Leadership

By Carol A. Cartwright

Today's CIO: Leader, Manager, and Member of the "Executive Orchestra"

After more than twenty years in higher education administration, I've come to think of the executive team of a college or university as an "executive orchestra" and the president of the institution as the orchestra conductor. Each executive officer is a highly skilled specialist—a soloist and ensemble leader—who, at various times in the life of the college or university, takes center stage. Although executive officers are expected to assume leadership in their areas of expertise, the president has final responsibility for selecting and interpreting the work, orchestrating all parts of the composition into a harmonious whole, and achieving a performance that meets with audience approval. Of course, in higher education, the compositions with which we work are mission statements and strategic plans, and our audiences range from parents to public officials.

To state the obvious, an overall institutional strategic plan should drive the information technology (IT) strategic plan and budget decisions—whether that means increasing distributed-learning courses, making transactions from billing to registration available on the Web, or offering advising via videoconferencing, all of which we've done at Kent State. Our Board of Trustees adopted the university's most recent strategic plan in 1999 after a broad-based planning effort that involved more than one thousand faulty, staff, and students. The plan leaves no doubt about the integral role of IT throughout the university.

As Kent State updated its strategic plan, we were replacing our networking backbone with a high-speed telecommu-nications network that links all academic buildings and residence halls on our eight Northeast Ohio campuses. The project—the largest installation project in NEC history—made Kent State one of the first institutions in Ohio to draw together video, voice, and data transmission on one network. In keeping with our commitment to partnerships and collaborations, the network also links Kent State directly to an area community college and allows us to offer courses and degree programs to other colleges and universities across Ohio. We are just beginning to tap the enormous potential of the network. To ensure that we do so to the fullest, and as another strong statement about the importance of IT to Kent State, I established the Division of Information Services and formed a search committee to find a chief information officer (CIO) who would serve as a full-fledged member of the executive orchestra.

The qualifications I sought in a CIO were the same ones I consider essential in all executive officers: proven leadership skills, strong management skills, and a solid grasp of the difference between the two. Possessing these very different and equally critical skill sets is particularly imperative in a field like IT, which is marked by rapid and unrelenting change. Whereas management comprises dis-

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crete activities such as strategic planning, budgeting, and problem solving, leadership comprises the broader processes of identifying and communicating a vision and, most important, inspiring the behavioral and cultural changes that are prerequisites for genuine transformation.

The reality of constant and complex change in IT led the CIO search committee to discuss the importance of in-depth technical knowledge and skills in the context of the leadership expectations for our CIO. The committee members concluded that several other qualifications were critical adjuncts to technical knowledge: the capacity to keep abreast of IT policies, issues, and trends in such diverse areas as information management, networking, data warehousing, computing, and educational technology; a comprehensive and keen grasp of general university operations and institution-specific culture; and an understanding of the local, state, and national higher education environment. As with every executive hire, I preferred a CIO who knew what questions to ask and how to evaluate answers—rather than someone who came to us with all the answers.

The search committee focused on finding a leader who could work effectively with a knowledgeable and skilled staff, who could provide mentoring, and

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who could be not only a team player but a team *builder*. In addition, it was evident that our CIO would have a key role to play as a communicator and thus needed to be able to articulate complex, technical information and issues to me, to the other executive officers, to faculty and staff, and to the larger university community. These audiences do not want every technical detail; they want lucid explanations of "what," "why," "how," and—of course— "how much." Finally, we needed a CIO who would take the approach that the job is not about technology per se but is about helping people become more effective and efficient, especially through the application of IT tools, about helping Kent State move forward, and about helping the state of Ohio move forward.

After an extensive national search, we found the best leader in our own backyard. Dr. Don L. Tolliver, Kent State's dean of libraries and media services for fifteen years, was named "Vice President for Information Services and CIO" in 1999. Like his counterparts at most other colleges and universities, he has been engaged in the critical work of leading the development of effective IT partnerships that support both individuals and academic/administrative units and that, ultimately, advance the university's strategic goals. On the academic agenda, for example, the Division of Information Services works closely with our College and Graduate School of Education on a number of projects to assess the impact of technology on teaching and learning. I look to our CIO to help nurture an environment in which faculty members in all disciplines are encouraged to experiment with learning technologies. Thus our New Media Group works with faculty who want to incorporate new technologies into their courses. The CIO also works very closely with our Faculty Professional Development Center on a wide range of technology-training programs. In partnership with the provost, the CIO plans for these faculty programs and makes every technology decision related to the academic mission. In addition, the CIO and the associate vice president for academic technical services attend all Deans Council meetings.

Our Division of Information Services is expected to cultivate and maintain connections to the administrative sector to an equal degree. At Kent State and at most other large institutions, planning and implementation for an enterprise resource planning (ERP) system will draw a large share of the CIO's attention in the coming months and years, as colleges and universities work to expand Web-based services, improve decision-making through access to timely and accurate information, and enhance productivity with technology tools. It is an understatement to say that the demand for the *information* in information technology will continue to intensify. For this reason, I recently expanded the size and scope of Kent State's institutional research unit and created the Office of Research, Planning, and Institutional Effectiveness. The unit, which is overseen by an associate vice president, reports to the CIO.

In addition to forging campus partnerships, CIOs will be increasingly expected to build mutually beneficial partnerships with the private sector. For example, last year Kent State became the nation's first public university to enter into a partnership with Adobe Systems Incorporated, the nation's third-largest PC software company. This new relationship with our Institute for Cyber Information will support faculty research on a variety of digital documents.

In the past two years, Kent State's CIO has played more than a few solos as part of the executive orchestra, communicating the importance of IT to the university's many constituencies and explaining how IT is coming to affect all aspects of university operations. As technologies and IT issues become increasingly more complex, the CIO's roles as educator and as communicator will be even more vital. Whether addressing executive officers, a faculty governance body, or the state legislature, the CIO not only must be able to perform as an effective soloist, providing the technology perspective, but also must be able to perform in concert with others in the executive orchestra, placing technology within the "big picture" of the institutional mission and strategic goals.

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