Management Is About Relationships

by Carole A. Barone

At the 1995 CAUSE annual conference in New Orleans, CAUSE presented its ELITE Award for Exemplary Leadership and Information Technology Excellence to Carole Barone. The award recognizes outstanding professionals in the field of information technology management in higher education. Dr. Barone addressed nearly 2,000 information resources professionals at a special luncheon at which she was honored. Her remarks, from which this article was adapted, compared the challenges of managing an IT organization to those faced in rafting and mountaineering, two sports in which she is an avid participant.

A few years ago I rafted down the Box Canyon of the Rio Grande River. It was early spring, just the second day of the rafting season. The river was high and wild. Early in the run we came upon a kayaker trapped in a whirlpool. The kayaker calmly steadied his boat as he waited for the river to shoot him out. I thought that he should be fighting to get free. However, our guide pointed out that the only choice the kayaker had was to wait in anticipation. At that point, the kayaker could do nothing to help himself, nor could anyone else help him.

You could say that the kayaker had not established a good working relationship with the river.

When you run a river or climb a mountain, you do not call the shots. Instead you have to read the river or the mountain and figure out how—or even if—it will allow you to make your journey. The river, with its challenging rapids, waterfalls, and whirlpools, often comes to my mind these days as I find myself pondering the role that we in information technology organizations must play in the transformation of our institutions.

I consider that I might end up spinning in a whirlpool (toward an unknown, and likely undesirable, destiny) if I try to impose my will—my notion of the best route through the transition—on the campus. Having been caught in my share of whirlpools over the years, I have learned to hire a good guide. I have also learned six lessons about relationships, which I would like to share with you.

Lesson #1: Build a relationship with your institution and with the people who make it work. Get to know it and them well enough to be able to discern what is possible, and when.

All good relationships require attention, understanding, respect, hard work, and compromise. Relationships succeed because of compromise. I have been fortunate in having colleagues who have been kind enough to point that out to me from time to time.

The Faculty Senate is a powerful governing body on our campus. Last year, during a brief but unfortunate lapse into ego gratification, I became engaged in a battle of wills with the faculty member who was the chair of the most powerful Faculty Senate Committee. When the chair of the Faculty Senate heard about it, he called me and suggested that I phone this person and offer to sit down and talk about our differences. It didn’t really matter that I was right (and I was right, and I dearly wanted to prove it). What mattered was that I not win the battle over that issue and produce a permanent rift with the Faculty Senate.

“All good relationships require attention, understanding, respect, hard work, and compromise.”
Carole Barone, in little more than ten years as an information technology leader, has become an influential force in harnessing information resources to the service of higher education. She has orchestrated transformations in two universities she has been associated with, as well as significant initiatives in several national organizations, with humor, creativity, hard work, and a deep commitment to the importance of dedicated staff.

Dr. Barone began a 22-year tenure with Syracuse University in 1969 as assistant to the comptroller. She served Syracuse as University registrar, director of student data systems, and, ultimately, as vice president for information systems and computing. During her six years as the University’s CIO she and her staff created a campus network and established a University-wide computer literacy program for all freshmen; by the time she left Syracuse all administrative information systems were online and interactive.

Upon assuming the position of Associate Vice Chancellor for Information Technology at the University of California Davis in 1991, Dr. Barone led the design and implementation of a distributed computing architecture and is now working toward creating a campuswide ATM network. She worked with the UCD librarian to develop a Center of Advanced Information Technology where faculty, staff, and students can explore leading-edge technologies. Apart from her roles at individual universities, Dr. Barone’s vision and energy have contributed to structures that advance goals important to all of higher education:

- During her tenure as chair of the CAUSE Board of Directors, the Board conducted a major strategic planning initiative, out of which came a renewed focus on professional development. Dr. Barone now chairs the Professional Development Committee.
- While serving on the Educom Board of Trustees, she chaired the Teaching and Learning Committee and was on the Educom Strategic Planning Committee.
- She has served on the steering committee for the Coalition for Networked Information from its early stages, helping formulate priorities and policy which are crucial to the effective use of the technologies.
- She has been a member of the National Learning Infrastructure Initiative’s Planning Committee from its inception.
- She was a founding board member of NYSERNET, the New York State Education and Research Network.

Dr. Barone has been acknowledged for her unselfish contributions to our profession. She has shared her experiences and knowledge with others through extensive writing, speaking, and teaching. Her work and vision bring direction to our efforts as well as encouragement to step across old boundaries and test new ideas. She challenges us to be solid professionals, solid citizens, and creative implementers of technology in support of the delivery and the administration of higher education.

Lesson #2: We need to have, and to be, colleagues who help each other to succeed.

Let me tell you the story of an administrator’s life. We’re born and our mothers think that we’re wonderful and they always will. We get married, and our spouses identify for us all those little ways in which we are not so wonderful. Then we reach a point in our careers in which we have an administrative assistant, who knows all of those ways in which we are not so wonderful and compensates for them.

