The Trust Equation

From 2006 through the summer of 2012, I had the privilege of leading a highly talented and complex IT organization at Harvard Business School (HBS). Through a dedicated focus on communication and sound management, we cultivated a high-functioning, high-quality, innovative team.

Throughout my time leading the IT Group (ITG) at HBS, we had a tremendous amount of success, but with the imperfect nature of technology, we still faced unexpected failures. Though we understood this was sometimes inevitable, in our environment—where we strive for “five 9s” (99.999%) of uptime—it bothered us nonetheless. This concern grew exponentially when we considered how central technology had become to the process of delivering education. There is no room for in-class technology failures. Interruptions of this kind can prove highly detrimental to the teaching and learning experience.

The right processes and structures play a role in minimizing these types of interruptions. For example, embracing an ITIL (IT Infrastructure Library) framework, adopting software-development models like Agile (http://www.agilemanifesto.org/), and hiring smart, adaptable staff are all necessary and important. But they are not always sufficient to protect against the unknown. This becomes even more evident when an organization operates very different businesses across an institution. A one-size-fits-all approach does not always work. HBS ITG offers software development, user support, web and intranet services, IT operations, and educational technology services to our campus partners. These functions have various needs and cannot always be supported by the same standards.

With this in mind, we sought to identify ways to work against these unexpected factors and come together to combat them before they caused roadblocks for us as an organization and for our partners across campus. In doing so, we were able to identify a common language that ITG now uses as a guiding principle for its internal and external interactions.

A Case Dissection

In the spirit of HBS, we brought the 130-plus members of the team together to dissect this issue in a case review of our recent successes and failures. Our goal was to take an outstanding organization and make it even better. Through this lively discussion, we identified key factors that made us successful and those that contributed to our challenges.

It became clear that although our goal was to drive quality within our service delivery, the enabling mechanism was built on active trust. As we explored this notion further, we began to see that true trust is the result of many interactions over time. In essence, it is the sum of our interactions with each other (and our campus partners) that either builds or degrades trust. Diving deeper into this concept, we identified three core tenets that enable us to build trust:

- **How we communicate.** This piece of the equation is measured by the ways in which people communicate with each other. For optimum trust, communications must be accurate, crisp, and timely. This is critical to ensure that we relay the right information efficiently and in a time frame that allows all interested parties to react to and process it effectively. As individuals, we also must listen to our teammates and partners so that we truly hear and correctly interpret what it is they are asking of us.

- **How we commit.** As members of an IT organization, we constantly make commitments to ourselves, our teams, and our partners. Honoring these commitments is a crucial factor in achieving high levels of trust. We must deliver on our commitments when we say we will, and we must deliver what we have agreed to accomplish. Even more important, we must deliver a final product that reflects the fit and finish our community expects. Delivering on time is critical, but not sufficient. We must also make sure that the delivery meets the desired business need in a way that helps the users do their jobs. In crafting the delivery we must, first, negotiate features and concentrate on those most valued by the requestor.

- **How we approach honesty.** Honesty is essential and plays across all the core tenets. As we collaborate with one another to achieve our goals and fulfill commitments, we must do so directly and reliably, showing we are accountable for the work being delivered. We must make sure that we are upfront about roadblocks. We must own up to our mistakes and commit to correcting them. And we must have the courage to stop the delivery if there is a possibility that quality is being sacrificed.

Through this discussion, the organization arrived at what we call the ITG Trust Equation (see below), which ties together all of these critical factors.

$$\text{Trust} = \sum_{t=0}^{\infty} (\text{Communication} \times \text{Commitment} \times \text{Honesty})$$
Why Is This Powerful?

This shared concept and supporting language gave ITG members a vocabulary through which we could govern our interactions and from which we could hold each other accountable. The Trust Equation also offered a non-threatening mechanism to guide conversations when members were not living up to the organization’s standards of quality. In essence, it provided a more friendly and constructive backdrop for ITG to monitor and correct our own behavior.

Having everyone involved in the creation of the Trust Equation contributed to its adoption because the concept belonged to everyone. As a result, it grew organically with support from across all ITG teams. In the months following its conception, teams began to use the equation as a measurement of their actions. They sought to live up to the equation and to use it to make the best decisions for HBS. Often an individual would point to the Trust Equation and ask other team members if the decisions being made fulfilled the equation in a way that honored our promises. As I reflect back on my time at ITG, I can see that the Trust Equation allowed an already high-performing organization to take itself to the next level in a constructive, fun, and powerful manner.

I’m not saying that every organization should use this formula, but having gone through this experience, I do believe that all organizations need to have an honest conversation to identify their strengths and weaknesses. Without this knowledge, it is impossible to proactively address challenges and effectively overcome roadblocks. Through this discussion, establishing a shared language and framework—one by which the organization makes itself accountable for successes and failures—can have a tremendous impact. Embracing these concepts across the organization will help everyone move forward.

Stephen J. Laster is Chief Digital Officer, McGraw-Hill Education. He is Editor of the EDUCAUSE Review Viewpoints department for 2012.

© 2012 Stephen J. Laster. The text of this article is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivs 3.0 License (http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/3.0/).
Good Ideas

Creating PowerPoint Screencasts Using Camtasia Studio

"Flipped teaching" supported by screencasts created from multimedia-enriched PowerPoint presentations enables instructors to facilitate learning and avoid sage-on-a-stage teaching. »

Is Your IT Organization a Marketing One?

Unless your IT organization is working to market itself, it could be losing ground to untested competition even with continuing improvements to its services and offerings. »

Partnering to Create Service Blueprints for Award-Winning IT Support

Service partnerships are about people and relationships, communication, and trust. They should not merely replicate processes but also take into account technical, political, cultural, and strategic implications. »

Digital Portfolios in the Age of the Read/Write Web

Creating digital portfolios published online holds enormous potential in pedagogical terms, increasing academic achievement, intrinsic motivation, student autonomy, collaborative learning, and digital literacies. »

GoSoapBox Classroom Response System Engages Students

This case study explores the implementation of GoSoapBox in classes that seemed too small to need it. Both the instructor and students found it engaging and useful. »

Online in November at » educause.edu/ERO
How would you describe your software provider?

Hear why your peers are choosing Jenzabar.

jenzabar.com/forward

“Forward thinking”  “Entire student lifecycle”
“Answer to a problem”
“They actually listen”
“It’s about the relationship”

Selected by more schools in 2011 than any other SIS vendor.*

We believe in the transformative power of learning. Through online, social and mobile technologies, students have access to individualized learning experiences that engage and nurture their curious minds. Together we can ensure that students stay learning, for life.

BREAK THROUGH

Be sure to visit Pearson at EDUCAUSE Booth #1243!

Don’t miss these sessions at EDUCAUSE:

- If Not Now, When? Challenges Facing American Education
  Wednesday, 2:30 – 3:20pm
  Mile High Ballroom 2B/3B
  Adrian Sannier
  Senior VP of Product, Pearson

- The Many Opportunities of Open
  Wednesday, 3:40 – 4:30pm
  Meeting Room 404
  Clancy Marshall, Pearson
  William Muirhead, University of Ontario Institute of Technology
  Jeff Seaman, Babson Research
  Cory Stokes, University of Utah

- The Quest for a University-Wide Digital Content Management System
  Thursday, 9:10 – 10am
  Meeting Room 304
  Patricia Bassett, Palm Beach Atlantic University

Follow us on Twitter: @PearsonLS

© Pearson, 2012. All rights reserved.