

Characteristics of Effective and Ineffective Technology Leaders

Nancy Maria Swygert

EDET 746

Dr. Gary Senn

University of South Carolina

“Vision without action is merely a dream. Action with out Vision just passes the time. Vision with action can change the world.” Joel Barker, Futurist, (Leading and Learning with Technology, September 2003, p. 47)

Abstract

Corporate and Institutes of Education in America are facing a crisis to provide technology and leadership in the wake of economic uncertainties. In order to fulfill the government mandates in the No Child Left Behind legislation school districts must provide Technology Leadership and goal planning. Corporate technology demands are just as strenuous, as companies scramble to compete in an uncertain and ever evolving market. Our Technology Leaders are faced with the need to create a strong and well-prepared workforce for this and future generations. Technology Leaders have the responsibility for developing and managing the vision, performance, and operations of our technological resources. The question however, is what makes an effective and or ineffective Technology Leader. In this paper I will focus on corporate America and the characteristics of one Technology Leader and how he personifies the characteristics of both an effective and ineffective Technology Leader.

Introduction

Intended or not, Corporate America is one of the nation's predominant technology consumers and producers. Every day over 20 million people gain valuable professional and career enhancement through the use of technology. Technology Leaders are faced with the challenge of providing effective guidance, support, and resources for this user

base. Corporations are faced with a greater challenge to provide and enrich the communications and technology for their work force with a higher return on investment, or ROI. These Technology Leaders are struggling against a sinking economy to generate vibrant, interactive communities of workers for a fraction of the cost of previously utilized networking and technological vehicles. This is most apparent in not-for-profit associations and academic institutions.

Purpose

Through this paper I will analyze the characteristics of an effective and ineffective Technology Leader. I will discuss how a Not-for-Profit Association's Chief Information Officer, an Academic Institution's network administrator, and several journal articles view Technology Leadership.

Scope

Combining an interview with Pete Pantsari, CIO, of National Educational Telecommunications Association, NETA, a not-for-profit association of public broadcasters, Eileen Able, Network Administrator for the University of South Carolina's School of Medicine, and journal resources I will analyze the primary constructs of the characteristics of Technology Leadership. Thus illustrating the application for providing employees positive technology experiences within the financial constraints of today's economy.

Characteristics of an Effective Technology Leader

According to an interview with Pete Pantsari, CIO of NETA, he views an effective Technology Leader as one who is “Keeping it all running and up-to-date; while looking down the road at the next upgrade in hardware and software – and doing all this on a shoestring budget.” (Pantsari, 2003) Mr. Pantsari is just one of many Technology Leaders who are faced with the demands for increasingly complex services while juxtaposed with tightening resources. (Learning and Leading with Technology, 2003, p. 46) Mr. Pantsari continues, “Too many IT professionals don’t know how, or don’t attempt, to talk to staff, clients, and customers in a non-technical manner so there is an understanding of how it works, why it’s down, or what it takes to get it back online.” (Pantsari, 2003) This need to communicate with staff is a crucial aspect of an effective Technology Leader in the wake of ever evolving technology and the wave of viruses reeking havoc on corporate and educational communities. According to Eileen Able, Network administrator for the University of South Carolina’s Medical School, the wave of viruses has been debilitating to many segments of the school. “We have so many computers that we maintain, it is impossible to keep ahead with our small staff. Even when we send out notices throughout the school telling folks to update their systems, many don’t or simply ignore the requests. Then when a virus like the Blaster or other Microsoft backdoor worms get in, it affects everyone. We then spend hours and hours trying to fix the problem. It is lost time and lost manpower. We just don’t have the staff to cover all of the systems.” (Able, 2003)

A vital aspect of being an effective Technology Leader is coordinating an infrastructure or team throughout the staff to help manage and fulfill the technological

demands. An article by Paula Moreira in Certification Magazine summed up the need for an effective IT team as “Effective teams perform better. They get the job done quicker with fewer mistakes. And they enjoy themselves while they do their job, which ultimately leads to increased productivity, greater loyalty and a higher retention of employees.”

(Moreira, Building an Effective IT Team, Certification Magazine, July 2003)

In addition to communication, forward thinking, and working with a team, an effective Technology Leader will view the systemic approach to how technology fits into the designated space. William J. Mitchell, Dean of MIT’s school of Architecture and Planning, and head of MIT’s Media Lab, stated, “You really can’t separate the issues of technology and the space that it accommodates at this point – you have to think of the two of them together.” (Mitchell, p. 12) In the interview Mr. Mitchell continues by saying, “Technology is going to become simultaneously more sophisticated, less obtrusive, and less visible. (Mitchell, p. 13)

Characteristics of and Ineffective Technology Leader

Mr. Mitchell commented that academic institutions are often the worst about anticipating the future needs, “they tend to be conservative and relatively unimaginable about these things.” (Mitchell, p. 13) Mr. Pansari stated that an ineffective IT leader is, “One who is only “reactive” to problems and situations. What we would call a computer “service” technician, as opposed to one who is able to plan ahead to avoid as many down-time situations and problems as possible.” (Pansari, 2003) Thus these gentlemen surmise an ineffective leader to be one who is shortsighted to the technological needs of the institution. Perhaps the reason that academic institutions were

singled out by Mr. Mitchell, is due to the fact that with budget cuts and staff demands, many “techies” or technologically advanced staff, are being called to grow into the role of a chief information officer – a role for which many are not prepared. (Leading and Learning, 2003, p. 46) The CIO role requires a different skill set than they are trained to provide, most of these “techies” are trained to be educators or tech managers. Yet school districts need strategic leaders who understand the return on investment, or ROI, and can articulate this need and vision to internal and external stakeholders. (Leading and Learning September 2003, p. 46)

So many times the ineffective Technology Leader simply gets bogged down in the routines of daily activities and problems and fails to see “the big picture”. This results in a demoralizing staff attitudes and a perceived lack of need or understanding. Thus the biggest aspect of an ineffective Technology Leader is an inability to have a vision of the future of technology. An ineffective leader is one who fails to successfully manage the vision, performance, and operations of an institution’s technological needs.

Conclusion

Corporations and academic institutions must actively seek to make a lifelong commitment to technology and to an effective plan and vision of this tool’s use if they are to survive. Effective Technology Leaders are the single greatest force in driving this vision successfully into the future. An effective Technology Leader must be one to see “the big picture”, to anticipate the changes and needs of the future, and one who can communicate with staff, clients, and customers. The daily routine cannot overwhelm him

without sacrificing the moral of his team, staff, and inevitably himself. For this lack of vision is the greatest hindrance of the ineffective Technology Leader.

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