Making Room for Yes: It Starts at the Top

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Overview

The first line of “One,” Harry Nilson’s 1969 song performed by the rock group Three Dog Night, is “One is the loneliest number that you’ll ever do.” When it comes to information technology (IT) service engagements, this line comes to my mind with a twist: “Yes might be the hardest word that we’ll ever do.” Although this attitude does not typically reflect how individuals in the IT organization think, customers often think that IT is an organization where no is the usual answer. Why?

In the late 1980s and early 1990s, IT departments were in the proverbial catbird seat. IT was fairly new, and customers relied on the IT “experts” to tell them what they needed and how to use it. As computing became more ubiquitous, however—word processing replaced the typewriter and client/server replaced the mainframe—technology became a crucial factor in the overall mission of the institution. Soon, having a redundant network, a stable e-mail system, and a fault-tolerant financial system became the expected level of service. It was IT’s job to deliver IT services around the clock, every day of the year, without a glitch. In a sense, IT professionals got what we asked for—demand for our services made us a critical part of our institutions’ missions. But some IT organizations and individuals did not evolve in response to these changes.

The 21st century brought exploding requirements for data storage and management, demands for multimedia integration, a new Web 2.0 paradigm, mobile computing, and higher costs of operation. Regulatory requirements, operational demands of system and application upgrades, end-user support, and the need to make everything available anytime and anywhere—this environment challenges every IT department, especially since there are so few windows of opportunity for maintenance and upgrades. The new millennium also brought a group of users to campus who have known nothing but broadband, instant access to information, and an abundance of tools for sharing pictures, documents, video, and other media.

In many colleges and universities, IT has gone from the catbird seat to being perceived as a barrier to progress. In an era in which higher education has to employ risky strategies to remain competitive on the global landscape, it is particularly critical for IT to be part of the solution—staying agile and helping to move the institution forward quickly, safely, and intelligently. For IT departments, shifting the attitude and perception from no to yes has a far bigger payoff than simply improving relationships within the institution. In fact, it can mean tremendous advantages for the institution as a whole, for current constituencies (faculty, students, and staff), and for future generations.

As Mark Cain stated in his 2002 EDUCAUSE Quarterly Viewpoint article, yes is not only the right attitude for our IT departments, but it is also a liberating attitude for IT professionals. If they think they do not have the authority or capacity to say yes to a request, the right thing to do is refer the request to a superior who might be able to do so.¹

This research bulletin provides some practical suggestions on how IT can become a valued partner in the mission of the institution by creating a culture of yes. Doing so requires strong leadership and intentional management. Even more important, it requires that the IT organization accurately reflect the true nature of the wishes of
institutional leaders and that it aggressively track technology developments that can be applied for the good of the institution.

**Highlights**

At the two extremes, IT organizations can be focused either on providing reliable, sufficient services (also known as “keeping the trains running”) or on using IT to lead the institution into new territory. Often, the new territory is attractive to IT professionals who can see the academic potential of important new technologies, but if the institution’s executives are not aligned with the concept of technology leadership, they are not likely to support this direction. Every IT leader must first understand where the institution’s executive leaders want IT to focus.

**Communication**

In order to get to yes, IT must be considered a partner, not an outside contractor rendering a service. For IT, the first step in partnership is understanding the business of the institution. In turn, other institutional leaders will seek to understand and value IT.

Striving for a win-win outcome is a critical skill for IT professionals. In *7 Habits of Highly Effective People*, Stephen Covey urges readers to “seek first to understand, then to be understood.” Although not everyone is a great negotiator, Roger Fisher, Bruce Patton, and William Ury suggest the following reliable principles that anyone can apply:

- Focus on interests, not positions
- Separate the people from the problem
- Look for win-win solutions

It’s unwise to respond to a service request with “No, we can’t do that.” The key to establishing a reputation of yes is ensuring that the customer’s need is met. This does not always mean that customers get the solution they had in mind; rather, it means they will get what they need, even if the particulars of the solution are different from those in the original request. Making room for yes is about building trust. Over time, customers will start sharing their goals rather than suggesting solutions. They will trust IT to find the right solutions. “Your customers should feel as if you are on their team working as a collaborator.”

