

Nurturing the IT Culture: the Leadership Challenge

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Synopsis: The importance of vision: formulating, selling, and sustaining it; nurturing of both teacher and student future leaders; rethinking/re-engineering educational institutions/frameworks: innovative organisational changes: pragmatic infusion of technologies into dynamic lifestyles: cultivating IT culture in appropriate segments of society.

Introduction

Information Technology, as a concept or even as a discipline, is extremely challenging. Leadership, itself, is a challenge. The dynamic nature of late-20th Century culture offers a challenge that, at times, seems practically insurmountable. Challenges are all around us, engulfing us completely as we struggle to comprehend and manage the complex culture of information technology. We, the leaders of this society, are up to the challenge, however. We accept it! We launch valiantly into pursuit not solely to *survive* in this culture, but to *thrive*!

Precedent to understanding how to proceed toward the development of a meaningful leadership strategy that will be sure to impact multiple categories of people positively, we feel compelled to step back and examine the conditions that exist currently. Then, we are beckoned to juxtapose our findings with what we hope, we dream, we pledge for the future. Such an activity as this will “set the stage” for our design of a leadership proposal that will impact how we deal with a rapidly-changing culture in which information technologies are main forces, but are coupled with the human mystique and its oft-unpredictable, sudden shifts. Richard Bach stated in his book, *Illusions*, “Not knowing the truth doesn’t make it any less true.” Going one step further, we can amend that to say, “Knowing the condition and nature of change doesn’t give us any less reason to lead.”

The focus of this discussion shall be upon educational institutions. Principles involved, however, apply equally to the worlds of government, business, military, or public service. One should simply adjust the particular examples and situations given to the various fields of endeavor.

Understanding Terminology

In order to fashion a leadership strategy that will have an enhanced possibility of working effectively in the dynamic world we face, it seems essential that we examine, and come to a mutual acceptance of, terms with which we shall be dealing:

- Culture = the sum total of ways of living built up by a group of human beings and transmitted from one generation to another
- Challenge = a difficulty in a job or undertaking that is stimulating to one engaged in it

While we shall not examine the specific, clinical definition of *leadership*, we shall adopt the understanding that the kind of leadership upon which we shall focus is not the institutional, positional leadership. Rather, it is the combination of character traits, operational attributes, and demonstrated behavior that causes an individual to achieve a recognized prominence among his/her peers. The topic of leadership has been debated, explained, catalogued, dissected, maligned, and even misrepresented by hundreds of “experts” around the world in a broad variety of settings. Leadership isn’t always the bold, “in the limelight” sort of condition, though. Often, the highest calibre leadership emerges from supremely subtle, practically unnoticed actions. It is this form of leadership that has the potential for greatest good when applied to an emerging information technology-rich culture.

Vision

Importance of Vision—It has been said that “. . . without vision, a people perish.” No doubt, this statement is true as it applies to information technology! Perhaps, though, for greater impact, the

statement could be expanded to say, "Without vision, a people *elect* to perish!" Hundreds, perhaps thousands, of times, we have been admonished to create a statement of vision so we could formulate a written testament to the dreams we hold for a particular pursuit. When technology planners and leaders ignore this suggestion, a multitude of beneficial opportunities will go uncaptured. The saddest reality, though, is that the big losers in such a scenario are the children, the learners, the ones we have vowed to help educate. It is as though we are allowing the metaphorical sand slip right through our fingers. Failure to give this generation of youth all the best we can bring them will impact not only their individual lives, but the collective lives of the offsprings they bring onto this planet. We will miss impacting numerous generations yet unborn as we leave children's lives untouched in this area. Certainly, then, a true leader understands the importance of vision—and will exert the necessary effort to capture that vision in the form of a clear, bold statement.

Building a Vision—Once the leader *understands* the importance of vision, he/she can engage in *building* that vision. One essential step to follow, after writing a vision statement, is to ensure that the leader commits to a thorough **belief** in the vision. Without strong belief, no great visions can be built. Can you imagine the chaos that can result when an architect designs a beautiful skyscraper, but doesn't hold a strong belief that the building can withstand the elements and isn't even sure the building should be constructed? The same condition exists with information technology leadership. The person who crystallizes his/her vision into a statement of strong belief can then progress to the stage of preparing a list of ways that vision can be transformed from a mere dream to a stunning reality. He/she must believe in the vision as though it exists already. Then, the compilation of events that must occur for the vision to become real will be reduced to a simple matter of time, energy, effort, and clear leadership activities. Visions can be built. Strong visions can be built strongly!!

