# TorchTech Forges NYU's Global IT Community Together

A Case Study on Building Leadership Community

by Sean McDonald, MOR Associates

In October of 2011, Evan Silberman arrived at NYU's Silver School of Social Work for his first day of work. Imagine his state of mind as he settled into his new office. As the first IT Director in the School's history, the smallest of the 22 schools at NYU, Evan was tasked with building an IT organization with zero resources and no connections. He was alone, seemingly amidst a sea of 16,000 NYU employees.
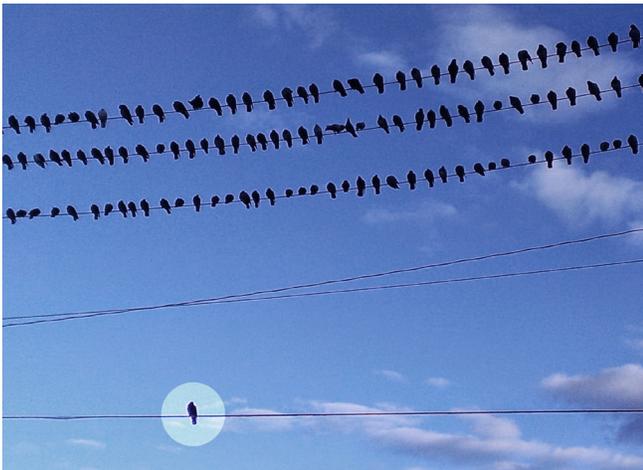
Due to the sheer size of the university, many of the IT employees felt disconnected from each other. In addition, each of NYU's schools and administrative units seemed to have different IT processes, priorities, and ways of operating. These challenges combined to make it difficult for Evan and his fellow IT employees to 'speak the same language' and stay aware of strategic priorities across the broader IT network.

But the other schools also had legions of talented employees and NYU also had a central IT organization. Further, technology was at the core of the university's mission and globally networked vision. The recipe for something special was there. Evan knew something was needed – something purposeful – he just wasn't sure what yet. And he wasn't alone.

Around the same time, Evan was nominated for and accepted into a MOR Leaders Program. This gave him the platform for support and reflection toward what he was experiencing in the context of delivering results in higher education. One lesson particularly struck Evan: "relationships are the coin of the realm." He began to see these widespread disconnections as an opportunity.

Exploration

Instead of rushing in with an answer, Evan took advantage of his "new guy" status. He asked questions. Evan met with everyone from individual contributors to the most senior IT leader at NYU, taking the time to listen and make much-needed connections. A theme emerged for the need for connected IT community. Through introductions from MOR, Evan also networked with leaders outside NYU. He discovered what other universities were doing to create communities, and why. With his homework done, relationships established, and credibility built,

Evan called together a group of NYU IT leaders and asked three questions: What would a community like this look like here? What would it do? And finally … Who's in?

From this pivotal meeting, they decided to form an IT community spanning across NYU. They would name it TorchTech. To kick-off TorchTech, they scheduled their first event. They were terrified that no one would show up.

Emergence

But show up they did. What started with one, soon moved to "Un." The first gathering was an "UnMeeting." In UnMeetings, a borrowed concept from Stanford University's UnConference, attendees create the agenda and lead discussions around the topics they propose. This was both symbolic and vital. People engage. They realize nothing is pushed upon them. This community would not work through the force of one; it needed the engagement of many.

NYU TorchTech
Forging a Global IT Community

After several more events, things really started to happen. They got a budget. TorchTech emerged as the "voice of the community" that spoke to the CIO council of NYU – a group linked to IT governance at NYU. This relationship took TorchTech's grassroots influence to the next level. The relationship between the two groups provides a way to filter information across the organization.

With that direct line to the CIO council established, it became incumbent upon the group to solicit, vet, and promote innovative ideas. To do so, they host Share Fairs, community poster sessions, breakfasts, and happy hours. Recorded events are sometimes broadcast via Livestream.com in partnership with NYU TV. Between events, TorchTech members use Google Groups and Google Hangouts to communicate, as well as Twitter and Google+. A WordPress-based Web site provides one-stop information on events, news, and ways to get involved with the group. Any idea agreed to by the TorchTech steering committee is a "go." Often, the person who brings the idea is the one to drive the initiative forward. In this way, TorchTech is part congregator and part accelerator.

Effects

Clearly, TorchTech has helped to facilitate the connections of a distributed IT network. Since its inception, TorchTech has hosted 12 events for nearly 1,000 attendees representing 55 different NYU organizations. Indeed, part of the power of TorchTech is in facilitating communication across 'silos.' Of the attendees, 38% were from Central IT and 62% were from Distributed Organizations such as University Service, Schools, or Institutes. These attendees were also diverse in terms of seniority (17% Managers, 30.6% Senior Leadership, 51.6% Individual Contributor). TorchTech published the first ever university-wide IT project directory and IT communities of practice.

Employees across all organizations now work closer with peers and have increased opportunities to learn from them. They meet with those responsible for particular technologies and understand their experiences and recommendations. They learn what to wait for and what to invest in now. As a result, they have greater awareness of the strategic imperatives of NYU and generate ideas to drive them forward.

TorchTech gives people an opportunity to contribute. They extend the contributions made at each of their schools and organizations to other parts of the University. With over three years of data, TorchTech leaders believe that these opportunities are beginning to result in increased employee retention. Engaged people stay longer and retention decreases costs. For these impacts and more, the TorchTech team was nominated for an NYU Team Achievement Award in 2014. Evan and TorchTech were also awarded the 2014 Campus Technology Innovator of the Year Award in Leadership, Governance, and Policy.

Echoes and Reflections

Despite TorchTech's success, Evan shuns the credit. "I was just the guy asking questions," he is quick to say. "It's not about being the person in the front of the room. Sometimes you can lead from the back." When asked for advice for those in similar positions, Evan Silberman shared these words of wisdom he first learned in his MOR leadership program. He saw these maxims play out first hand in real-life and now whole-heartedly believes them to be true:

- It only takes one person to start the ball rolling.

- Begin with questions, not solutions. If people sense that you have an agenda, they'll sniff you out immediately and tune out.

- The evolution of "I to We" and "My to Ours" is very important.

Evan also is quick to credit the TorchTech community members who continue to step up, in addition to his fellow cohort and coaches from the MOR Associates development program for insight and support.

TorchTech is now connecting with NYU's Emerging Leaders program to expand its' reach and longevity once more. With the involvement of a new generation of leaders, Evan hopes that that TorchTech will continue to iterate and innovate.