Focusing on IT, rather than our customers’ needs, leads to a perception that there is no partnership. All too often, technologists think first about the amount of work it will take to implement a technology rather than the impact the solution will have on the customer or the institution. Other factors leading to a self-centered IT focus include 1) defensiveness—because we don’t know how we can fit the project into the priority list, and 2) superiority—resulting from the attitude that since IT is our business, no one should tell us how to do our jobs. If we think the customer is not knowledgeable and uses improper technical jargon, we might stop listening to the speaker, which is never a good idea. Also, when IT projects an attitude that a customer’s problem or request is bothersome, the chances of the customer coming back, if given a choice, are small.
Communication takes staff commitment and cannot be just included in “other duties as assigned.” Effective communication requires a level of skill and articulation that is not commonplace among technical staff. It takes time and effort—quality communication can be difficult, and communication methods should be tailored to the target population. It is important to keep in mind that first impressions are critical, and the opinions that faculty form about IT are often based on their first few experiences at the institution.

Every institution is different. Some have centralized support for marketing and communications, while in others each department is responsible for its own communication. No matter the model, it is important to have qualified and dedicated staff to deal with IT communications.

Trained technical writers/editors make sure that communication is consistent, achieves the objective, and makes sense to nontechnical customers. This group should be responsible for ensuring that IT is delivering the right message in a planned, intentional, consistent, and methodical manner. If the institution doesn’t have the budget for a dedicated communications staff, it might choose to use journalism students or English students, either as part of an internship arrangement, as part-time employees, or through other arrangements with academic units.

All too often, focus groups and surveys reveal that faculty, staff, and students are unaware of the many services that IT organizations make available. Even the most effective organization must successfully market its services. As William Cohen has observed, it is critical that 21st century leaders be good marketers. We should be focused on the customer and concerned with how customers view the organization and its services. The leader must set the tone for how the organization is viewed—and be its best representative. Following are some practical suggestions on how to provide better communications and market services.

Help Desk

When a customer contacts the help desk to report a problem or make a service request, it is most important for the IT organization to promptly acknowledge receipt of the request and to be sure to keep the customer posted on progress. Most help desk management systems have automatic notification and escalation. Consider setting up the system to provide notifications to customers whenever the ticket changes status. Keeping the customers informed leads to transparency, accountability, trust, and partnership.

Although both types of requests are handled by the help desk, problem tickets are typically seen as needing to be handled promptly, while service requests are often perceived as not having a similar sense of urgency. To the customer, IT’s ability to complete service requests in a timely fashion is critical because the request often impacts the customers’ ability to deliver on a promise to their customers.

Consider publishing a list of services provided, along with reasonable time frames for these services to be completed, such as:
Network jack activations—3 days

New financial report—5 days

Monitor service delivery to see if the target time frames are being met. If they are not, adjust the resources assigned to these tasks or publish new service time frames.

Website

Websites that focus primarily on the technologies the IT department delivers and supports and on the IT organization structure do not meet customer needs. For example, letting customers know that IT offers a virtual private network (VPN) service is valuable only when we describe the value it has for customers and how they can make use of it. A helpful website might offer a page on “Mobile Computing—Working from Off-Campus” that includes all of the available services and the means to access them.

Effective IT websites offer “landing pages” for every function (i.e., remote and mobile computing, teaching and learning, research technologies, faculty resources, storage, and so forth). For example:

- **Service: Storage.** This page should include all of the storage options, standard quotas, how to get more, and so forth.

- **Function: Teaching and Learning.** This page should include information about the learning management system, training, instructional design, multimedia, teaching toolkit information, classroom technologies, and so forth.

