

Penn State: Building a Community of IT Leaders

How One Leadership Development Program Has Helped Foster Collaboration Across the Institution

by Robin Anderson, Penn State University

In 2004, Penn State University began a journey to build a “new approach to shared leadership across IT.” The goal was to invest in promising individuals who could become proactive leaders, individuals who would understand what leadership looked like, who would have the skills to exercise it, and who would be committed to applying this knowledge in a way that served the larger interests of the University. This article examines the outcomes (expected and unexpected) of Penn State’s participation in the IT Leaders Program (ITLP) and how it has fostered an IT community that collaborates more readily and shares leadership more effectively.

It is natural for organizations to fill the ranks of its leadership with people who are promoted from within. After all, existing staff often have specialized knowledge of the work and familiarity with the culture of the organization. In technical organizations, such as IT, or engineering or science-focused organizations, where specialized knowledge is critical, this strategy has obvious advantages. However, it also has a built-in speed bump: the folks who are selected for leadership roles are usually distinguished by their technical expertise rather than their leadership skills. In many cases, individuals are asked to step up with little or no leadership training and sometimes with very little management experience. This would be difficult under normal circumstances, but since technical organizations are increasingly required to work collaboratively with others and to approach their work from much broader strategic perspectives, these new leaders are being challenged to grow into their roles while the organization is engaged in rapid changes on multiple levels.

These difficulties were visible in 2004 when Brian McDonald, president of MOR Associates, a Boston-

based consultancy, and Jim Bruce, just-retired CIO of MIT, interviewed CIOs from ten universities. These conversations focused on the potential content for an IT leadership development program that would provide emerging leaders with the frameworks and tools they needed to succeed in this more challenging environment. Four schools, Stanford, Penn State, the University of Chicago, and Duke signed on for the initial round of what came to be known as the IT Leaders Program. Since that time, twenty other schools have participated and over 650 leaders have graduated from the program.

When the IT Leaders Program was first taking shape, Gary Augustson, then Penn State’s CIO and head of Information Technology Services (ITS), quickly recognized the program’s potential to develop a set of leaders with enhanced skills and a much broader vision of what IT was trying to deliver to the University. He said at the time, “We want to empower people so they become better leaders, take more initiative, feel more ownership for what IT is doing, and work like we are all in this together.”

In November 2004 Penn State sent six participants to the four-session, eight-month pilot program, and these people found it such a positive, transformative experience that they became evangelists for the program. Then CIO Augustson reported that people came back from the first session “all fired up” and told him, “if you really want to create an environment that fosters shared leadership you’ll have to send a lot more than six of us to this program.” So began a long-term commitment to developing IT Leaders at Penn State. As of July 2009, the school has sent 138 participants through the program, the highest number of any university. Penn State’s alumni include 40 ITS staff, who

attended national sessions with participants from other universities, and 59 ITS staff and 39 distributed IT staff who have participated in local sessions delivered onsite at Penn State. These alumni represent approximately 44% of all IT management at Penn State and 75% of senior ITS leadership. Over this span, Gary Augustson retired and his successor, Kevin Morooney, became an equally ardent supporter of the program.

So why did the participants get “all fired up?” There are two answers. The first relates to the primary goals of the program: participants came away with a tremendous amount of practical information and new skills that they could immediately apply to their work. The second is the profound impact that occurred from people sharing a common understanding about what it really means to be an effective leader. Participants left the program with a common vocabulary, a common tool set, an ability to observe and appreciate each other’s perspectives, and a genuine desire to support each other’s development. In other words, the program created a group of skilled people with a shared vision who were inclined toward collaboration and part of a ready-made network. No wonder they immediately saw the value in expanding their ranks. Fast forward to the present: Jeff Kuhns, Associate Vice Provost and Deputy CIO, an ITLP alumnus, and long-time supporter of the program, recently noted, “An unintended benefit of this program - yet one of its greatest strengths - has been the creation of an IT leadership community. People who had never met are now part of a viable networked group who share a common language and approach to serving the University’s interests.”

A recent study, conducted by an IT Leaders project team, examined the alumni opinions about various aspects of the program. The results of that study, along with interviews of alumni, vividly demonstrate the impact of the program at Penn State.

