

# Culturally Relevant Leadership

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*The views and opinions expressed in this blog are mine personally, and are not necessarily representative of Texas Health Resources or its subsidiaries.*

One of my favorite things to do as a youth was to visit my dad's office. To get into the French Army compound unnoticed, I had to be smuggled, cloaked in an air of mystery and suspense. I'd hide under the dashboard of our military sedan as French security forces saluted our vehicle through the gate. Once inside, my dad would park the car in front of the U.S. Forces headquarters and, when given the clear signal, I would run inside where I savored a free existence among the U.S. military and civilian officials.

As my dad worked, I would pull up a chair to the massive wooden conference tables and desks and play office. I toyed with paper clips, erasers, pens, rubber stamps and other office paraphernalia. I loved using the electric typewriters and placing my classified papers into filing cabinets that filled much of the hallway space. I made pretend phone calls to other consulates and raided whatever candy jars were available.

Fast forward...

In recent years, I have entered ex-IT leaders' offices to discover that not much had changed since my youth! Searching desk drawers, I was surprised to unearth rubber stamps, legal pads and stickers. (Remember those gold stars teachers used to put on report cards?) With the exception of computers, these offices were even equipped with yesterday's furniture. Although digital automation was functioning, you'd never know it by the amount of documents printed and processed via historical methods. Despite all the digital storage media available, I'd speculate that we still store more paper than ever before.

We have an aging leadership issue, and I'm not necessarily referring to chronological age. Evidence supports the likelihood that our antiquated styles and methods are creating hindrances in raising the next generation of IT leaders. These future leaders need our wisdom; but are our succession plans hip enough to give us credibility? I am not the most avant-garde CIO out there, but I am cognizant of my need to continuously update my team and myself lest we become irrelevant to those whom we lead and serve. So I push myself. I still have a long way to go.

If I have offended you thus far, check your desk drawers before you reply.

Cultural relevance manifests itself in many ways: how we dress, lead, talk, use tools, interact with staff, innovate, etc. Assuming you already have the requisite IT skills, endeavor to keep up with cultural trends. What was relevant when you graduated is not so for today. Here is a test. Bring your father into your office. If he is comfortable with the tools you use on a regular basis, give yourself an F!

## How to stay culturally current:

- *Hire and promote it.* Do not be afraid to hire new blood right out of school. Promote talented individuals even if they don't have years of experience. If they're talented, they're teachable.
- *Hang out with culturally current people.* Having had two teenagers in our home has acted as a catalyst for me. I have also created advisory groups to keep me on my toes. The best one was

made up of second-year residents who gave me advice. I first learned of wikis and the power of blogs from them.

- *Experiment.* If you don't already have a LinkedIn and MySpace account, you are way behind. Bonus points if you conduct business via SecondLife.
- *Hang time.* Set up monthly after-work parties at the local watering hole, where people will be more likely to let down their guard and deepen relationships on a different level. You'll reap the benefits back at the office. I even had a foosball table in my office that helped eliminate intimidation and similar barriers.
- *Cross-pollinate.* Avoid spending your conference investments solely in health care. Attend non-healthcare venues and get to know people who don't look like you or share the same points of view.
- *Wardrobe.* Honestly, how old are your suits and ties? I picked the sharpest dresser in my IS shop and had him stop over to my house. He systematically eliminated about 75 percent of my work wardrobe. He then took me shopping -- and not where my dad shops.
- *Read voraciously.* Read blogs! Read from non-traditional sources of media. Gain fresh perspectives on everything from innovation to leadership. Managing Gen X requires different diplomacy than Gen Y, which requires completely different techniques than do baby boomers.
- *Speak and write.* This process will force you to differentiate and expose yourself to new ideas, vocabulary and trends.
- *Reduce e-mail.* Email is from the 90s. As my kids say, e-mail is for when you want to send a thank-you to your friend's mom for having you over for dinner. Push the limits with IM, txt msg and video.
- *Furniture.* My office furniture has no place to store paper. There is no table, except for coffee. There is no trashcan. There is no printer. Everything (phone, projector, tablet) is wireless. We are tearing down several cubes in favor of contemporary design that encourages innovation and collaboration.
- *Music.* Hey, I love 80s music. But I do my best to mix it up with the latest in sound. Listen to all -- yes all -- that your employees listen to, from Mozart to Moby. Admittedly, I still struggle in Texas with country.
- *Phones.* Do you still have a flip phone?

Being culturally current cannot be delegated. Be proactive, otherwise you'll end up only attracting employees who like to stamp documents and store them in mammoth filing cabinets. Candy jars are acceptable.