- **Function: Research Technology.** This page should refer to or describe storage options, data management support, high-performance/grid computing support, lab support, and research software. This is good place to put links to the institutional research and grants departments.

To keep an IT website dynamic, consider including the following information to stimulate an educated user base:

- Tips and tricks

- Frequently asked questions (FAQs)

- Top-10 problems of the month, with appropriate solutions

- IT projects

- Interactive knowledge base

- Service level agreements (SLAs) for standard services and problem tickets

- Information related to research (i.e., budget, grant information, FAQs, training sessions, search engine for all active research projects for collaboration purposes, documentation, specific software, and so forth). This should be created in partnership with research administration.
• Case studies about using IT services
• Use cases for using technology in classes or research. Create a blog for faculty to share their use cases.
• A discussion forum for support communities (i.e., SPSS support, Final Cut Pro, Banner Reporting, and so forth)

The IT organization can make great strides toward eliminating institutional silos simply by structuring information properly on departmental websites. Consider integrating technology information on the functional website the technology serves. For example, put all of the technology information for human resources on the HR site. Likewise, integrate research technologies with the vice provost of research or the office of research administration. As needed, these technologies can also be linked from the IT site. When IT works to showcase the customers and their services, it becomes a win-win for everyone. There’s advocacy on both sides—finger pointing is mitigated, partnerships are enhanced, and perceptions are turned from negative to positive.

Internal Communications

One of the significant points of Patrick Lencioni’s *The Five Dysfunctions of a Team* concerns how much time the senior management spends together.\(^6\) Intentional and focused effort to build trust within the team is imperative. Below are some suggestions that may help to bring your senior members into a performing, productive team.

**Weekly**

• IT directors present new project proposals at leadership meetings and take time to discuss the staff and financial impacts.
• Report on at least one positive event that occurred since the last meeting.

**Quarterly (ideally, off-site)**

• Review all project status reports.
• Review and update progress on tactical plans associated with the strategic plan.
• Review and discuss each department’s budget.
• Review and discuss open positions.
• Each director presents a report on operational plans for the next quarter.
• Discuss problems and staff morale issues, and identify solutions.
• Review and discuss the things that are working and how to improve them.
• Review customer service reports (i.e., aging report, top-10 problems, top-5 departments, top-10 customers, etc.).
Other Considerations

It is a fundamental principle that the urgent interrupts the important. Several years ago I worked at a health science institution with a teaching hospital where we had to wrestle with chronic unplanned IT service interruptions. After doing a root-cause investigation, we determined that we needed a scheduled weekly window to do maintenance. After negotiations with the hospital and college administration, we established a four-hour maintenance window every Sunday night from 10pm to 2am. Within a few weeks, the unscheduled service interruptions virtually disappeared. Although the time was not convenient for my staff, it brought stability to the environment. Do not underestimate the importance of weekly maintenance windows, which enable the IT staff to focus on strategic initiatives without unplanned interruptions. An added bonus: the absence of unplanned service interruptions leads to increased customer trust.

With respect to managing resources, consider moving poor performers to other tasks under a new manager. Even a gifted athlete may not perform well in the wrong position, especially if she or he is under the wrong coach or with the wrong team. Personal chemistry makes a difference. If this action fails, however, begin the paper trail for termination. You need everyone “on the bus” going in the same direction.

Before asserting that the department is insufficiently staffed, perform a comprehensive assessment of the organization. Are you organized efficiently? Would the organizational chart make sense to another CIO?

When evaluating the staffing in your organization, develop a chart of training that your staff has attended in the past two years. Is it adequate? This exercise is also a good opportunity to take a step back and evaluate whether the training is actually advancing staff skills in the right direction.

In these days of shrinking budgets, consider setting up a test lab environment for staff to experiment with new technologies. You can save valuable training dollars by providing an environment for the staff to try new things without fear of impacting production.

Good resource management creates a culture of confidence and enthusiasm, which in turn results in a positive perception of IT by the customers.