On the personal side of the ledger, participants enjoy greater confidence; 97% of IT Leaders alumni feel more confident in their leadership abili-

“Penn State has a large number of talented IT staff. We expect these people to spend years developing their skill and becoming expert in various aspects of IT, yet somehow we think that leadership skills and talent will just happen. They won’t.

This program encourages individuals to think broadly about institutional goals and the challenges involved in meeting these goals. It also stresses individual thought and action to be folded into a collaborative environment, and consideration not only of the technical elements of a plan but of the cultural and political ones as well.”

Jeff Kuhns
Associate Vice Provost and Deputy CIO

“Strong, effective leadership is critical for any organization to be successful, and to grow and adapt as the environment changes. Leadership comes in many flavors and styles, and can and should occur throughout the organization at all levels. The IT Leaders Program provides the framework for individuals to develop as leaders regardless of their place on the organizational chart. Thus, the front-line supervisor of four people can grow to become the unit manager, department head, or senior director of tomorrow. Penn State will continue to reap the benefits of the IT Leaders Program for years to come.”

Neal Vines
Director of Information Technology,
College of Agriculture Science



A newly minted set of ITLP graduates

ties and 94% say that others have noticed improvements in their leadership skills. On this latter point, Morooney notes, “The program has created a cadre of leaders from different groups and backgrounds at the University who we can depend upon to step up as the situation calls for it.” And step up they have. Many applicants for the ITS CIO position, as well as for several other central IT senior leadership positions, have been IT Leaders alumni. A number of candidates have said that, prior to the program, they never would have considered applying for these jobs. It is apparent that alumni of the program are seen as a highly regarded qualification and confers some influence: search committees for these positions deliberately pulled in alumni, and the search committee for the ITS Senior Director Customer and Support Services was composed entirely of IT Leaders alumni from both central and distributed IT. Committee members who had served on previous search committees saw it as one of the most efficient and effective searches ever for a senior IT leadership position.

A personal benefit that translates to staff development is an emphasis on coaching, which is based on the results from a 360° evaluation of various leadership characteristics prior to the beginning of the program. Participants are provided professional one-on-one coaching over the course of the program and are taught how to coach as well. They typically find the giving and receiving of coaching to be valuable: 93% report engaging in more coaching opportunities with peers and direct reports, and one IT Leader has stated, “I now seek out coaching from others, particularly those I wish to emulate. I’ve assembled a small group of peers and mentors to make me a better leader.”

Another significant personal benefit is an enhanced ability to redirect energies to activities that will yield the most benefit. This is, in fact, a major theme of the program and appears in various forms throughout, beginning with establishing development goals at the outset (with guidance from their assigned coach), and progressing with workshop segments on “the immediate versus the important” and “leading, managing and doing.” Some 94% of

IT Leaders alumni reported they more effectively prioritized important versus immediate tasks as a result of participating in the program. They also report a more proactive than reactive approach to their work. IT Leaders alumni use delegation and development of their staff, along with defensive calendaring and consideration of capacity planning, so they can work on the “right things at the right time.” As one alumnus states, “E-mail is no longer the first thing I check.” They make “focusing on priorities” a priority by blocking time weekly to review and plan.



The Committee on Institutional Cooperation (CIC) ITLP participants engage in a planning exercise with other Big Ten schools

They have applied their knowledge to other facets of their work as well. Mairéad Martin, ITS Senior Director of Digital Library Technologies, said, “The program made me approach leadership much more deliberately and fully appreciate the fact that effective leadership doesn’t just happen on its own in the gaps between meetings, time away from e-mail, etc.” And Renee Shuey, Principal Lead for the Identity and Access Management Initiative, noted “There has been a positive impact on meetings, both in content and organization. The overwhelming number of meetings we attend can be time well spent when organized.”

Strategic thinking is another major theme of the program. Having been invited to think strategically about the use of their own time (immediate versus

important), participants are invited to broaden their perspective on the organization. 100% agree they think more strategically and 80% use SWOT and gap analysis techniques, which help illuminate the landscape, improve decision-making processes, and build consensus for desired paths. One alumna, until her recent retirement, annually conducted a SWOT with her staff and reassessed strategic direction for the group. She also used their strategic plan to determine where limited resources should be applied. This litmus test helped to keep her staff from being scattered and trying to do everything. As an outgrowth of these types of experiences, IT Leaders alumni have influenced the most recent strategic planning cycle. The Information Technology Services Strategic plan, once developed by internal organizational units, was created as a single plan with input from University IT staff throughout the process. In addition, future Penn State IT Strategic Plans will be developed jointly by a cross-section of IT leaders, not just those from the central IT unit.

