EDUCAUSE announced three “special focus” leadership awards for the year 2000. David L. Smallen, Director of Information Technology Services at Hamilton College, and Jerry Niebaum, Assistant Vice Chancellor for Information Services at the University of Kansas, won the Leadership in the Profession Award, for displaying exceptionally effective leadership in campus information technology use and management and for mentoring other professionals. Jeffrey I. Schiller, Network Manager at MIT, won the Leadership in Information Technology Award, for visionary achievements and effectiveness in identifying and advancing technology directions for the various needs of higher education. In a panel presentation at the EDUCAUSE 2000 annual conference, John Bucher, Director of Information Technology at Oberlin College, asked the three winners a few questions about their leadership roles in higher education and information technology.
by James A. Autry.

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EDUCAUSE:

When you make a decision, there is always a regret. There is always the choice you did not take, the path you did not go down. But that's the nature of change. The only constant in this business is change. The only thing we're going to happen the same way tomorrow as it did today is that we're going to change yet again. It is critical, I think, to prepare people—the people who work with you, the people who work for you—for that change, and to prepare them so that they understand that just because the technology changes, they don't need to feel threatened. They may have to change. The work may have to change. But that doesn't necessarily mean we have to change the people. Instead, I think we have to prepare the people to be able to make the changes with us.

Jerry Niebaum: I like that a lot. I really like the philosophy of the one-minute manager: that's about the length of my attention span for looking at leadership. I like the part that says “Catch someone doing something right.” That little simple thing is what we ought to try to look for. So often we focus on what people are doing wrong. You take an excellent employee, and he or she does 99 out of 100 things right, and you point out the one thing done wrong, and the employee will obsess over that one thing. So catch people doing something right.

David L. Smollen: I'll take a different tack. There was a good scene in the movie The Karate Kid when Mr. Miyagi points out the key to success in karate is balance. I think that's also what I find to be the most effective in the kind of institution that I come from. There are always folks trying to push things very fast. We know that the technology is moving very fast, but we also have traditions and we also have an institutional culture that changes at a much, much slower pace. I think there's a need to play a balancing role in almost any discussion, taking either side of a question. I have found that at least at Hamilton, a very traditional kind of place, this balance has been very important in leading a technology organization.

Bucher: OK, so what does it take? How do you provide that kind of leadership? Is it simply common sense? Is it paying attention? Is it something we're born with? Where do you get it?

Smollen: I don't believe you're born with it. I think you're born with certain characteristics, so you have to play to who you are and what kind of person you are, but I don't think there's one right way of doing this. If the notion is true that leaders are born, there wouldn't be any need for things like the Leadership Institute, where you can bring people together and see that everyone has a role to play and that everyone can lead according to the way that works best for the individual.

Niebaum: I've got a one-year-old grandchild, and I notice it's really interesting to watch kids develop. They develop by making mistakes and learning from those mistakes. Sometimes they repeat them and sometimes they don't. I think that leadership too comes in steps of making mistakes, recognizing the kinds of mistakes that we make by seeing what things do work right and do work well. I think you've also got to be enthusiastic about what you're doing. You're really got to like people and like what you're doing in order to be a successful leader. And that comes through to your staff—you're enthusiastic. I've always been excited about technology, and that rubs off on your staff. But you learn in small steps.

Schiller: I also believe that leadership is learned, though I think that maybe some of us learn at a very young age and some of us learn it at an older age. But the first step is confidence. What do leaders do? Well, leaders inspire others, but leaders also take risks. And to take a risk, you have to be willing to say: “I may make a mistake. I may fail.” And you have to have the confidence in yourself to say: “That's OK.” You have to develop that self-confidence so that you're not afraid of making mistakes. And you have to bolster the self-confidence of your staff so that when they make a mistake, they don't become afraid to fail. Because leadership in some ways is about risk. And it's also about learning constantly, learning new things. I think it was Jerry (Niebaum) who said that you should make sure you laugh at yourself because otherwise you leave that job to others. That's a very funny statement, but it's also very, very deep concept. The idea is that you shouldn't take yourself seriously you have to have confidence, you have to love what you do, and you also have to realize, at some level, that it's a game.

Niebaum: I want to add to that we learn from others as well. We all have our mentors or role models that we try to use, and they're there for us. But you have to have confidence in yourself. You have to be able to take risks. And how do you do that? You have to develop self-confidence. And you have to develop the ability to do something new. And you have to be willing to take a risk. That's important, not only for the organization but also for you: sometimes you're not run over by a bus, but you do want to take advantage of other opportunities. And so it takes time. It takes time to explain to people. Sometimes it involves just sitting with people, having them ask you questions very informally. Mentoring is a time-consuming thing, but it's an investment and it's a worthwhile investment.

Niebaum: John Bucher made me aware of another concept, which I'll call “retrospective mentoring.” John worked for me for almost twelve years, and I failed seven years, and since he has become successful in the field, I consider that I will consider that I did not really realize it at the time.

Bucher: You may not have actually thought, “I'm mentoring John,” but I do consider you a mentor, Jerry. When I went to the University of South Dakota in 1987 for my first director's position, I asked myself on a regular basis, “What would Jerry do?” Every time we had a problem, I'd say to myself, “What would Jerry do?” Now often times I didn't come up with an answer to that question because it wasn't always clear what you would have done. You told a lot of different things at different times. But over the years, I've picked up what I call “mentoring moments” — the little things that people do and that I remember, such as a particular way of dealing with a problem or a particular way of motivating staff or getting people excited about a project.

