# MSU's IT Community Comes Together
A Case Study on Building Leadership Community
by Sean McDonald, MOR Associates

"We were just thrashing around."

This is how Jim Willson, IT Director of the Broad College of Business at Michigan State University, described the state of affairs in MSU's IT group in 2012. Collaboration did not exist. Silos were impenetrable. Even their homegrown Linux mail system was not built to share information. Local IT groups like Jim's were often excluded from needs analyses on new initiatives, resulting in suboptimal systems.
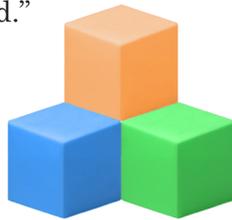
Furthermore, Jim looked on in frustration as his staff supported utility systems like file servers and mail servers instead of working on strategically important initiatives like research, academics, or student-facing projects. "If we can't do work that gives us a strategic advantage in the market," Willson wondered, "then why are we here?"

The chasm between central and local IT was clearly growing ever wider. Local IT staff felt ignored and nickel-and-dimed, and they were angry. Jim was fed up with the half-baked solutions and nobody taking initiative to fix the problem. There had to be a better way.

Around this same time, two significant events occurred in Jim Willson's life. First, his son was diagnosed with Stage 4 Hodgkin's disease. Though his son has since fully recovered, this living nightmare gave Jim a fresh perspective. He stopped worrying about "small stuff" like challenging cultural norms, speaking his mind, or taking risks. Work battles seemed trivial to the battle his son fought.

Second, Jim participated in MOR Associates' MSU IT Leaders Program. When the facilitator asked, "What's missing on your campus?" Jim felt like he was speaking directly to him. Of course, he knew the answer. For years he had wondered, why won't anyone step up? And then he had his aha moment: It's me. I need to step up.
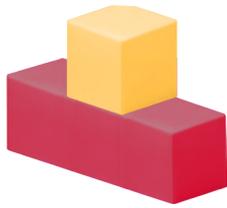
Exploration

Jim shared his aha moment with his MOR coach. His coach immediately introduced Jim to a senior leader at Penn State University. Three years earlier, PSU implemented a new approach to unite their IT community, creating an IT council with representation across PSU's IT landscape. PSU's IT Leadership Council resulted in greater strategic alignment, cross-organizational collaboration and decision-making, and increased engagement of staff. These were exactly the results Jim sought.
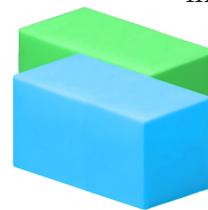
This senior leader shared lessons on what worked and what hadn't. She said that while it is possible to build such a com-

munity, there would be people who would not support it. She advised him to identify them and, although it may feel easier to avoid them, meet with and listen to them. Upon reflection, Jim realized this was critically important. He may not be able to convince everyone. But by engaging dubious people, he could at least prevent them from becoming an obstacle. Sure enough, as Jim met with these people, some of them senior leaders at MSU, he realized that many had a reason to be wary of a unified IT community. For some, it was a perceived loss of power. Others wondered what was in it for them. Still others had seen prior initiatives fail. There were skeptics abound. Each required a different approach to inoculate their objections.

For those worried about losing power, Jim guaranteed a seat on the board. For the WIIFM (what's in it for me) manager, Jim identified the manager's needs. Then, Jim explained to him how PSU's community banded together to create a new data center and wireless system – which, coincidentally or not, exactly described the manager's needs. The skeptic, a CTO and associate dean, was mostly concerned about wasting time. Jim interviewed him to understand why the initiative had failed previously and got his ideas about how to avoid the same outcome in the future.

All of these practices – neutralizing potential adversaries, inoculating objections, building buy-in, and sharing "social proof" of PSU's successful experience – built a solid foundation upon which to build a new community.

After these initial conversations, Jim championed the idea of an IT council more broadly. It took a few months to reach everyone. Most people were supportive because they previously hadn't had a voice. Once key people were on board, it was "go time."

Emergence

Jim asked for volunteers to write the charter for this potential MSU IT Council. Ten influential people raised their hands, including some previously skeptical people. This group used PSU's charter as a starting point, tweaked it, and sent to various IT groups for feedback. They kept pitching the charter and finally secured a critical mass of high-level support. Momentum was on their side.