As we evaluate IT infrastructure, it is important to work with institutional leaders to identify what they consider “core functions” for the institution so that we can build IT infrastructure to support those functions. “Core” is whatever creates sustainable differentiation to create competitive advantage, while “context” is the catch-all description for everything that is not core. For example, is the institution’s core focus on teaching? Or learning? Or research? Do we really think e-mail and student information systems are what differentiate our institution from others, or are these simply context functions? Assess the resources devoted to context activities and investigate available options for redirecting these resources to core functions. Context systems still need to be supported, but institutional knowledge is not needed to perform routine maintenance tasks, which makes them good candidates for outsourcing to vendors or other options. On the other hand, it does take institutional knowledge to support the
core. Redirecting talented, star employees into core activities is a great motivator and morale builder. It impacts attitudes and performance, thus creating a positive environment for a yes perception.

“Research tells us that 64% of the software features and functions we develop are rarely if ever used.”

- Is this because we over-engineered and introduced features and functions our customers don’t need?
- Is this because those features and functions weren’t developed enough or marketed sufficiently?
- Did we invest adequate effort in helping people understand what the tools can do for them?
- Was customer and support training inadequate?

All too often, customers say, “My life was better before IT made me start using this new system!” Consider how often customers complain about not being able to perform a given task with the available technology, when the solution to this situation would simply require a few minutes of training. Implementing new technology should improve efficiency and productivity. An IT project or infrastructure upgrade should not be considered complete until customers appreciate personal benefits from new processes and behaviors.

**What It Means to Higher Education**

Higher education is under significant pressure to manage costs and increase services. Operational costs are increasing, forcing institutions to (reluctantly) raise tuition or find other funding streams. Tough choices have to be made—does the institution renovate faculty office space or invest in new classroom technology? We all know that institutional needs are always greater than available funding—especially for new funding requests. So, if IT is perceived as wasting money or if the division is perceived as a “black hole” of activity with questionable value, it is safe to assume that budget cuts and/or reductions in force will follow. The steps to make room for yes will not insulate IT from inspection, but if we’re perceived as a valuable partner, we may be able to avoid or minimize the cuts.

Higher education is as much about culture as it is about product. Learning to understand and work within that culture is critical to success. The biggest danger we face is to do nothing. Our relationship with the institution must be cultivated and maintained; we should never become complacent.

- Making room for yes boosts energy and optimism. Departments will be less likely to take on a “bunker” mentality of protectionism. “No is the saddest experience you’ll ever know.”
• Making room for yes creates a culture of innovation in which management and staff will seek ways of improving processes and driving toward change that benefits the mission of the institution.

• Making room for yes is not easy. It requires discipline across the whole IT division, starting at the top. The payoff is an organization that is valued and respected not only for the services it provides but for its leadership.

• Making room for yes is about change—not technical change or political change, but a change of attitude and culture. This cultural change takes time and requires persistence.

• Making room for yes means that we have to see things through more than just a technical lens. The CIO and the IT leadership team must be active learners of the cultural and political landscape.9

Remember, IT is not simply about technology; it is also about service. Great service can overcome poor technology, but poor service will doom great technology.

**Key Questions to Ask**

• What is our published service level for responding to problem resolutions and service requests?

• How do we communicate the status of IT projects?

• How do we assess the institution’s level of trust in the IT leadership team?

• When was the last time members of your IT leadership team sat in the back of a classroom or observed the activities in a research lab?

**Where to Learn More**


• Control Objectives for Information and related Technology (COBIT), [http://www.isaca.org/cobit](http://www.isaca.org/cobit).

Tanglao, Roland. “Core versus Context—Core creates value that competitors can’t replicate,” Roland Tanglao’s Weblog, http://rolandtanglao.com/archives/2004/04/06/coreversuscontext_corecreatesvalue_that_competitors_cant_replicate

**Endnotes**


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