

Moving Beyond the Rhetoric

At the beginning of the twenty-first century, when Internet start-ups were routine and technology seemed boundless in its ability to transform our world, expenditures on information technology (IT) increased substantially. The rhetoric of change was rampant. Our society was determined to leverage technology and to create the “ultimate paradigm” of the new digital age. Now, two years into the new century, the rhetoric has been tempered. Many of the tactical plans in the business world did not work, producing a loss of confidence in a digital future. More important to colleges and universities, the softening economy has led to reduced levels of IT funding.

Clearly, those of us in higher education must learn from the business world’s experience. We must implement well-thought-through tactical plans that husband our resources on much tighter budgets. And although it is tempting to lose ourselves in endless planning and rationalizations, it is vital that we move beyond the rhetoric and address the tasks that institutional and IT leaders must execute together. As someone who has worked in both business and academic environments, I’d like to share the six steps that I believe college and university leaders must take if they are to become truly effective within their organizations: (1) creating a detailed IT operating plan; (2) gaining consensus among IT and academic management; (3) defining and utilizing metrics and data; (4) communicating the plan; (5) staying focused; and (6) weighing criticism.

The first step, *creating a detailed IT operating plan*, assumes two preconditions.

First, the institutional leadership must have credibility with IT, and second, IT service levels must have credibility with the users. IT leaders should always be involved in the issues of assessment, just as the technological infrastructure should always meet the requirements of the users. Users need reliable equipment and software, regular system checks and maintenance, adequate training, and strong support. IT leaders need consistent interaction with, and support from, the institutional leaders. This is a team effort, and the foundation of mutual credibility and sound infrastructure must be in place.

Once these are in place, the IT operating plan can be created. The emphasis here is on “operating,” as in “the ability to execute.” Many people think that once the overall institutional strategy is written, most of the work is done. Nothing could be further from the truth. When institutions develop their overall strategies, it is vital that they also develop an IT operating plan that will serve as a concrete checklist of responsibilities. This checklist will require that very specific questions be answered: What are the critical success factors that need to be in place? What are the specific roles of each team member, and are those

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roles being clearly communicated? What are the milestones of progress, and how will they be measured? Most important, have these milestones been agreed to by all of the teams involved?

This last question relates to the second step: *gaining consensus among IT and academic management*. Consensus is crucial, for both internal and external constituencies need to be involved not only in the strategic formulations but also in the actual execution of the plan. Leaders cannot work in a vacuum. Without consensus, their plans will be open to vulnerabilities that can derail the best business strategies. So how can leaders build that consensus? Obviously, they need teams that understand and support the IT operating plan. But just as

important is *transparent decision-making*. This transparency will ensure that both IT and academic managers understand their roles and tasks and also the strategic reasons behind the decisions that are made relative to the execution of the plan. In addition, leaders must pay attention to the direction the plan is taking and must not be afraid to make midstream corrections. Warning signs will appear if the plan is off track, and the importance of heeding these warnings cannot be overemphasized.

How can a distinction be made between what is truly a warning sign and what is merely a call for slight correction? This is where the third step, *defining and utilizing metrics and data*, becomes critical. Having accurate, timely data available to everyone, from senior management to the users, is important. And the time to decide on the metrics and data is at the beginning of the plan, not after launch. For example, suppose an IT leader implements a data warehouse. The design is done, the specs are complete, the code is written, and the warehouse is up. Is the

metrics decided on, the efforts will be worthless unless the institutional leadership understands and supports the technology and its objectives and then communicates that support to the community as a whole. This is the fourth step, *communicating the plan*. For example, several years ago, I was involved in initiating a laptop requirement for students. At that time, this initiative was an important step in advancing the technology vision of the institution. I quickly learned that it was critical for me to fully understand the laptop technology, its capabilities, and the

cultural acceptance. It is thus vital that senior management assess a plan from the perspective of the people and the culture it will affect. As a university president, I'm particularly sensitive to the importance of traditions as well as to the need for moving forward. Leaders must not only respect and appreciate the culture in which they work; they must also understand the changes in attitude that will be necessary for a plan to succeed. An institution is so much more than its infrastructure, its business plans, and its day-to-day operations. An institution is also its people, its culture, and its work environment.

Even with good communication and change management, problems will arise. But the problems will not be insurmountable as long as leaders stay focused on their goals. This fifth step, *staying focused*, will be a natural outcome if clear priorities have been set and sound strategic reasons for the IT operating plan have been established. Above all, leaders should not forget the example of the data warehouse and should remain focused on the users and their needs.

These users are a vital part of the sixth step in the successful execution of the IT operating plan: *weighing criticism*. Leaders should encourage comments upfront and solicit input along the way. If they don't, the differences of opinion could go underground, and what might have been a constructive idea could quickly turn into an infusion of negativity. It is better to hear the criticism and weigh it wisely than to risk the foundations of the plan. Conflict is a natural thing; the challenge that leaders face is having a process in place for *dealing* with the conflict.

In summary, I'd like to stress that the success of these six steps depends on the alignment between IT and the strategic direction of the institution. The institutional leaders may create a vision, but it is the IT leaders who will *enable* that vision. I have no doubt that all of us in higher education can move beyond the rhetoric, work together as one team, and accept the challenges this new century has brought.



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job complete? If the users aren't getting the answers they need or if the warehouse data isn't accurate, the job is not finished. Focusing on the users' needs is an invaluable tool in measuring progress, enabling those involved to make corrections when necessary or get confirmation to stay the course. Metrics must include not only quantitative measurements of data but also qualitative measurements.

Even with the IT operating plan, the consensus among management, and the

desired outcomes and then to communicate these to the faculty. I also learned that for this new initiative to be successful, I needed to make sure that the IT people had access to the academic leadership. This access, combined with the knowledge of senior management's commitment, became a fundamental tool for successfully executing the initiative.

Over the years I've also learned the importance of change management. Often, technological capability outstrips