To fill out the council's roster, they reviewed organizational charts to find and invite the right people. Council members needed to be able to speak authoritatively for each group/college. To ensure that this group had clout, Jim emailed all the deans to check that each council applicant was, in fact, the right person.

This was so new that some deans felt compelled to call the provost and EVP. Someone on campus was making decisions besides them! With nineteen colleges, and as many deans, the council decided to invite MSU executive leaders to their meetings. Their discussions included pain points, how IT could help, and the future of IT as it related to each school's strategic needs. The president attended one meeting and said, "People have got to stop doing what's best for their unit and start doing what's best for MSU." This really struck a chord with the council. They had been siloed for so many years. They began to shift to a stance that they did not work for a particular college – they worked for MSU. Together.

Effects

The IT Council had its first meeting in February 2014, over one year from Jim's aha moment. Because Jim had taken the time up front to listen, communicate and collaborate – up, down, and across the university – walls fell very quickly. People worked for the greater good.

For example, an instructor in the supply chain program could not get a physical lab to teach supply chain management. The instructor needed a Virtual Desktop Infrastructure (VDI) to connect people virtually. MSU has the top-ranked supply chain program in the US. This was a strategic priority. However, central IT did not have the time, money, or resources to support the VDI.

Several schools and groups – the business college, Agriculture and Natural Resources, Communications and Branding Strategy – banded together. They each repurposed state funding to solve the financial portion. Through their collaboration the IT Council members generated enough momentum and success so that central IT committed to supporting their efforts by hiring a full time employee to support VDI. Today, central IT continues to support VDI by making it commercial grade and working toward funding and staffing it centrally.

In another example, several colleges and groups all needed storage but none were big enough to buy it. Through IT Council meetings, they realized their common problem and took action. Five groups bought into a large storage system and let other schools piggyback on their system. They did what was best for MSU!

Office 365 is another great success story of the IT Council at MSU. At IT Council meetings, many people spoke about the need for Office 365. However, a workgroup determined that there was no support – financially, politically, or otherwise. The workgroup then surveyed the entire campus community. They asked participants what mail service they used and how much money they spent on it. It turned out that there was wide support for Office 365. The business case was there. The workgroup took their data and made the case to the CIO office and Office 365 was approved. Prior to the IT Council, the wide demand for Office 365 would have remained frustratingly latent; trapped by boundaries and silos. Now, students get free Microsoft Office and technical support. Perhaps even more importantly, the IT team has only one operating environment to maintain.

Echoes and Reflections

Ultimately, these examples illustrate a wider story of moving from talk to action. Of moving from folded arms to outstretched hands.
Of momentum.

The leadership demonstrated by Jim Willson and colleagues such as Barb Dawson, Mike Dawisha, Anne Phillips, John Resotko, Monique Dozier, Dave Vietti, and Nicole Rovig in the early stages of developing the IT Council – neutralizing potential adversaries, building buy-in, sharing "social proof" of PSU's experience, and involving senior leadership early and often – might not seem like much. But they sowed the seeds of collaboration.

The IT Council was a success because of the willingness of the units to collaborate together along with central IT. The campus-wide Microsoft agreement was just a start. VMWare, Qualtrix, and RedHat Enterprise are all now funded centrally for betterment of the university. In the past, there was just never enough forward momentum on any of these things. The IT Council collaborates to serve the needs of the
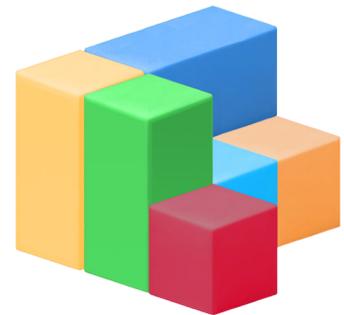
IT Community, gather data, get some people to step up, take action, and move the ball forward.

Now, they are building on their early successes to tackle long-standing campus wide needs: a new data center, network upgrades, and salesforce implementation.

When asked for advice for leaders in similar positions, Jim Willson reflected on his leadership program experience. Several lessons particularly resonated with him:

▪ When you observe things not getting done in the university, you must first get on the balcony for a wider view and then jump onto the dance floor to make it happen. It's up to you.

▪ Leading up is tough, but critical.

▪ Culture eats strategy for breakfast. It is critical to see things through the others' perspective to connect to their needs.

No longer thrashing around like fish in low tide, central and local IT now swim together as a well-coordinated school. Or, in this case, well-coordinated schools.