Answers to Questions Submitted for the Roundtable on 8/20

featuring William Dougherty, Dale Pike, and Carl Harris

The discussion on the morning of 8/20 was very engaged, and we were not able to get to the submitted questions. Later in the week, William, Dale, and Carl took a few minutes to share their answers to the questions sent in through the online form.

Where do you feel your unit stands on making an environment that is welcoming and inclusive to all? For your direct reports and/or your clients.

WCD: We are making good strides toward that end, although we recognize the national political climate (particularly as it relates to immigration policy) impacts our abilities. I recently attended my first university "Diversity Summit," and left with many ideas on how to improve on our approach particularly with writing position descriptions and recruiting. This is really a question that should be asked of the staff, however, as my view may be skewed.

DDP: I will say that we do several things that are intended to make our work environment welcoming to new colleagues and visitors, but this is an area where we likely have blind spots (if someone doesn't feel welcome or included, we may not know about it). In terms of our clients, we've made strides in building awareness among our team members regarding the ways that our environments and our activities can be designed with a more universal perspective, but again, we need to continue to improve our understanding of how people are experiencing our tools and services.

What, if anything, would you like your unit to decommission (including services) to make room for innovative work? What innovation(s) would you make room for?

WCD: Lesser utilized services would be the first to examine, as well as those that don't fit our core mission. For example, should NI&S continue to act as a pass-through for university provided cellular services? Is there value added through our involvement? What about cable TV? Is there enough demand to warrant continuing this service?

We would likely dedicate resources to more outreach/relationship management, and development to improve apps such as our customer portal.

DDP: We are beginning a comprehensive review of how traditional computer labs are being utilized with an eye toward modernizing our collective approach, including consideration of virtualization and mobile-first strategies.

For all, in what ways has the Division of IT better poised itself for carrying out its coming strategic and operational plans versus a few years ago?

WCD: I think articulating our Core Values is much different and has enabled a common vocabulary to be used while we examine our activities, particularly those that might not reach the higher standards we set for ourselves.

The all-hands meeting was also different, and I think opened a lot of eyes to our size, diversity, complexity, and overall friendliness.

DDP: I believe we are building better relationships with one another, which is an essential component of our success. The various programs intended to celebrate our colleagues and their successes are also improvements that contribute to a better climate.

CEH: I'll say that simply the recognition that we need operational plans as a supplement to the higher-level strategic plan is a significant factor that should help us succeed. I am concerned, however, that some of our draft operational plans aren't focused enough on measurable outcomes. We also still have much work to do at articulating priorities at the division level and aligning unit level priorities to ensure success. Too often we're impeding success by having too many interpretations of the priorities.

To better serve teaching, research and/or operations at the university, it's assumed you will have many stakeholders. How does your department/teams directly engage your stakeholders and get their feedback about the work you deliver? How is this done well and in what ways could it improve?

WCD: As I mentioned in the meeting, I personally attend IT Council meetings, and have had staff members (our Chief Operating Officer, Joe Hutson, and Service Owners like Steve Lee) attend as well. This is a good way to float ideas and receive input (often very honest and unvarnished) about our services. I have also appointed a Business Relationship Manager (Richard Hach) who is tasked with outreach and strategic alliance building. We conduct surveys (that's how we know those who occupy residence halls aren't watching cable TV). I'm also open to further suggestions.

DDP: In TLOS we've had a pretty good track record the past few years of engaging with stakeholders when we have a new program or project. We have not quite mastered the process of engaging in a similar fashion when we're in operational mode. We've got efforts underway to establish and/or improve our connections to key stakeholders, focusing on sharing info about our progress and seeking feedback.

CEH: I think that one of our challenges is that our stakeholder engagement is at the department level. We present many different faces of the division, generally with a service provider mindset, and we often leave all or part of our stakeholder needs in the gaps between the functions of our units.

For all, what question do you think should have been asked that was not and why is that question important (if any)?

WCD: What factors are making our services difficult to deliver or provide, and will that change positively or negatively over the next five years?

DDP: I did not receive any question and did not specifically include information about the good work we've been doing around Accessible Technologies, including the recent cadre of digital content specialists from across campus (including several from the Division of IT) who now hold a Certified Professional in Web Accessibility (CPWA) credential from the International Association of Web Professionals. Virginia Tech now has the most certified professionals of any university in the United States. These people will now apply their expertise to helping the Virginia Tech community identify and remedy challenging collections of content from an accessibility standpoint.

For all, what observations do you have about the pace of change with regards to the University as a whole and then specifically to IT at Virginia Tech? What approaches have you developed or plan and deliver strategic/operational results as a result of this pace of change?

