The Final Quarter: Leadership and Legacy

IT careers have stages, and those of us in the final quarter of a long IT career have experienced many technical advances through those stages. We have a strong sense of progress and benefit as a result. I remain very busy on a daily basis, and the stack of unfinished work and undeveloped ideas seems to grow exponentially. Yet I am reminded that everything on my to-do list from 2015 and before is completed or resolved in some way (sometimes dying a natural death). Reviewing ten years of annual reports provides an overview of an incredible amount of change and finished work. Planning every day with the realization that the work matters, that much happens, and that it will all get done eventually is motivational. There is a reason to continue to work toward a better future and to do so with intention. The final quarter of a career is not a long slide into retirement; it is an opportunity to intentionally do the work that makes a difference. Today I seek to identify the best technology initiatives and projects that contribute to organizational and community value, and that goal is different from the objectives of my early career steps.

Our community is rightly talking about early-career professional development and career growth. Yet equally important is continuing to grow and push hard through the final quarter of a career. How do you want to spend the last quarter? We are all end-dated, much like grocery produce. Some of us will last longer than others. We can make conscious decisions about how to spend the last quarter of our careers, rather than simply letting that period randomly unfold. Intentional action steps will yield a stronger contribution—and ultimately a greater legacy—than an unplanned slide into retirement.

I speak to many early-career professionals who conflate “career” with “employment,” and I advise them to broaden their view. Much of my career satisfaction and professional contribution came outside of my employment, as part of the professional community. I recently asked retired CIOs to identify valuable experiences they remembered from their careers. Robert Paterson offered a comment endorsed by other retired IT leaders: “Most valuable were the professional relationships made through organizations and conferences, the willingness of colleagues to share their knowledge base, and the joint support received from them.” We can have two, simultaneous career pathways: one as a staff member of the institution where we are employed and a second as a member of a large and vibrant professional community. There are times when a job can be unfulfilling, for any number of reasons, and during those moments our professional community can provide a terrific opportunity to contribute to the greater good.

Our careers involve a series of job roles, often in different organizations and on a variety of campuses. While the transitions can be difficult, the community can be constant and grounding. Our ability to navigate transitions contributes to success and feelings of contribution and value, especially when supported by a consistent community that sees, understands, and appreciates our value through several transitions.

As we follow our career pathways, we all work with many different teams. Richard Nelson, another retired IT leader, stated: “As I look into the rear-view mirror, every contact I made, either good or bad, was valuable to me and helped me grow as a person, as a leader, and as a problem solver.” As a member of a team, we see our good moments and bad moments reflected back to us. I like cycling, and so I like watching the Tour de France races, which last more than three weeks. Cyclists work collaboratively in a team, called a peloton, which may be likened to a murmuration of birds. There are good days and bad days, good weeks and bad weeks, shared together as a group, constantly in motion. The motion of the peloton is complex, at times seeming synchronous and with central control and at other times appearing to be free and random movement. Craig Reynolds has written that there are three rules to be followed by each bird in a murmuration (or, for that matter, by each cyclist in a peloton): stick with the group; proceed at group speed; and don’t bump into others (stay in your lane). Following these rules involves learning the group mores, the organizational culture, and the lanes of responsibility. Some action may not be your personal job, but it is up to you to discover and learn whose job it is and along the way develop organizational awareness and valued partnerships. The shared experience of the peloton provides strong group bonding and a truly memorable experience contributing to a transformative event.

These same descriptions form a good foundation for teamwork, especially on large and complex projects. IT professionals looking back at their careers often cite the milestone projects that provided the peloton experience. Often mentioned are ERP implementations, LMS implementations, major network shift projects, and email transitions. I now point out to early-career professionals that the major project they are working on may be something they do only a couple times in their entire career and that the experience, as well as the people they work with, will be memorable. Ron Cigna, retired CIO, offered: “I, literally, loved the people I worked with and had an extraordinary career because of them.” I encourage project team members to ask themselves: Are you doing the most you can possibly do with your peloton, your team? Don’t miss out on the long-lasting impact your work
contributes to the project and the lifelong partnerships that you will build. Purposeful actions are about helping the group succeed; what adds meaning to my career at this stage is knowing that I continue to help others in the group do their best.

Talking tech is one aspect of a communications portfolio that includes public speaking, published writing, and active listening. The actual tech subjects change over time, of course. At one time, our discussions included core dumps, checking for periods after column 80, and hierarchical database program specification blocks. Today I listened to an early-career team member present a solution involving encrypted JSON web tokens placed on a page in a widget. We are talking about what matters to us: solving technical problems, whatever the current tech happens to be. Our endless curiosity and desire to solve problems is a strong foundation that has to sustain us over our entire careers.

While some leaders say they hire the “best fit,” with the idea they can teach anything technical, I have found the reverse to work better for my organizations. We seek to hire the best technical talent and then develop the rest as part of our culture. One Merriam-Webster definition of the word culture is “attitudes, goals, values, and practices held in common” (back to our peloton). Our cultural attitudes, values, and practices change little over time and provide a strong foundation. An experienced leader can make a great contribution by communicating values and ethics—especially by sharing ethical decisions confronted over the course of a career and by leading explorations of values and ethical concerns with new technologies. Core values, like privacy, may stay the same over time, but they may also (simultaneously) be challenged in new ways. For example, experienced leaders can engage in ethical discussions around big data analytics, such as new initiatives in student social and learning data or in edge-device data in the growing internet of things (IoT) environment. Our experiences can shed light on unintended consequences and privacy issues.

When CIOs talk about the skills that CIOs need to bring to the leadership table, the list includes negotiation, persuasion, and influence. A long career in IT leadership also requires perseverance, resilience, and integrity. Retired CIOs or those late in their careers share stories of frustration and failures along the way. Much of the expressed frustration is connected to the ongoing and never-resolved gap between campus expectations for a quality technology experience and the resources (both funding and people) required to deliver solutions. The work is not easy and generally is not visible or understandable by many campus members. Still, we can find personal reward in cultivating perseverance and resilience and in knowing that we worked with integrity. Bruce Maas, retired CIO, states: “I pass along to others that the struggle is what shapes us.”

In addition, I believe that the abilities to suspend your disbelief and to nurture solutions over time are key. We have to believe that we can enable positive change, and we have to hold on to that belief to the very end of a career. Those of us in the last quarter of our careers have the advantage that we have experience with performing in a variety of situations. We can share those experiences with others and help them see the lasting impact of their work. And perhaps more importantly, we can share and contribute to EDUCAUSE and other professional organizations, creating lasting impact in our community. These are intentional leadership actions, and when we finish the final quarter of our career, we will remember these actions with satisfaction.

Note

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