7x4: An IT Leadership Philosophy

I remember taking a leadership class in which the instructor told us that we should have a firm grasp on what our ethics are. She said that we would be faced with an ethical decision at some point and then would not be the time to have to decide what was ethical. I agree wholeheartedly. I also think the same preparation is called for around a leadership philosophy.

Early in my career as a higher education chief information officer (CIO), I would tell people in the IT department what I expected of them, but I did so often as a stream-of-consciousness spread over weeks, months, or years. The information was passed out whenever an event occurred that brought one of my pet peeves into sharp focus. At some point, someone who worked for me told me I should write them all down, and then he did so for me. At this point, “Wayne’s 7&4” were codified.

These days I share my leadership philosophy—my “7&4”—with my direct reports during my first meeting with them. I point back to these leadership principles as the people in my department and I get to know one another. In this way, there are no surprises about the things that are important to me. My “7&4” consists of 7 thoughts about IT leadership and 4 thoughts about professional success in general. This leadership philosophy is something that has grown and changed over time.

These 11 points are mine; they come from a background and experiences that are unique to me. I encourage you to put some thought into the things that are important to you—your style and your view of the role of the IT department and the technology leader. Once you have your philosophy, write it down and share it with the people you work with. Then live that leadership philosophy through your actions. The people you lead will watch what you do after hearing what you say.

Wayne’s “7&4”

7 Thoughts about IT

1. Remember that customer service is at the top of our list.  
   ■ Be responsive.  
   ■ Don’t bounce a support call; personally hand it off to the person who can assist.  
   ■ People are frustrated when they call. Don’t frustrate them further by giving them the runaround.  
   ■ Remember: we are here to help.  

2. Perform executive-level service for executive staff.  
   ■ Don’t view this as “kissing up.”  
   ■ I have to ask people for money, support, resources, etc. This is much easier to do if they perceive the IT organization as being customer-focused and valuable to the organization.

I joined an IT organization that had told the college president that he could not have a certain kind of phone. This same group had also told the provost that she could not have a printer on her desk. This lack of service was performed in the name of IT “standards,” but all it did was alienate the IT organization from the leadership of the college. This lack of customer service was part of the reason the college leadership decided to do a CIO search and hired me.

3. Communicate, communicate, communicate.  
   ■ Typically, IT professionals don’t do this well.  
   ■ Lack of communication is the number one—bar none—complaint about IT departments and their leaders.  
   ■ Communication is easy to do and makes customers feel so much better about potential solutions to their problems.

4. Create an invisible foundation of technology that is “bullet proof” and always works. Functional improvements and innovation should be layered on this foundation.  

I’ve joined IT departments that were engaged in producing some whiz-bang technology while core systems were failing regularly. We have to get the core systems right before, or at the same time that, we move on to implementing the latest and greatest technology.

5. Establish healthy technology governance.  
   ■ Functional system leadership, training, and support should be led by the functional area.  
   ■ Partner with functional area leaders as they propose a fix or system.  
   ■ Keep the IT organization aligned with the institutional business.  
   ■ Support the mission of the institution. We exist for no other reason.

I could fill another article with examples of IT department leaders who took on the role of functional system leadership...
and allowed the functional area leaders to abdicate their role in our partnership. I recently sat in an academic leaders meeting in which an advising tool was demonstrated by two IT leaders. The tool was not designed well and required a manual to use. The feedback from the academic leadership was fairly harsh—and justifiably so. The tool had been developed with academic advising input and feedback, but when the criticism started flying during the demonstration, the academic partners on the project were very quiet. As Tacitus said, “Success has many fathers, but failure is an orphan.”

6. Do good things for a reason.
   ■ There are lots of “shiny objects” out there. Do these things contribute to the mission of the organization as viewed by the functional areas?
   ■ Is there a functional need for the solution? Don’t be a solution looking for a problem.
   ■ Our mission is to educate students who can then improve their lives. Our mission is not to implement and support technology.

   It is very easy for IT professionals to lose sight of the bigger mission. I find that it helps to get a reminder that the primary mission of a college or university is educating students who will graduate and improve their lives and society.

7. Take care of your people; you get little done by yourself.
   As a technology executive, I attend a lot of meetings, but I don’t perform the real work in the IT department. The people who do the work are at the front line, and if they are not taken care of, the real work won’t get done.

4 Thoughts about Professional Success
1. Do a fantastic job.
   Being a member of a professional organization is wonderful. Attending professional development courses is great. Serving on committees is helpful. However, if you don’t do a fantastic job first, none of these extracurricular activities will mean anything.

2. Do well what typically isn’t done well.
   Stand out! Every profession has stereotypes, and there are several for IT professionals: not being able to communicate; being introverted; not being social. Pick out some of these stereotypes, and work on them. Be the IT leader who is outstanding interpersonally or who delivers polished presentations.

3. Professionally support the IT organization in other departments.
   Volunteer to serve on committees outside of the IT organization (after you are already doing a fantastic job).

4. Support the organization in other ways (civic and social).
   For example, attend the annual institutional fund-raising event or show up for the after-hours meet-and-greet for the new provost.

In Summary
Leadership is one of the most important parts of an IT executive job. Take some time to give it some thought and decide what is important to you as an IT leader. After you do, write down your leadership philosophy and share it with those you lead.

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