WCD: Honestly, we talk a lot about change and how rapid it is occurring, but nothing happens that quickly at the university. The Innovation Campus is a good example; it will be five years before the first of a series of new buildings is close to being ready for occupancy. On the other hand, we had to perform network upgrades on the Holiday Inn Express and the Inn @ VT with very little lead time, so we must be ready for anything, regardless of whether it is due to a strategic decision or just poor planning.

Certainly, the Division of IT needs to become nimbler. In NI&S, Agile project management (and Scrum) have helped a lot, and while we use it in software development, it's being expanded to include initiatives and projects from the other Service Owner units as well. This can allow for more rapid course correction and provides a deliverable (Minimum Viable Product) faster.

DDP: There are many sources of change, and most of them are not under our direct control. Much of the change is potentially good, but the time and energy required to manage it seems

to be increasing. In TLOS, we've worked to establish some concepts and practices intended to help us manage the change. The overall focus is on our services rather than on specific tools or technologies, but it is often the tools that are the changing variable. We call this our "Innovation Pipeline", and it applies a sandbox/pilot/production methodology in hopes of making our research & development efforts more likely to "stick" when it comes time to make them into approved services that go into our service catalog.

Name one recent example of how you have shown the Trust core value as a senior leader.

WCD: My wife was admitted to the hospital in mid-June of this year. It happened suddenly and without warning (as these things usually do) and I had many commitments and meetings that had to be handled. I trusted the administrative specialists and the senior directors in NI&S to ensure coverage of these commitments and activities and they did not disappoint.

I tend not to micro-manage, instead trusting directors/managers/supervisors to handle their own operations including decisions on alternate work schedules, hiring, and salary offers (so long as the funding is available), etc.

I also hold monthly "Meet the Executive Director" meetings (last one was last week) where NI&S staff can come and share whatever is on their minds. I then issue a summary, without mentioning names of attendees, for the department to review. Some months there are six to eight people, some months, no one shows up. But I try to make myself available to hear individuals' concerns and ideas.

DDP: I have begun to attend individual team meetings for the units in TLOS with the primary purpose of listening and understanding. I believe that by experiencing how my colleagues are spending their time, my ability to represent TLOS will improve. They will also have more opportunities to speak with me and observe my strengths and my flaws in person. Assuming the balance is favorable, I'm hopeful that this will lead to a reinforcement of trust.

Dale and William - Can you give some examples of cross-unit partnerships within the Division that are working well?

WCD: NI&S funds and utilizes a position in Enterprise Systems/DBAA to manage our ORACLE databases. NI&S partially funds a position in HR as well. We currently share responsibilities for handling email with CCS also. Search committee work is generally a good example of where cross-unit partnerships shine, in my opinion.

The recent APA audit response, coordinated through the CIO's office, is another good example. Responses were required from NI&S Network Engineering and Operations as well as Systems Operations in conjunction with the ITSO. Enterprise Systems' DBAA team also had to provide detailed answers.

NI&S is offering a new service, known as Wireless Device (where devices can be attached/connected to the WiFi system without personal credentials) and a lot of work was done with TLOS staff (particularly in the I/O Studio) to work through operational issues and provide user documentation. Work with S.I.S. Middleware, in the area of Enterprise Directory groups, was also necessary for this service.

The SAMS group (Scheduling & Announcing Maintenance of Services) is a prime example of how a cross-unit team can function in a collaborative manner. Members are very collegial, communicative, and have a good sense of humor as well.

DDP: TLOS has become much more reliant on Enterprise Systems (hosting, data lake, etc.) and NI&S (device-specific wireless, etc.) for core infrastructure services than it was a decade ago. These relationships work seamlessly and facilitate the high level of quality that our faculty and students expect.

What is your unit (or function) best at…and what is it worst at?

WCD: NI&S is best at designing, installing, and administering systems, be they network, compute or storage systems. NI&S is not so good (though we're probably no worse than any other IT department) at sunsetting services or handling one-off needs (we just create another service code which bloats our portfolio). We're also pretty good at satisfying customer needs when they fall outside normal processes, but ONLY IF THE CUSTOMER REACHES THE RIGHT INDIVIDUAL (emphasis mine). There are still times when the answer is "That's not how we do things," instead of "Let's see what we can do about that."

DDP: The answer for TLOS is the same for best and worst… We are good at exploring creative solutions to problems that leverage emerging technologies. It is best because we help our partners think through all of the aspects of a solution that may be necessary for successful implementation. It is worst because we often end up with semi-orphaned and/or partially supported solutions. We've worked successfully to find ways to formalize and operationalize this work, but the creative edge of this work is messy and we'll likely always be seeking ways to tidy it up.