Understanding a Vision—The leader, next, will take the vision statement, along with the listing of things that must be done to help the vision become reality, and will develop a set of principles

around *how* that vision will work. Too, the leader will want to spell out what the realized vision will mean to the community/culture served. Through this activity of examining vision carefully and extensively, the leader will experience the contagion that comes from looking straight into the face of possibility.

Selling a Vision—To sell the vision, a leader must engage in at least three things: articulating, publicizing, and living the vision. Vision can be articulated, or explained clearly so others who hear it will comprehend completely, only when it is first understood. The understanding phase comes prior to the selling phase, so we can assume that the leader has made the effort to gain an indelible understanding of his/her vision. Then, it will be possible to explain the vision to peers, colleagues, and even community members. Effective articulation occurs when all parties who hear the explanation are able to repeat the vision statement in ways that duplicate the original meaning held by the leader. Articulation is pivotal to the vision's serving as seed to a successful information technology implementation effort. Enough testimonials exist to substantiate the validity of supporting this element; we must acknowledge, then, that it is undeniably true!

Following close on the heels of vision articulation is the concept of *publicizing* the vision. A leader who is intent on seeing "dreams come true" will focus upon ways that he/she can spread the good news about the vision to as many people as possible. Innovation, imagination, and creativity are key elements here. Using the leverage of rapidly-expanding technological solutions, the leader can take advantage of vast resources and avenues for publicity.

"*Living* the vision" becomes extremely simple if and when the prerequisite actions have been completed in this process. If a leader crafts a vision statement, then understands it so clearly that he/she can sell it to any and all constituents, he/she will find that living the vision is easy. Just because the act is easy doesn't mean it should or can be taken for granted. To the contrary, easy

things fall victim to neglect, often. For that reason, we must emphasize the importance of making one's vision as natural as inhaling and exhaling. If this occurs, others will notice.

Sustaining a Vision—Once the vision is built, the leader must maintain a **focus** upon the vision. At times, this may be as simple as ensuring that the vision statement remains in front of people constantly. Perhaps bumper stickers, t-shirts, banners, brochures, and other advertising media can be used effectively to keep people's minds on the vision. Once the vision has been "bought into" by a populace, some inertia has been created. So, the leader has a phenomenal opportunity to sustain the momentum begun, allowing for occasional "fine-tuning" of vision elements so eventual and continual success come nearer being guaranteed.

Evaluating a Vision—What does a clear, strong vision bring to a school and/or community, especially when it is articulated well among a broad range of contacts? Questions such as this will aid the leader as he/she evaluates the vision and its related elements, continually. If the vision is held up to scrutiny regularly, and can withstand rigorous critique, the vision will be bound for remarkable growth toward reality. If the vision is left alone once it has been created and placed in the form of a vision statement, it will wither and die, much like a once-healthy plant which is victimized by apathy and neglect. True leaders do not tolerate neglect of their visions!

Rethinking/Re-engineering Frameworks

The framework of educational institutions is a dynamic entity, much as the institutions, themselves. When we find a situation where both any institution of society and the elements that govern its functioning are fluid, we witness massive potential for phenomenal shifts in operation of those institutions. Coupled with all this change is the fluctuation that occurs in our own understanding of these elements. Maybe a reasonable approach to reach a better comprehension of this dynamic is to proffer a series of questions for consideration by information technology leaders:

- As technologies change (reform), will we need to ensure that we keep our approach(es) current? If so, how will we accomplish this best?
- What kinds of frameworks will work best for learners in the future?
- Suppose we do, in fact, have groups of people who are known as “knowledge workers.” How will we react? How quickly will we be called upon to create shifts/improvements?
- How much have frameworks changed in the past? What limitations have these created/brought on?
- How will leaders change within the emerging framework?
- What will be the leader’s profile in an emergent, effective framework?

These, and other salient, compelling questions, call upon the leader to exercise talents that are, perhaps, innate, rather than taught. Evidence does not exist to indicate that leaders can be taught how to *answer* these questions, so the most effective manner of dealing with them may be to formulate a series of *responses*. Responses have the power to lead to deeper, clearer thought and they do not harness the respondent into having to justify or substantiate what may be *ingenious conjecture*. Responses, rather than answers, are potentially powerful tools to aid a leader in information technology as he/she provides careful nurturing to the culture for which he/she is responsible.

