Leadership Lessons I Learned from

Diana Oblinger

By Timothy Chester

At the end of May, Diana Oblinger will step down as President and CEO of EDUCAUSE. She’s had an incredibly successful run, and both the IT profession and higher education have benefited as a result. Under Diana’s leadership, EDUCAUSE has excelled—as evidenced by the association’s continued growth in membership, community participation, and influence. But Diana’s most enduring legacy will be the profound effect that she has had on the lives of higher ed IT professionals. Diana’s impact on higher education will continue to be felt over the next decade, or perhaps longer, through the work of the IT leaders she has nurtured and supported.
Leadership Lessons I Learned from Diana Oblinger

I count myself in that group. Whatever success I may have enjoyed these past years is due, in no small measure, to some of the lessons that I learned from observing Diana's leadership and working with her. In particular, four leadership lessons that I learned from Diana have become a critical part of how I approach my work, the IT profession, and the field of higher education.

The first lesson I learned from Diana is that strong and successful leaders set and clarify a compelling vision for others. This type of vision helps individuals understand their role in responding to opportunities and challenges while also placing their work in the broader context in which it occurs. This is especially critical in difficult and fast-changing circumstances. Diana outlined this compelling vision right at the start of her tenure as EDUCAUSE president. The dire straits of the economy in 2008 provided imperatives supporting change for both the IT profession and the field of higher education. Diana's view consisted of two interconnected thoughts: (1) that the focus of the IT profession needed to shift from developing and supporting technology to understanding and explaining how individuals can use technology to deliver value; and (2) that there was a significant need for change in higher education, with IT leaders having a key role to play in reinventing what higher education could become.

I first came to know Diana personally in the fall of 2008, when I served as the chair of the EDUCAUSE Quarterly Review Committee. The EDUCAUSE Annual Conference was being held in Orlando, Florida, and Diana had been president for less than a year. That fall was an especially turbulent time, as the economic crisis was in full swing, destroying endowments and threatening the viability of many colleges and universities. Responding to the crisis required leaders at higher education institutions to make very difficult choices. For the first time, my generation of IT leaders faced the fact that we would need to make decisions that would negatively impact significant numbers of employees and their families. During the committee meeting at the EDUCAUSE Annual Conference, it was my duty to introduce Diana, and in doing so, I mentioned the economic crisis and asked her how the need for expense reduction in the near term might require EDUCAUSE to adjust its agenda. Diana didn't miss a beat: she maintained that the economic challenges facing colleges and universities were, in fact, a symptom of the larger need for change in higher education. She stated her belief that contrary to the hopes of many, the economic crisis was not a temporary blip and that we shouldn't expect things to return to the previous sense of “normal" anytime soon. Diana advocated that this was ultimately an opportunity to leverage technology to increase both the reach and the impact of higher education—and that, despite short-term challenges, this was actually an opportunity for IT leadership and IT innovation.

Diana was correct in her prognosis. And over the next seven years, EDUCAUSE delivered a set of creative new programs as the association focused on the strategic use of technology. Initiatives such as the Next Generation Learning Challenges (NGLC) have led to positive, lasting changes through innovative uses of technologies that connect students to faculty and to one another. These programs are the result of the strong, compelling vision that Diana laid out at the beginning of her presidency, a vision that focused on the need for change in both the IT profession and higher education.

The second lesson I learned from Diana is that successful leaders create a culture that supports the development of strong teams that work together to deliver on a strategic vision. EDUCAUSE enjoys broad, inclusive, and transparent stakeholder participation. This high level of affinity among the membership, as evidenced in conference attendance and participation in working groups, has been key to the association's ability to deliver on its strategic vision of rethinking higher education through more innovative uses of information technology.

The field of higher education is large and diverse. One of the trickier challenges for EDUCAUSE has been how to balance the sometimes competing agendas of research-oriented institutions with those of regional institutions, private liberal arts schools, and community colleges. Under Diana's leadership, EDUCAUSE has balanced the needs of these different stakeholder groups quite well. The broad spectrum of constituent and working groups reveals strong representation from all of the different types of institutions that the association serves. This diversity extends to international participation. Rich and diverse collaboration across the entire community of members has been key for programs such as the EDUCAUSE Learning Initiative (ELI) and has led to advances in the fields of educational technology. Inclusiveness and collaboration are the hallmarks of Diana's tenure as president of EDUCAUSE.

