in new ways that highlight our impact on the mission will help to ensure that the right things are being measured and valued. We will need to evolve our thinking on traditional IT metrics that take into account what is valued not just by our operations, but by the perspectives of students and faculty. This also applies to how we design solutions and innovate for our campuses. We need to be working with our students and faculty and designing solutions that enhance their ability to excel and that do so from their perspective.

If new leaders are able to see this perspective and translate it into tangible outcomes, information technology will be seen as a valued partner.

Giving Great Service
Providing good customer service is not a new notion in the IT organization. However, IT practitioners are often stereotyped as not always being the best in this particular area. Yes, we have great network speeds, we can deliver 99.99 reliability, and our helpdesks have low abandonment rates, but as we move forward, those are now the baseline requirements. Our campus communities will require a higher level of service. Next-gen IT leaders will need to shift their thinking from traditional perspectives to ones that include many of the soft skills that are important in dealing with people from various areas both on our campuses and beyond. Our communities require great experiences not just with our services and solutions but with our people and in all of our interactions.

What if we shifted our focus from providing great customer service to simply giving great service? At the University of Wisconsin–Madison, we have engaged with ZingTrain (http://www.zingtrain.com), a training facility in Ann Arbor, Michigan. ZingTrain encouraged us to change to this new mindset. The trainers encouraged our teams to shift from focusing on those communities we have traditionally labeled as our customers (i.e., faculty, students, and staff) to a mindset in which we view everyone with whom we interact as our customers (i.e., each other, our peers, campus partners, vendors). This engagement with ZingTrain led off an 18-month customer service development program called ServiceU, and we now have more than 125 full-time staff with a new outlook focusing on giving great service.

When we start to concentrate on giving great service, the effects can be powerful.
We begin to see things more from the perspective of those with whom we interact. This assists in our gaining a better understanding of their requirements as we build solutions and experiences, it increases the number of our relationships and builds rapport across our campuses, and it enables us to ensure that we are meeting the right needs of our institutions.

Ultimately, we as an IT community should strive to be a provider of choice, so that our campus communities use our services and interact with our people not because they have to but because they truly want to. Over the next decade, the amount of choices regarding technology for our campuses will continue to increase at astonishing rates—ranging from new cloud ventures to next-generation learning management tools. Our campus communities will look to us to help them sort through the new offerings, manage the associated change (both technical and personal), and learn how to use the plethora of new tools and apps. This is an exceptional opportunity and one that we shouldn’t take for granted.

It is important to note that if we aren’t careful, some campus stakeholders will start to question our value. They will ask about outsourcing and about choosing other providers they think might be able to do our job cheaper or better. Although these are good questions that should be asked by any institution seeking to be prudent and a good steward of resources, we need to ensure that we are the provider of choice and that we can differentiate on our people giving great service.

Collaborative Relationships
When we as a technology community look to find answers to problems occurring across our campuses, we often find that we are all dealing with the same issues. That is part of what makes groups like EDUCAUSE so powerful. When EDUCAUSE brings people together, there is a dynamic synergy that leads to the sharing of best practices and ideas on how we are working through very similar issues at institutions both small and large. Part of the beauty is that in groups like this, we come together as a community and work together. However, when we are back home on our own campuses, we too often try to go it alone, developing solutions that mirror what others on our campus or other campuses are already doing. We work in our silos and don’t leverage the power of the team as much as we can, and should.

Anyone who has worked collaboratively with other people for any period of time knows that relationships are currency but that they are not always easy to start or even maintain. Building relationships requires trust and the ability to be OK with not always getting 100 percent of everything we want. In his popular training materials and book The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People, Stephen Covey uses the metaphor of the “emotional bank account” into which people need to make deposits in order to later take withdrawals. This is a great way to think about the relationships on our campus. We should be making continual deposits into our relationship “accounts” across campuses and not just taking withdrawals by contacting our colleagues only when we have an issue. Too often, we see colleagues focus on the operational portions of their job and forget that it takes time, dedication, and a purposeful approach to build lasting relationships.

True collaboration is difficult. It requires compromise and the ability to have empathy and see things from others’ perspectives. As IT practitioners, many of us are used to dealing in absolutes: ones or zeros, right or wrong, decentralized or centralized. This mindset does not always lend itself to collaboration. As we go forward as a community, we will have to shift our focus and ensure that we are collaborating so that we can meet the financial and other demands impacting our institutions. This will mean that we’re not likely to get 100 percent of what we want; we may have to settle for 80 percent if doing so helps to gain acceptance of a solution. Often cited in Six Sigma and continuous process improvement training is the change formula pioneered by Norman Maier: Q = A (User Acceptance) + E (Effective Business Result). This formula helps to highlight that the best technical solution or service will be effective only if we are able to gain acceptance from our campus communities.

In higher education, we are uniquely positioned to be able to collaborate both across campus and across institutions. We don’t necessarily see each other as competitors but, rather, as colleagues who are willing to share ideas and partner. The many examples of successful multi-institutional collaborations include HathiTrust, Kuali, and Unizin.

Next-gen IT leaders will need to be purposeful about engaging various segments of their campus communities (both inside and outside of the IT organization) to build trust, form relationships, and engage in true collaboration.

Professional Development Toolkit
In times of change or ambiguity, the development of leaders becomes even more important. Thankfully we have organizations, such as EDUCAUSE, that can help to provide training and opportunities for staff to gain needed skillsets. EDUCAUSE offers a wide array of workshops, conferences, and publications that can help the next generation of IT leaders to build their professional-development toolkits. These development opportunities are very beneficial for staff and can be even more powerful when paired with campus hands-on learning experiences that give participants a place to practice what they learned.

Strengths-based leadership is also a great discipline for next-gen IT leaders. The StrengthsFinder 2.0 book and assessment provides a unique way to evaluate individuals and discover their strengths. Based on Donald Clifton’s work in the area of strengths-based psychology, the basic premise is that individuals will develop and be much more successful if they play to their strengths instead of trying to compensate for their weaknesses. Although this can be done individually, the assessment can also have good effects if done with others on a team: the team members learn about their strengths as a group and how they can leverage each other’s strengths to achieve their goals.
Professional development also occurs through exposure to new teams, committees, campus projects, and other hands-on opportunities. We need to continually push ourselves, and others, to participate in these opportunities that are beyond our traditional comfort zone. It is often those experiences that push us out of our comfort zone where we learn the most. We should encourage staff to participate in new projects and campus committees so that they can get additional experience, further develop their interpersonal skills, and gain exposure to other areas of the institution. CIOs and senior leaders should continually look for, and in some cases create, these opportunities so that staff can acquire the necessary skillsets and perspectives.

**In Summary**

One view of the current landscape of higher education information technology sees a time of change and increasing complexity. Another view sees a time of great opportunity. As leaders of our institutions question the traditional models, next-gen IT leaders will have an opportunity to innovate and to create ideas and services that meet new demands and challenges. To do so, they will need to ensure that they are mission-focused, that they work with their organizations to give great service, and that they build collaborative relationships across institutions.

On all of our campuses, if we set the right foundation now, we will ensure that the next generation of IT leaders will be prepared to lead our IT organizations—and our higher education community—for the challenges and opportunities of tomorrow.

**Notes**


© 2015 Brandon Bernier. The text of this article is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International License (http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0).