It is one thing to re-think frameworks. It is something else entirely to *re-engineer* them. Planning is important, but without actions, plans are hollow. Action is reserved for the bold, while the timid are still debating change. Hence, when the effective leader recognizes the nature of rapid and broad-based change in the world of technology and societal reactions, he/she will move forward with aggressive action plans that are designed in such a way that the interests of the majority of parties are protected and even enhanced. Careful study, deliberate involvement of key community personnel, energetic research, and a constant awareness of emerging trends are all essential elements to help ensure that leaders can face—and conquer—the challenges that characterize a culture rich in information technologies.

Dynamic lifestyles and intrusion of technology

Without question, the landscape of education is changing rapidly—and constantly. It has been said that change, itself, is the only constant thing about change! So true! While education is changing, so are the lives of teachers, administrators, schools, and the publics who support the educational enterprise. Much of the change witnessed is either brought on by technologies or is exacerbated by the presence and impact of technologies.

In a dynamic environment such as we find in contemporary schools, one of the most fluid conditions existing is the changing role of the teacher. Historically, classroom teachers were ones who stood at the front of the classroom and lectured to students. Occasionally, the teacher might conduct a demonstration or an experiment while students watched so they could mimic the teacher's actions at some later time. With the advent of supportive technology solutions, teachers are empowered to take on the role of a facilitator—one who is a direct, hands-on, involved *aid* to the immediate learning experience. Teachers' roles now include such acts as questioning, prodding, exploring, and cajoling. The learning environment of a classroom is taking on the vestiges more akin to a learning laboratory, little by little. Certainly, technologies can assist with this shift; however, to some, technology is seen as an unnecessary intrusion. Teachers' reactions are as varied as the philosophies that underlie their responses; it is the task of effective leaders to discern the subtleties of these reactions and support teachers appropriately. This is not an easy task for leaders, but it is essential and has the potential for huge payoffs, when conducted properly.

With the dynamic shifts in schooling, itself, comes a radical change in the *expectations* placed upon schools (and all the associated personnel) by the general public. Part of the dilemma that creates this condition is the rapid reporting capability inherent in information technologies. This fuels the public's expectations for schools, teachers, and administrators to do a better job in preparing the

youth being sent to school by society. Naturally, then, what was expected of schools just five years ago simply will not be tolerated today in many locations.

A partial response to the changing expectations dilemma is the formation and support of alternate school forms. For example, charter schools, specialty schools, and home schools have sprung up around the world as a partial answer to the societally-perceived deplorable and declining conditions created by inadequate educational structures and strategies. Leaders have an opportunity to leverage the technological prowess of new tools to educate the public on what their schools are doing, how rich the achievement by students actually is, and the multitude of values that come from a technology-enhanced instructional environment.

During recent years, a veritable tsunami has been evidenced by publics who demand higher student achievement. Sadly, this is reported, most often, in terms of standardized achievement test scores. Little or no attention has been given to the forms of learning that will sustain the individual learner for many years after the bare-bones cognitive facts have fallen useless to them. Howard Garner and others promote the concept of multiple intelligences; strong leaders in the dynamic educational landscape will grab these concepts and seek innovative ways to educate their supporters with respect to the countless benefits that accrue from such robust learning conditions. All these interactive elements impose ominous demands upon teachers and administrators. Their lives and lifestyles surely are changed, as a result. The effective leader recognizes all this and strives to provide substantive support as teachers, students, and communities collaborate to engage in rich, lifelong learning experiences.

Technologies may, in fact, intrude on our lives. On the other hand, we can gain a higher-level understanding of the technologies and, thus, harness them to lead us forward to more progressive, more positive, more exciting learning opportunities. The next generation of leaders (who are our student learners, currently) will be the big winners!

Conclusion

Information technologies present challenges. Leaders grow in their abilities to deal with challenge. Educational systems at all levels are immersed in a metaphorical sea of change. Strong, clear, articulated, and sustained vision is a crucial element that serves as a “pivot point” for all of technology-enhanced instructional designs. Leaders who desire to thrive in an information technology environment are seeking a near-endless stream of ways that they can mobilize the minds, emotions, energies, and influences of their constituents in such a way that they propel the entire educational system forward. We can neither deny the existence of dynamic change in either technologies or in contemporary educational practice, nor can we simply stop the progress. What we *can* do is to educate ourselves, prioritize what is important, prepare our youth, engage all our resources, identify our strengths, and sustain all the things we are doing “the right way.” Certainly, then, the leader’s challenge to nurture the information technology culture will be met, overcome, and transformed into a mighty, positive force that improves thousands of lives well into the next millenium.