S. David Mash

Reflections of a former CIO

Leadership lessons learned

This year I returned to academic librarianship after ve years as the chief information of cer (CIO) for a small private college. For some, CIO is an acronym for career is over. For me, it is an opportunity for a homecoming with more to offer the profession I love. I believe I am a better librarian because of my half-decade stint in the bowels of the machine. My increased technical knowledge and the new insights I have about the inner workings of an IT department will serve me well. But these are the lesser part of the fruit of my time away from the library. The high-speed, high-stakes, sometimes high-pro le life as a CIO forced me to grapple with important matters of leadership with an intensity I often would rather have avoided. Yet now I would not trade those years for a different path. I come away from the experience with renewed convictions.

Leadership defined

First, leadership is not about power. A friend once asked me how it felt, as CIO, to be the most powerful person on campus. I was startled by the question. How would I wear this mantle? Over the years I remained conscious of the perception of power associated with my position. But an inner dissonance forced me to face the greater question of how power relates to leadership and how leadership may best be de ned. It is my conviction that a leader is anyone regardless of position or power whose moral bearings, relational skills, breadth of awareness, and decision-making practices are admired and emulated by others. Someone who occupies a posi-tion of leadership or power, but who lacks these qualities, may have subordinates who comply and peers who cower, but they will not be able to cultivate a sustained commitment to the course they set.

Second, stakeholder involvement is not an optional part of planning or project execution. Leaders continually make decisions that affect the daily life and welfare of others. This can become so routine that a leader might lose an appreciation for how his or her decisions weigh on others. The demands of planning and project completion can make it very dif cult for even the most collegially minded leader to contemplate, let alone fully process, stakeholder dynamics. But pure motives and busy schedules are no excuse for unilateralism.

Leaders who are serious about achieving sustainable positive change cannot dispose of the buy-in and good will that only stakeholder involvement can achieve. It is my conviction that those who must live with the consequences of a decision (aka stakeholders) really should have a signi cant and meaningful opportunity to in uence the decision. Leaders expect this for themselves, and the seasoned leader will provide it for others.

Third, strategic planning articulated in terms of means instead of ends is a dead end process. Ever-present institutional stresses make it easy for tactical thinking to

S. David Mash is director of the L. Mendel Rivers Library at Charleston Southern University, e-mail: dmash@csuniv.edu

masquerade as strategic thinking, resulting in the accumulation of mere project checklists. But IT strategy driven by bandwidth, wireless coverage, and replacement cycles is a dead end. Library strategy driven by holdings counts, building expansion, and digital format migration is a dead end. Important means become implacable masters when we fail to keep them unmercifully subordinated to nobler ideas of *why,* ideas which transcend lemming logic: everybody s doing it.

Of course, inattention to trends may be professional malpractice, but following trends because they are trends is not leadership. In place of counting the number of chill bumps generated by an idea, it is my conviction that planning must be disciplined by a compelling purpose for which. Good ideas that have no explicit connection to that purpose are not, in the end, good ideas. This purpose will vary from context to context but the need for such a compass point does not.

Stephen Bertman has observed that supported by an electronic network of instantaneous communications, our culture has been transformed into a synchronous society, a nationally and globally integrated culture in which the prime and unchallenged directive is to keep up with change. [1] I am a daily bene ciary of the synchronous society. But my life as a CIO was often frenetic and the speed of change left little time for re ection despite my conviction that prolonged re ection is the soul of leadership. As I return to the library, I take to heart the maxim of Will Durant, that no man in a hurry is quite civilized. I am therefore resolved to spend less time fretting over how to catch up with the direction the culture is going and more time re ecting on where this direction is taking us. As a leader, I need to know the difference.

Note

1. Stephen Bertman, *Hyperculture: The Human Cost of Speed (*Praeger, 1998): 1. ℘