M ost of us in higher education IT roles are accustomed to thinking about our work as strategic and beneficial to the overall good functioning and core priorities of our institutions. That’s certainly true of our projects to improve major systems and services. Any effective CIO needs little prompting to state the top priorities the IT team is focusing on, at any given time, to keep the institution in a strong position with respect to information technology. But in an age of ever-increasing demands on technology and ambitious expectations for digital transformation, the what of our work is only half the story. The how matters as well for the constructive and sustainable change we are often trying to enable in our projects, services, and strategic plans. Here are five practices that not only support successful IT operations but also enable the resilient collaboration and partnership that is essential to strategic success within IT teams and across the institution.

1. **Build a culture of institutional citizenship.** This is a seemingly obvious approach that takes consistent effort and focus to sustain. You start with the goals of the institution, the current priorities, and the big questions in play. From there you explore the ways in which different people across the institution are grappling with them. What do campus partner groups want to accomplish? What new innovations are emerging in the curriculum? How are partners in alumni relations, career development, and co-curricular programs connecting to each other and to students? What kinds of questions do institutional research colleagues want to answer? What can the experiences of the IT team bring to bear? Where do IT team members have common ground with colleagues in other parts of the institution? Answering these questions is not the sole province of the top IT officer or the IT senior leadership team. Engaging the full IT team in regular discussion of these questions—within the IT organization and in cross-disciplinary groups—can lead to better-informed and aligned plans for the IT service portfolio.

2. **Define guiding principles.** What will determine how you make decisions in your work? What will you focus on in the event you have to choose between options or move away from familiar practices? What approaches do you need to follow to address institutional goals? Defining a few key guiding principles will help you communicate clearly and consistently about what’s most important to accomplish in your project, program, or service. For example, in moving from an older system to a new one, you may define guiding principles around the degree of configuration or customization you want to allow. If you are developing an institutional practice of data stewardship, you may have a guiding principle of defining a clear system of record for key data elements. In operational contexts, you may have a guiding principle of solving higher-order problems to the fullest degree possible, rather than simply resolving the same repeated problems more quickly. Once these guiding principles have been defined, you can use them to help with decision making and to prompt constructive conversations at times when the work is not fully aligned with the principles that have been agreed upon.

3. **Be intentional about shared team context.** Talk together about what’s important in a project or service from the perspective of different participants and users. What does a good day look like for the members of the team? For different users? What does a bad day look like? What’s the one problem that would be a huge win if solved? How does what you’re providing or working on fit in the daily experience of the user? What pieces have to fit together for everything to go well for the user? For your team? Who’s paying attention to how those pieces fit together? As you talk through the answers to these and related questions, you can develop a holistic picture of your context and how effectively the individual and collective work of your team is positioned for what you hope to achieve.
4. Identify and manage key dynamics proactively. In most settings, the people involved in a project or service know that a couple of potentially challenging dynamics are likely to surface at one or more points along the way. Perhaps the challenge is a long-held frustration over the length of time that has elapsed without attending to a particular IT need. In some cases, people may be reluctant to move away from an outdated plan because a lot of hard work went into its development, even though conditions or expectations have changed. Maybe the team members don’t have full confidence in their mastery of a new technical approach. Perhaps a working group is larger than it needs to be because some stakeholders are concerned that sitting in is the only way to be represented in key deliberations and decisions. Naming these dynamics as early as possible, and working with team members to define clear strategies for monitoring and managing them, can help keep related issues from having a disproportionate impact on the team’s work or outcomes.

5. Clear the path for good work to get done. Teams and partners are most effective when there is a clear commitment to mutual success. Make it a shared goal to check in regularly on how things are going. Set a tone of openness, giving colleagues an opportunity to ask questions, discuss approaches, or express constructive differences of opinion. Identify where teams need help to make progress, providing or advocating for “air cover” to offer support when necessary, and establish a norm of raising concerns proactively if there’s anything making it difficult to get priority work done. Draw regular connections to the bigger institutional picture and guiding principles, and never pass up an opportunity to celebrate great work and give credit! These small examples of operational mindfulness will go a long way toward fostering a sense of forward progress and collegiality.

In following these practices, those of us in IT roles can strengthen how we go about our work and, in doing so, increase the chances of ongoing success and effective partnerships. And in modeling these practices in cross-functional teams with others across our institutions, we can develop shared ways to manage through the complexities we all face in our work from time to time. This positions the IT team for an additional kind of strategic contribution, moving beyond the what and enabling the how of collaboration and partnership.

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