Outlandish hypothetical: Imagine, 5 years from now, technology has evolved to the point that you could develop your own AI Assistant to rove amongst your unit's employees and

support their work. But the technology is only capable of applying ONE core value. Which core value would you choose & why?

WCD: Well Trust would seem to be out the window if I'm deploying an AI bot to "rove amongst" the staff, so probably "Striving for Excellence" is appropriate since the idea (I hope) is not to spy, but to assist. I'm sorry, but I may read too much Science Fiction to think that this scenario is going to come out good in the end.

DDP: I'm not sure the roaming assistant would be an effective solution for any of the core values, as they all require we become more connected with one another. It would be very easy to create a solution that inadvertently made it less likely that we get to know one another, which would be bad for all of our core values. As a stretch, I can imagine some sort of bot that would allow someone to ask, "I'm struggling with x. Who can I reach out to?" or "I've got a bit of spare time this afternoon. Is there anyone struggling with something that I might be able to help with?" Sort of a digital matchmaker that could facilitate connections and build relationships.

For the "Have you seen examples of the DoIT Core Values in action?" question, it would be great to hear examples of each of the core values.

WCD: I agree. I recently saw Debbie Fulton show "Care" for one of her employees, who was involved with answering the APA audit questions. He was scheduled to go out on a much-deserved vacation, but the questions were due. She requested an extension form the auditor to ensure this individual could vacation.

The ITEE unit is showing "Service" to the max as they put themselves in the middle of the chaos that is Fall Rush! (And they managed to get volunteers from the division to assist!)

The Senior Leadership team has been "Striving for Excellence" (particularly Vicki Hall) as we prepare the IT Strategic Plan. We're going to have to let it go, however, short of excellent, but hopefully close.

The H.R. team has been working diligently on "Inclusion" during the recruitment and interview stage of the hiring process. This is clear from the candidates we've seen for the last several positions I've been involved with hiring, both in NI&S and the division.

CEH: I think this is a great topic... for a different roundtable discussion or forum.

Plan for 5 years? Things change so fast today; how can we plan for the next 5 years and sit on it?

WCD: You make plans and continually update them as you get closer to the time when delivery is due. Reiteration, based on current info and adjusted forecasts, is required. See mention of Agile/Scrum above. You also must accept that plans are often wrong, but the act of planning is important.

CEH: If you're not looking out at the horizon, you won't know what's ahead until you're about to collide with it. That said, you've got to course correct all along the journey. Making a plan and "sitting on it" is a pointless exercise.

DDP: Any strategic plan is likely to contain principles and purposes at a high level that change very little, as well as some attempts at detailed outcomes that will help us maintain/attain the principles and purposes. The detailed outcomes must be flexible to avoid chasing yesterday's objectives while ignoring today's challenges/opportunities. It might be helpful to contrast a couple of different challenges/opportunities that many of us face: getting fit vs. buying a house. If we set long-term goals for fitness, we'll focus on markers and outcomes that represent our desires for strength, cardio-vascular capacity, flexibility, etc. We may even set specific goals like riding our bike to work every day or hiking a certain number of miles every weekend. As our circumstances change, however, we usually wouldn't hesitate to change the modes of our pursuit, while still keeping our eye on the desired long-term outcomes (e.g. snow outside may mean I walk to the bus instead of riding my bike). Buying a house, in contrast, involves finding the right combination of a property and financing options, then locking in terms for an extended period of time. Barring a re-finance or bankruptcy intervention, there isn't a lot to do over time except for pay the mortgage bill. I believe that more and more of our strategic opportunities are more like fitness than finance, so our planning and implementation strategies should reflect the difference.

Have you seen examples of the Division of IT Core Values in action?

WCD: Yes. See above.

Why is the sky blue?

WCD: Because it isn't red. (Actual answer is the gaseous composition of the atmosphere refracts a certain wavelength of light from our "yellow" sun. This is why the sky on Mars *is* red.)

DDP: What is blue?

For all - can you give an update, as far as you can tell so far, on how the Innovation Campus is going to impact your unit and your work?

WCD: There will be short-term design, planning, installation work that may, depending on the timing of it and other projects, stretch our resources. We've already experienced access and information issues, when they haven't been as readily available as we would like, so reaction times may be shortened (see answer about "rapid change" above). Once the first building is up and running, the distance and visibility ("Showcase for VT") will create challenges. The distance is not unique since we are supporting remote campuses and locations already, but ensuring we are providing the "VT Experience" for all will be the guiding principle.