The third lesson I learned from Diana is that strong and successful leaders focus on the professional development of others—and that the cultivation and retention of talent is key to the long-term success of any organization. For EDUCAUSE, that talent...
has been developed within the association's professional ranks, as well as throughout the IT profession itself. EDUCAUSE is a highly professional association in the way it is organized, in the types of leaders it has recruited and retained, and in how it engages its membership. Leadership is not a solo activity, and the wide and far-reaching impact of EDUCAUSE under Diana's leadership is in no small part due to the success she has had in bringing the right talent into its ranks.

Professional development has been a key activity of the association, requiring new ways of thinking. The IT community has been forced to change. Being successful with technology is less and less dependent on having knowledge about engineering; today it has much more to do with developing other competencies—things like communication skills, business process knowledge, negotiation and change advocacy tactics, and relationship management expertise. These people-oriented competencies, and others like them, are the essential ingredients for IT leaders who desire to be more than the “computer person” who is called when something isn’t working right. The need for this shift formed a strategic direction for the EDUCAUSE professional development area during Diana's tenure. New programs, like the Hawkins Leadership Roundtable (which I have been fortunate to chair), have worked to bring together the current and future leaders of the IT profession to collaborate on developing the skills and competencies that will allow the profession to expand its influence and broaden its impact.

Leadership is about having the credibility and the relationships necessary to convene strategic conversations throughout an institution, particularly on topics that involve change.

My generation of IT leadership sits at the intersection of the past and the future of the profession. The early parts of our careers were all about the challenges of building networks, installing computer labs and large-scale computing resources, leading ERP implementations, and harnessing the Internet. But as noted above, the success of the IT profession today has less to do with implementing technology and much more to do with using technology to deliver strategic value. What may seem like a subtle shift in semantics has posed significant change for IT leaders. With the widespread availability of the cloud and other large-scale technology service providers, the IT profession will continue to move away from its roots in technology implementation and will continue to evolve into areas that were previously outside of the IT organization. Readying the profession for this change has been a hallmark of the EDUCAUSE professional development programs during the past seven years. Diana's focus on the development of talent—both within EDUCAUSE and among the membership—has been critical to supporting this shift.

The last lesson I learned from Diana concerns the very essence of what leadership is all about. As individuals begin their careers, leadership tends to look, from a distance, a lot like making decisions, allocating resources, and sitting atop a hierarchy. But as perspectives mature and careers advance, we come to the realization that leadership is about something else entirely. From Diana, I learned that leadership is about having the credibility and the relationships necessary to convene strategic conversations throughout an institution, particularly on topics that involve change.

This last lesson goes to the heart of why I believe that those of us in the IT profession are working in one of the most challenging fields in higher education. Since the future is about what we do with technology, being successful in our profession requires the ability to influence others, none of whom work for the IT organization. Developing the capacity to engage others throughout the institution requires credibility, and that credibility in turn flows from our ability to provide exceptional technology implementation and support. This capability allows us to deliver on Diana's vision for what leadership is truly about: influencing others. That's the most important lesson I have learned from Diana, and she has served as a marvelous example of that style of leadership.

The lessons I've learned from observing Diana's leadership have heavily influenced my thinking and my own style of leadership. Successful leaders establish a compelling vision, and they rally others around it. They create a culture built on the importance of inclusiveness, transparency, and teamwork. They focus on the development of talent throughout an organization. But most importantly, successful leaders influence others—including those outside the organization—for the better. Demonstrating this model of leadership remains Diana's most lasting contribution to our profession and to the field of higher education.

© 2015 Timothy Chester. The text of this article is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/).

Timothy Chester (accidentalCIO@uga.edu) is Vice President for Information Technology at the University of Georgia.