

FINDING YOUR VOICE” – EXAMPLES OF SUCCESSFUL IT LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT IN

HIGHER EDUCATION

The author and presenter, Neil Thelander, has had 30 years' experience in IT leadership, including 13 years in the HE sector, and has had direct experiences at over a dozen Higher Education institutions across Australia. University leaders chorus demand for more IT leadership in their institutions. An IT Director turned consultant looks at IT leadership development territory explored and gives examples of what seems to work.

University leadership is demanding more of IT leaders: more strategic contribution, more active participation in shaping the future of their institutions, more innovative exploitation of the cloud, BYOD and the next IT sweet spot. But how well equipped are our IT leaders to step up to being more than order taking service providers?

Increasingly university leaders get that intelligent use of information technology in their institutions depends on them – on administrative and academic leaders being engaged in choices about IT use. And they are getting engaged: in prioritizing IT investments, in leading successful change enabled by technology, and overseeing effective use of systems supporting the core activities of their university. IT has become a key enabler for them, and they are teased by the wider potential of the new consumer technologies in their hands and homes. As more leaders get that IT is as important as \$, staff and facilities, university leadership renewal is also reducing the rump who can't or won't.

What is the IT group's response to this surging leadership interest? At best IT has an effective leader who has garnered respect in the university leadership community. At best the IT group is respected for the set of services it does provide with reliability, usually core infrastructure and several major admin systems. At worst IT is seen as a blockage to be avoided – full of Dilbert's cliché, Mordak the Preventer of IT Services. Often IT is seen both ways, by different parts of their university. This is the harsh reality for how university IT is really seen by the rest of their university – IT is not pulling its weight strategically, for the future.

Apart from the CIO and/or IT Director, there are usually few in the IT group with positive strategic visibility across university leadership – folk that university leaders want to do business with. And there is a potential gold rush of strategic IT engagement if IT were ready, willing and able. This potential comes from all domains of university activity; the

familiar administration, but also surging in teaching and learning, and research. The potential is beyond 1 or 2 individuals to handle because of the volume and range of engagements that are necessary.

IT groups need diverse and skilled individuals to offer the right chemistry, domain knowledge and the right set of skills, especially in active strategic listening, akin to high end consulting or business analysis. Many current IT leaders have been elevated for their articulateness in promoting IT but even this can become a deficit if overused. Those few who have found their voice often need next to find their ears.

Potential IT leaders live right across the university. Most IT leaders look down to their IT group's next level and there is usually some potential there. But there are also potential IT leaders in the other silos of the typical university, and these junior leaders are often better focused on client and strategic issues. Most university leaders have 1 or 2 staff in their own silo that they turn to for advice and to run their small "s" systems. In universities where IT is badly regarded, there will be many capable IT-ish staff outside the IT group. Engaging this wider next level community of IT leaders has shown great potential for improving tactical use of IT, and managed developmentally, this community can step up to strategy.

IT staff need focused development on specific interpersonal skills to be more effective as leaders in their universities. The CAUDIT Institute has been very successful for many years by sticking to recognized deficit areas, like interpersonal communication, leadership, performance management and teamwork, and using a high faculty ratio to help Institute participants enjoy a highly interactive and engaged experience. Participants leave the Institute with confidence of how successful they can be when they step up and use these new behaviours. The problem for attendees has always been sustaining these new behaviours when they return to their institution. A sustained programmatic approach to embedding leadership development into ongoing IT management is recommended.

IT Leadership development programs must from their outset reach out and include the wider university, starting with trusted critical friends who want the IT group to lift its game. Executives and their support staff value IT input when it is delivered with modest interpersonal skills, and seek continued engagement when given a positive respectful start. The development program should be based in large part on the growing set of

relationships necessary to IT being a strategic success, and help grow these relationships by building key leadership interactions into program activities.

Leadership development needs to be experiential. As much as possible program activities should be structured rehearsals for the real thing, like sports drills for the actual game. Leadership often requires delivery in the moment and leaders need to develop a kind of leadership muscle memory and reflexes to proactively engage in the key strategic moments of a university's life. Role plays, simulations and leadership game are examples. The program should provide a safe place to practice and develop these skills while maintaining a reasonably authentic learning experience, for example by involving critical friends.

Sincere sustained commitments to relationship reform, guided by critical friends, can improve the situation. There are many natural allies and partners for IT in the university, who will help if IT adopts a reciprocally professional and respectful approach to partnership. The Library, Teaching and Learning leadership, Research office and research leadership, Facilities, HR and others will happily team with an IT group that shows some basic ability to understand and respect their mutual needs from the partnership. The typical needs of these natural allies will be discussed. The future is bright for an IT group with many partners.

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