In interviews and surveys many alumni report that they are better able to act as champions for change initiatives because they take into account cultural and political systems as well as organizational structures. Dan Mroz, Director of Information Technology, Penn State Mont Alto, observed, "The program provided me with additional insight as to what occurs throughout IT at Penn State, the people that influence change, and how to be more proactive as a catalyst for change." Not surprisingly, IT Leaders also are significantly more politically savvy and influential, using both formal channels and their informal network to accomplish their goals. Program participants more willingly volunteer when they are needed, or see a need before others do and take it upon themselves to address the need, a fact noted by the CIO and other IT directors. Pam Fuller, ITS Senior Financial Advisor, illustrated this point by saying, "I am taking the initiative to step up on really tough issues and take action to move the issue to a resolution. It doesn't have to be perfect the first time – any movement towards resolution helps in the long run."

Participants from Penn State have researched and suggested solutions to a variety of relevant IT topics. These have included identifying the IT needs outlined by perspective freshmen in the Class of 2012, collaboration and teamwork across the IT community, creating environments that embrace change, fostering a culture of leaderful behavior, presenting seamless IT services, governance and financing IT in large research universities, identity management issues, as well as a variety of surveys to measure the effectiveness of the IT Leaders Program.

The IT Leaders Program, and Penn State's significant participation in it, has helped to create a positive circle of influence in the University's IT community, based on the foundation of leadership, management, and strategic thinking skills as they relate to higher education. Penn State's tangible benefits are evidence that leaderful behavior can be learned and modeled, that it can have a significant impact on a large, diverse organization, and that it can foster a culture of collaboration. As one alumnus states, "The IT Leaders Program has been responsible for giving us the same place/vocabulary to begin a conversation and sustain the conversation over time." And the overall effect on Penn State? Another alumnus summarizes it well, "By those leaders applying their leadership knowledge and tools, and working together, better overall decisions can be made, in turn increasing the overall value and quality of education that Penn State can offer."



Graduates and program leaders from Penn State's on-campus IT Leaders Program

About the Author

Robin Anderson was the Director of Customer Communications within Penn State's Information Technology Services (ITS), a position she held from 2001 until her retirement in 2009. In this role, Robin was responsible for presenting a coherent focus on what Information Technology Services provides to Penn State by creating greater visibility and understanding of the unit's products, services and successes. She was the ITS public relations and media contact, coordinated organization-wide information and distribution, and managed the ITS image. Robin was a member of the Senior Leadership Team and reported to the office of the Vice Provost of Information Technology.

She was an active member of the Commission for Women, serving as its chair in 1998-1999. One of her major goals as chair was to establish a mentoring program for women at the university in 1999, and re-instituted the annual Technical Services Workshop for women in the technical service ranks. As chair, she also established a strategic planning process, a budget management process and cost-benefit analyses for the Commission. In 2004 she was awarded the Rosemary Schraer Mentoring Award given by the Commission for Women. Robin also was an Administrative Fellow in the office of the Senior Vice President of Finance and Business/Treasurer during 1995-1996.

The IT Leaders Program in a Nutshell

The IT Leaders Program is a collaborative development opportunity designed to enable participants to:

- lead change initiatives by understanding culture and political systems, and organizational structures
- increase focus on the "important versus the immediate" by various strategies such as delegating, developing people, considering capacity planning, and defensive calendaring
- identify personal developmental goals and facilitate sustainable improvements using coaching as a means for supporting this growth
- enhance communication, persuasion and negotiation skills, and
- develop business and financial acumen at the enterprise level

The program is structured around three complementary tracks:

- a series of four to six workshops, offered about two months apart. These sessions provide a conceptual framework for leadership and practical lessons on specific leadership competencies
- individual development planning, which takes the form of a 360° survey administered and debriefed with an assigned program coach before the first workshop and, later, working one-on-one with the coach to develop - and track - personal development goals over the course of the program
- applied learning opportunities where participants are pushed to immediately put into practice what they learn, either by working on their development goals, by completing assignments between workshop sessions, or by collaborating with other participants on strategic projects of interest to the program sponsor

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