

Shame on Us

For a couple of years now, many of us in higher education have tried to rationalize the relationship between our two national network providers, Internet2 (I2) and National LambdaRail (NLR). In a Viewpoints column in the September/October 2005 issue of *EDUCAUSE Review*, Tracy Futhey described the situation as she saw it at the time.¹ Now, more than a year later, we seem to be even further from a rational outcome. As of October 2006, NLR has said that no further discussions about a merger will take place before 2007, NLR is engaged in partnership discussions with another organization, and NLR and I2 have reached the agreement that I2 will terminate its membership in NLR.

NLR was born of the best of intentions: to create an entirely new service model deploying optical networking owned by higher education. At the time, some in our community believed that this needed to be done outside the direct management of I2. All of us in the academic community are indebted to the “founding parents” of NLR for the investment they have made on our behalf. However, ever since the NLR youngster came into the world, most members of the community have agreed that we do not want NLR and I2 competing for our money and attention and thus fragmenting the higher education networking scene. In the last year, very smart and well-meaning members of our community have spent many hours trying to find a way to avoid just that situation. And we have failed, at least for now.

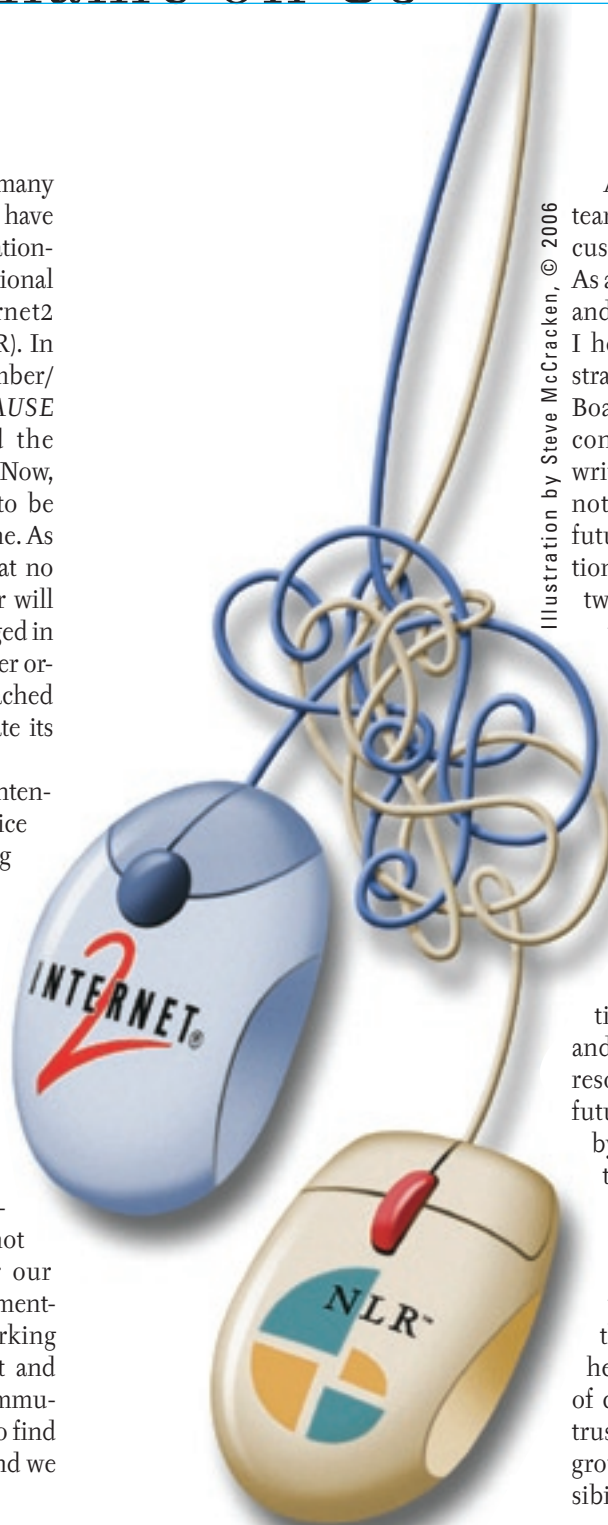


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Although I did not sit on the merger team, I participated in the merger discussions from “inside” both NLR and I2. As a member of the I2 Network Planning and Policy Advisory Council (NPPAC), I helped to advise the I2 president on strategy, and as a member of the NLR Board of Directors, I advised the NLR contingent of the merger team. I am writing from this vantage point today not to cast blame or even to suggest future steps for resolving the fragmentation problem. Instead, I want to suggest two main reasons for our failure and three general lessons about organizational change.

