



What Your Technology Staff May Not Be Telling You

In mid-size enterprises, executive leadership of the Information Technology function is frequently assigned to an individual with a limited technology background. Because of this, communication can become strained between the technology staff and the business leader, resulting in a great deal of frustration for both.

Even though technology and business leaders sometimes seem to speak different languages, we've found a bit of effort on each of their parts can ease relationships and lead to a more productive work environment. For the non-technical manager, understanding the following points about your technology staff may help better lead them to their fullest potential:

1. They often feel “out of the loop” in regard to business planning.

The most consistent frustration we hear from technology staff is that they want more information on overall business planning and initiatives. Technology staff members legitimately feel that they have a responsibility to ensure that adequate computing capacity in many forms is available to support the business. Knowing the general trajectory of the business (whether up or down) can assist them in making a number of decisions on a daily basis.

This communication can come in several forms. To begin, mentor your IT staff in how to obtain and interpret the information being made available to all employees. Include them in appropriate meetings even if only for their education. Your occasional initiation of individual conversations can also provide needed personal insight and allow them to ask questions.

2. They would appreciate clear guidelines on spending.

Many technology roles involve procuring goods and services of some sort. This could be new notebook computers, replacement file and database servers, updated network equipment, or upgraded software licenses. It is extremely frustrating for staff to spend considerable time (and sometimes deplete “relationship capital” with vendors) on these matters only to find funds aren't available or the investment doesn't meet some previously un-stated criteria.

You will do both your IT staff, and yourself, a big favor to clearly communicate the guidelines for spending in your current business climate. If you need to “tighten your belt” and spend only on what's essential this year, just let them know. If business performance allows for some above average investment, then that would be welcome news as well.



If you have specific criteria used to judge investments, then provide some education. Many businesses have less formal criteria that technology staff members don't have the context to understand without some help. If your company strategy favors spending to benefit one group over the other (e.g., the sales staff over the accounting staff), letting them know these un-stated preferences can provide immense help.

3. They take it personally when something breaks.

Technology professionals (at least the ones you want on your team) have an intrinsic understanding that your organization is dependent on the products they support for your organizational success.

Outages, particularly those affecting a large number of your employees (or worse yet, your customers), can bruise the ego of even the most confident members of your staff.

Our recommendation is to set appropriate standards for system unavailability and hold your staff to those standards. However, understand that in today's complex technology environment, "bad" things are sometimes going to happen. In the midst of the problem, you're probably best just to let your staff know you'll support them however you can. After the problem is resolved, work with them to understand the cause (as often as not it may be from a source no one could have expected or, potentially, even one out of their control) and how it might be better resolved in the future.

A few words of praise for their expertise in handling the issue would be welcome as well.

4. They're concerned about their significance being diminished by emergent technologies.

That's correct – the people who have brought you organizational productivity and implemented your technology products are worried about their own obsolescence.

A number of highly valuable skills are now becoming less critical with the advancement of cloud technology and alternative staff models. Why should businesses maintain a highly paid e-mail server expert on staff when e-mail accounts can be sourced on a commodity basis from cloud providers? Why should



on-site software developers be paid a prince's ransom when you can use offshore resources?

It's important to have frank, ongoing discussions with your staff regarding these issues. Their highest value is often not where they think it is. Also, it is much rarer to reduce IT staff than it is to repurpose them for higher-value tasks. Relieving the server administrator from the daily tasks of managing the e-mail server may allow time to improve performance of the network infrastructure that is unique to your business. Offloading routine report writing to a less expensive off-site resource could provide your key software developer needed time to collaborate with your operations team on improving key business processes.

5. They really like to experiment with technology.

Most technology professionals have a curious mindset and like to experiment. Their success in their work has come from an ability (even desire) to spend countless hours in front of a computer screen trying different solutions to find what does, and doesn't, work.

To address this need, many of the biggest technology firms (e.g., Google and LinkedIn) provide their employees up to one day a week just to experiment with projects of the employees' choosing with no specific expectation of results.

While you might not be able to make this concession of time, you can support technology staff in their quest to learn more about their craft. Encourage their experimentation with products that could be low cost but provide value to your organization. Relish in their accomplishments when it brings value and keep encouraging them when it doesn't. Many employees will spend considerable time outside of their normal working hours on these pursuits. Your encouragement of (and paying for) training classes, donating "obsolete" equipment for their experimentation at home, and being willing to let them use some "on the clock" time for experimenting will go a long way towards making them more content, and producing better results for you in the long term.



6. They are often hesitant to engage outside help.

The growth in complexity of the technology environment over the last decade has resulted in multiple specialists being required to maintain all the needed components of the technology landscape.

One of the first items on our checklist when assessing an organization's IT group is their usage of outside services for either occasional complex problem assistance or ongoing management of technology components. Too often we find that the internal IT staff, for a number of reasons, doesn't have good working relationships with those who could assist in moving the technology agenda rapidly forward.

There can be several reasons for this, but the most common we see is the IT staff feels that the business leaders look to them to be able to resolve any problem that may arise. Our recommendation is that you make them aware that you know that it is impossible for even a large IT department to have all the needed competencies available in their full-time staff. When planning large technology implementations, we would recommend you require your staff at least have the plan validated by an outside source, even if this source won't provide any tangible assistance during the implementation itself.

Conclusion

While business leaders and technology professionals may come from very different points of view, improved communication can pay off handsomely in the form of decreased frustration and improved responsiveness to the organization's goals.

We encourage you to promote open lines of communication, try to see the world occasionally through the eyes of the technology staff, and help them develop a clearer view of your world as well.



***Technology Topics** is a series of communications by Mike Davidson for clients and friends of OnCourse Technology Group, LLC. To be placed on our mailing list, please visit our website at www.OnCourseGroup.net or e-mail us at info@oncoursegroup.net.*

About OnCourse Technology Group - Headquartered in Birmingham, Alabama, we provide consulting services for businesses seeking to improve operations and profitability through the application of Information Technology. Our goal is to become the trusted advisor to our clients in all matters relating to the usage of technology products. Our services include strategic planning, software selection, and implementation project management for a wide range of businesses.

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