Next question: Assuming that partnerships and collaborations are important

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in leadership, what are some of the ways that you develop nurturing partnerships and collaborations? What are some of the approaches that you take to make these happen, especially when the people you need to partner with may not be all that willing to partner?

Smaller: Collaboration is hard. It’s hard work. So you need a good reason to do it. I think that’s the first thing. Many people have talked about collaboration from the perspective of being more efficient and saving money. These may be benefits, but I don’t think they’re the main point. There are things you simply can’t do by yourself, and you need other people, and I think when there’s a recognition of that need, then you should find other people who see that same need.

“...You’ve really got to like people and like what you’re doing in order to be a successful leader.”

But this isn’t about just electronic communication. It’s been stated that if we have electronic communication of between people, we should be able to collaborate as well with people all across the country. I don’t think that’s the case. We need face-to-face communication, and that fact is reinforced by conferences and meetings. We have all the electronic communication in the world, but for some reason 5,000 or 6,000 people showed up in Nashville in October 2000 for the EDUCAUSE annual conference, and I think a big reason is their need to talk to others face-to-face and in small groups.

Schiller: I think there are several types of collaborations. I was involved in MIT’s Project Athena, which was an electronic collaboration between DEC, IBM, and MIT. Key to that collaboration was a common vision and shared understanding that the three organizations working together would be able to do a better job than any one organization working alone. We were all physically located in the same building, on the same floor of the same building, because of that human communication aspect. A funny thing about human nature is that if you have a bunch of people who work in the same space, they will build a working relationship, and it doesn’t matter who they work for. You can have two groups of people who work for the same employer, but if they’re separated by a couple of miles, it becomes those guys and us guys. That’s human nature. That’s something that you have to recognize and that you have to counter in such situations. The fundamental point is that there has to be a common goal and a common vision. You can have loose-knit collaboration when the collaborators are physically apart, but the focus on the common goal has to be that much stronger.

Niebaum: I’m going to take just a little awards at the University of Kansas started including an award for the best team effort. Certain times the IT staff have been recognized for extramural team effort. And I think that’s the kind of thing that we have to move toward to get collaboration among our own staff.

Bucher: How does a successful leader make sure that his or her staff get the professional development they need? What role does a leader play in professional development?

Niebaum: I feel very strongly about this subject. For the years that I was Director of Academic Computing at the University of Kansas, we had something called TTT funds: Travel, Training, and Tools.

was my first introduction to what I would call “the prisoners” — people who are there because somebody told them they had to take so many units of in-house training. As somebody who tried to make the best of it, it wasn’t fun. These people would get bored and play a game called Torture the Trainer. They would think, “Let’s see if we can get his goat and he’ll explode or something.” So I agree completely with Jerry, who said that you have to be prepared to make the department to set aside the funds. We certainly do that at MIT and let staff know that we consider their development to be important and we will fund it. But you also have to encourage people; you have to get people to do what they’re interested in, and you can’t cross the line by saying I’m going to pay for it. Right now we are competing for extramural funds, and these companies will take extraordinary pains to make sure that their developers are happy. But universities are about students. They are not about the IT Department, and thus a big challenge is to keep staff motivated, to help them feel important in an environment in which they are often made to feel like second-class citizens. That, I think, is one of our toughest challenges right now if we want to keep good staff.

Bucher: How do you lead from the middle? That is, how do you lead when you don’t have ultimate control? How do you get the job done?
Niebaum: You need to know the priorities of your bosses. And sometimes that's not always easy to understand or to learn. But you probably should try to take specific steps to understand. What is your institution trying to do? What are the goals of the institution and of your immediate bosses? I had a provost tell me one time, “Jerry, I think you and your staff are really doing an excellent job of responding to user needs.” And man, I just lit up! Compliments from provosts are hard to come by. Then he went on to say: “That's not what I want you to be doing. I want you to be doing what the deans are needing or feeling that they need in their schools.” That was a real shocker. I was trying to focus on the user needs as the faculty and students were expressing them to me and to my staff, and the provost was saying that these were not the priorities of the institution. You have to pay attention to what the administrators say are the priorities of the institution because they’re looking at the institution from a different level.

Smallen: I think you have to find ways to get to that level, not as part of those groups but as part of the discussions that go on with those groups. I don’t think that’s too difficult. You can find ways to be in the information flow of those groups. It isn’t like these are secret meetings.

Schiller: I like to think of myself as an engineer. The definition I use of engineer is a person who solves problems for which there is no clearly laid out path toward solution. And operating within a fixed budget with a fixed set of rules that sometimes appear to be arbitrary and that you have to enforce on others is a challenge. There isn’t any one recipe for doing this. It depends on the situation. You do the best you can with the resources you have. I think you have to be open with people and say, “Look, I can only do this much.” For example, we recently had to move staff to a different building at MIT, and some people were not really interested in making the move and wanted to know if there was something we could do. I had to explain that we were moving some fifty people, that there were only so many places on the planet where we could put all of them together, and that indeed we could get them much nicer offices if we broke them up into little groups of four and five scattered here and there, but that we really felt that having the less luxurious office location was better than not having the cohesiveness of the group. In other words, staff need to know what the real constraints are because the people who make the decisions up the chain operate within constraints too. We need to try to understand what those constraints are and pass on your calendar and look for more information on the EDUCAUSE 2001 Web site: www.educause.edu/conference/e2001

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