In my opinion, the first and most significant reason this merger failed was the use of an adversarial approach to the merger process. From the very beginning, the advice that several of us gave our colleagues on the merger team was: “Make the merger team into the owner of the future network organization. Create a new vision together, and then figure out how you can use the resources of I2 and NLR to build that future.” Instead, the merger team began by having each “side” come to merger team meetings with “term sheets,” frequently justified as a way to “exercise fiduciary responsibility.” The two sides then attempted to “negotiate” the terms of a merger agreement. In the end, this adversarial process, inherently defensive of the past and also of current separate interests, destroyed trust among the parties and caused the group to lose its grasp of the future possibilities.

The field of organizational development called “appreciative inquiry” contends that if people participate in creating a positive image of the future, they are more likely to invest in efforts to make that future image a reality. The growing literature of positive psychology suggests that our minds are predisposed to respond to positive suggestions. For example, if you coach athletes by showing them what they are doing right, they improve significantly more than if you show them what they are doing wrong. Teachers who believe that their students are “smart” tend to see the “smart” actions of their students more frequently, remember those actions longer, and more often interpret whatever they see as “smart.” According to these theories, major organizational change can be accomplished if that change is tied to a shared positive vision of the future. By contrast, the adversarial approach focuses on what people will lose (or fear they will lose) rather than what they all will gain. It polarizes the team and reduces the members’ willingness to change. It sets up a negative feedback loop, with each demand and each agreement failure leading to more entrenched, rather than converging, positions.

The second reason for the merger failure was the preexisting and emergent divisiveness between some individuals on or close to the merger team. In some instances, people seemed to be intent on ending the careers of others. It is unfortunate when people take aim at others and act out those personal animosities at the expense of the community as a whole. Everyone understands that seemingly endless negotiations and disagreements can wear out our patience, but the behavior in this case went beyond that norm. In addition, some participants in the merger discussions seemed to be placing the interests of their subconstituent ahead of the interests of the general higher education community. Add to all of this the tendency to assign the most unfavorable interpretation to the motives of those on the “other side,” and it is easy to see why divisiveness rather than cooperation ruled the day.

What can we learn from these two mistakes? The first organizational

change lesson I see in this experience is that avoiding a problem is almost always easier than solving a problem. If Internet2 could have acted to create “Newnet” earlier in response to the needs for dedicated optical connections and for the incorporation of regional networks and CIOs in governance, perhaps this chapter could have been avoided.

My second lesson is that we must pay attention to *how* we go about organizational change. Leadership is more about keeping focus on what we want to accomplish in the big picture and nurturing the process that can take us there than it is about getting “our way” on all of the terms and conditions.

Finally, we should be very careful when choosing those to entrust with our collective future. We in the academic community tend to be a respectful and trusting lot, but we are being irresponsible if we allow individuals who are not representing our agreed-upon common interests to gain too much influence in the change process. A whole community can easily lose the war when the members of that community allow a few people to get too attached to winning their own battles.

I believe that a good merger is impossible at this point. The mistakes made have created a set of cultures and organizational as well as individual dynamics that, if forced together, would most likely result in a dysfunctional organization. When I finally realized this, I pulled back from my merger activism. Sometimes a system needs to reach a new and different equilibrium before the desired organizational change is possible—another lesson learned. But we all should have learned these lessons already. We knew better. In this case, we just did not act in accord with what we knew. Shame on us.

Note

1. Tracy Futhey, “Life of Lambda,” *EDUCAUSE Review*, vol. 40, no. 5 (September/October 2005): 80–81, <<http://www.educause.edu/er/erm05/erm05511.asp>>.

Polley Ann McClure is Vice President for Information Technologies at Cornell University. She is Editor of the Viewpoints department for *EDUCAUSE Review*.



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