

IT Leadership Principles from *Don Quixote*

En un lugar de la Mancha, de cuyo nombre no quiero acordarme...”—that is, “In a village of La Mancha, the name of which I have no desire to call to mind...” Thus starts the opening sentence of the first chapter of one of the masterpieces of Western literature. In 2005, we celebrate the four hundredth anniversary of the publication of *Don Quixote de La Mancha* by Miguel de Cervantes Saavedra. The comic, social, moral, and literary lessons of this masterpiece are as valid now as they were four centuries ago. (Indeed, the television movie *Passion and Discipline: Don Quixote's Lessons for Leadership* aired in the spring of 2004.) How do lessons from *Don Quixote* apply to leadership in information technology? Below are a few of the IT leadership principles—drawn from *Don Quixote*—that I follow while managing technology as a chief information officer at one of the Georgetown University campuses.

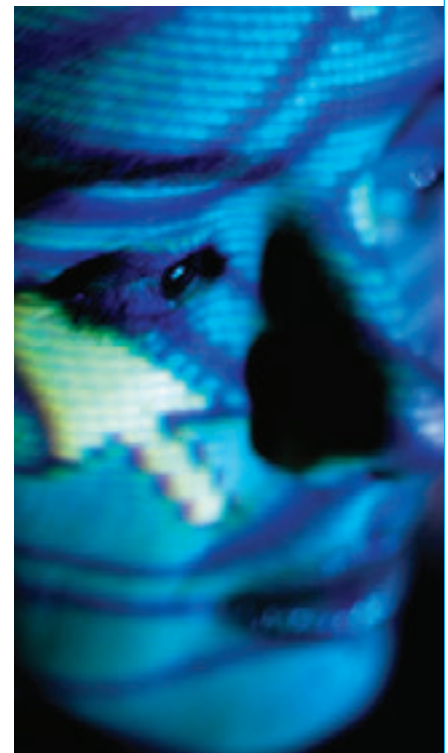
Alonso Quejana was a modest noble who lived in the plains of Spain, in the area of La Mancha, around the turn of the seventeenth century. In his fifties, he became obsessed with epic literature on chivalry. He spent days and nights reading, without proper eating or sleeping; he neglected the administration of his possessions and even sold some of his lands to buy books. Eventually, he lost his mind and became convinced that his destiny was to become a knight. He renamed himself Don Quixote de la Mancha, and with promises of a post in the administration, he persuaded a good-natured, poor, and unwise neighbor, Sancho Panza, to leave everything behind and become his squire in a quest for adventure.

Don Quixote IT Leadership Principle

#1: Being obsessed with what we do for a living is a factor of success, though we should strive to retain our sanity. When I was young, science fiction novels such as Jules Verne's *Twenty Thousand Leagues under the Sea* and Isaac Asimov's *Foundation* and films such as Fred Wilcox's *Forbidden Planet* and Stanley Kubrick's *2001: A Space Odyssey* sparked my interest in technology. Decades later, my obsession with technology has not diminished one bit. A faculty member recently asked me: “How do you keep up with so many new technology developments?” My answer is that I read news on technology in the world press, for example, the *New York Times*, *The Economist*, *PC Magazine*, and *El País*. I watch technology programs on CNN and the BBC and technology documentaries on the Discovery Channel. And I regularly attend lectures by prominent speakers from all technology fields, including luminaries such as Carnegie Mellon University's Dave Farber, Stanford University's Lawrence Lessig, and Harvard University's Jonathan Zittrain.

Perhaps the best-known episode in the life of Don Quixote is his epic fight against the windmills on a field of La Mancha. At first glance, Don Quixote mistook a group of windmills for giants and, without hesitation, charged against them regardless of their size or number. In his first charge, his lance became tangled in one of the windmill arms, and he fell to the ground. He was not severely injured, but both his pride and his body were hurt. This episode offers a powerful lesson on the importance of being brave and tenacious in the face of perceived adversity.

Don Quixote IT Leadership Principle



#2: Sometimes we face obstacles in our institutions that appear to be insurmountable; however, true technology leaders find the courage and stamina to persevere. If we look back only a few years, we may remember how hard it was to convince our institutions that we needed budget replacement cycles for computers, network electronics, and instructional technology equipment in classrooms. Today, we probably relish our recent quests to deploy wireless networks or Voice-over IP, even when some network engineers and customers declared the technologies insecure, unnecessary, or technically inferior.

As I contemplate our roles of advancing the mission of the college or univer-

sity with the judicious use of technology, I can see many obstacles ahead. It will be daunting to meet students' ever-growing expectations, to manage the risk of multiple information security vulnerabilities, to comply with additional regulations, to advance in instructional technology, and to seamlessly integrate and simplify all of our information systems. Instead of adopting a passive stance, one of despair, my team members and I seek out new opportunities and challenges in all these areas. We continue to conduct pilot projects and implementations of groundbreaking technologies, such as social networks or electronic books, in our effort to support and enrich the work of our community members.

I have a special fondness for another celebrated episode in the life of Don Quixote: his encounter with the galley prisoners. In one of their early adventures, Don Quixote and his trusted squire, Sancho Panza, encountered a group of chained prisoners, watched by guards of the Crown of Spain. Don Quixote asked each prisoner why he had been convicted. After carefully listening to each prisoner's explanation, Don Quixote felt compassion and then fought to free them all. At first, the convicts expressed their gratitude, but eventually they turned against our hero.

Don Quixote IT Leadership Principle #3: Listen to all, care for all, but don't be surprised if they turn against you. I regularly meet with faculty members, senior administrators, librarians, staff members, and student leaders. I have insisted, at every institution where I have served, in running technology-satisfaction surveys, particularly among students. I take these comments and survey results very seriously. When evaluating plans and projects, we must put ourselves in the shoes of all the constituents we serve and do our best to defend their interests. Frequently, our job as leaders is to represent the student body or the faculty and request adequate technology resources for them in

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committees and forums. Sometimes, it becomes our responsibility to ensure that all staff members, including non-office workers, can use electronic resources by granting staff access to public computers, e-mail accounts, online services, and proper training.

Feedback and comments are very useful, but on occasion one must take them with a grain of salt and a good dose of humor. A few weeks ago, a student requested an appointment with me to discuss wireless connectivity on campus. He complimented the members of the technology team on their work to expand wireless coverage to the most remote areas of our campus. He then complained about the lack of wireless connectivity inside the men's restrooms in the first floor of our main academic building. Perhaps it was my amused facial expression that prompted the student to leave my office without saying another word.

IT leaders have a challenging job: they need to be obsessive about their work, without going over the edge; they need to find courage and stamina in the face of seemingly insurmountable obstacles; and they need to help others with no expectation of gratitude. One sentence from the last chapter of *Don Quixote* always helps me put my job—and other aspects of my life—into perspective: “Como las cosas humanas no sean eternas, yendo siempre en declinación de sus principios hasta llegar a su último fin, especialmente las vidas de los hombres.” That is, “As nothing that is man's can last forever, but all tends ever downwards from its beginning to its end, and above all man's life.” Time and work solve even the most difficult problems.

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