River runners, climbers, and others who love adventure have their trusted partners; they know each others’ skills, strengths, and weaknesses so well that they almost work as one. You know that your partner will be there, especially when the going gets tough.

Lesson #3: There exist in our professional lives some very special relationships; acknowledge them and value them.

Sometimes a rafter or a climber will form an association with an adventure travel company to enable him or her to experience an especially remote or difficult adventure. Likewise, functional units are seeking partnerships with IT organizations to experience the adventure of developing new application systems.

Adventurers choose their partners very carefully; they team up with people they trust. Good communication is vital to survival on a difficult river run or technical climb. Trust is built on communication.

Consider how we must truly terrify some of our campus partners. Our vocabulary is strange. They don’t understand our skill sets. Consequently, they don’t value them. Our methods of working frighten them (and vice versa, I might add).

In speculating about why we and our partners often find it so difficult to communicate, it occurs to me that there is an awful lot about power and control in relationships, and it usually isn’t good. If you don’t work out a healthy balance of power, you are into a troubled relationship in which both partners (and the institution) suffer.

On our campus, we recently embarked on a financial information system development adventure. It is instructive to note that our assistant vice chancellor for accounting and finance and a member of his project team are attending this
conference. Although I might wish to believe otherwise, I assure you that they did not come to New Orleans to see me receive the ELITE Award. They came here to learn more about the hocus pocus that we wave over their functional systems, and frankly I’m glad they did. I am confident that the CAUSE95 program sessions will establish our credibility with them.

Seriously, building a relationship that allows the IT organization effectively to execute its enabling role in institutional transformation is the greatest challenge we and our partners face. The problem is that neither we nor our partners have recognized or dealt with it as a mutual challenge.

**Lesson #4:** Communication, mutual respect, and trust are fundamental to any good relationship; they are more important than technical or functional competence in our partnerships with our clients.

If ever there were relationships that I have valued, they have been with the people with whom I work every day and whose competence I respect. I am honored to have staff colleagues from Syracuse University and UC Davis here today.

The most difficult part of leaving Syracuse University was knowing that I would no longer be working with this group of professionals, whom I had grown to know, respect, and to care very much about, over a period of more than twenty years. The most wonderful aspect of my tenure at UC Davis has been the relationship that I have with my IT staff colleagues.

Navigating through a period of institutional transformation is like running rapids in a river. Knowing that they must deal with difficult and capricious conditions motivates many a lone kayaker or solo climber to team up for enhanced safety and increased odds at reaching the desired destination. These are strong, capable, independent people who are wise enough to realize that what one accomplishes is the result of interdependencies and relationships.

I could have accomplished nothing without the loyalty, support, and competence of the staff colleagues with whom I work at UC Davis. When I think of the courage, steadfastness, and good humor that they have displayed as we have worked through the agonizing process of change in our organization, I am overwhelmed. I am under no illusions about how difficult it has been for them to carry us to where we are today, because I know how difficult it has been for me. We have learned and grown together. I am a different, and I believe a better, person because of my association with them.

**Lesson #5:** Our staff are our colleagues. We need to be able to rely on each other. Since we’re making this exciting journey together, we might as well enjoy each other and have some fun along the way. Harmonious companions enhance the satisfaction of a journey successfully completed.

Climbers, white water rafters, and others who relish risk often have families who do not share their passions. One hopes that in responding to their own needs to face and surmount danger they have taken the time to work through the consequences their actions could have for those who are closest to them.

This is also true for us as we develop as professionals. The accomplishments for which I am being recognized through the ELITE Award are those that I should be engaged in at this stage of my career. In the beginning we focus inward on our personal development and that of the work unit. As we gain experience and take risks, like changing jobs or speaking out, our scope of involvement and influence broadens, and our obligation to serve beyond our own campus grows. We move from paddling a stream to running the Colorado River.

Those who are closest to us share in both the good and bad of the choices we make along the way. As I have progressed along my career path, my husband has always been with me. My career choices have affected his life. Of course, he would tell you that some of my mountaineering choices have threatened his life. I could not have made my way through my career, much less my life, without him. My husband has taught me to stay true to your values and to place integrity above all else.

**Lesson #6:** Staying true to your values makes you strong at the core. When you are strong at the core, you make choices. When you are strong at the core, there are no insurmountable obstacles.

You can tell that the ELITE Award prompted me to reflect upon (actually obsess is more accurate) the relationships in my life. This is a very humbling experience because you become acutely aware of how many others are responsible for enabling the achievements that are being attributed to you.

I want to thank the SCT Corporation for the generous scholarship donation to the Students First Fund at UC Davis; it is being matched dollar for dollar by our student association. And a special and heartfelt thanks to the CAUSE Recognition Committee for selecting me for this honor, which is very much about professional, collegial relationships.