Crowdsourcing: A critical component in the new CIO’s arsenal

I recently transitioned jobs and like many new leaders, I planned to listen intently and understand the nuances of the new organization. So many leaders rush in to make changes not fully understanding the dynamics of the organization. The first 100 days is a magical period during which the new leader is positioned to learn a great deal if they are willing to listen. It is a period of rising expectations where everything is potentially possible. Remaining politically neutral and listening intently is critical as it extends the honeymoon period. Done correctly, the new leader learns how business value is created in the organization, identifies quick wins that builds trust, and begins to build a solid foundation for relationships. It is also a period during which the new leader can learn who to trust. Ultimately, you want to be moving at the speed of trust and that only occurs if the foundations for new relationships are built in the first 100 days. The longer the honeymoon period, the higher the probability that the new leader will be successful in the long run.

I wanted to empower the voice of the community and encourage that community to articulate its pent up demands and opinions while not picking sides. I also wanted to start creating a culture where everyone felt empowered to be an agent of innovation. Creating safe channels for open communications is the first step. Allowing everyone to have their say and contribute to the ideas of others seemed like a natural second step. This led to a decision about 60 days before I arrived to create a crowdsourcing venue for all staff, faculty, and students at the University of Alabama at Birmingham.

Given the university mascot is the Blazers, Spark seemed to be an appropriate name for the crowdsourcing site. Ideas.uab.edu seemed like an appropriate URL. To keep the conversations safe and on target, the system selected supported user login through the central authentication authority and idea creation was moderated so that the ideas remained focused on improving information technology. While very limited moderation took place, this approach avoided some of the disadvantages associated with anonymous submissions. To empower folks to submit ideas, the first few ideas were pre-solicited so that there were enough submissions so that initial entry to the crowdsourcing site was lowered and other members of the community felt empowered to submit their ideas. Finally, the launch of the site was soft and

Crowdsourcing statistics at our university:

- In first month:
  - 1 campaign (IT)
  - 57 ideas
  - 250 comments
  - 310 users
  - 1,200 votes

- In first 18 months:
  - 7 campaigns
  - Hundreds of ideas
  - Thousands of comments
  - Thousands of users
  - Tens of thousands of votes

What happens to a new idea?

- Some ideas are unpopular and voted down by the community. Pet rocks identified.
- Some ideas are functionality that already exist. Communication problem solved.
- Some ideas are popular and can be quickly implemented (often overnight).
- Some ideas are popular and require resources. Add these to the strategic plan.
through organizational leaders so this venue was not considered a threat to existing leaders or structures.

The intent was to supplement, not replace, the normal approach of meetings with key leaders and constituent groups. The normal and rapid pace of meetings continued. With each meeting, I revealed the existence of the crowdsourcing site and asked the organizational leader to share it with everyone they knew. The soft launch allowed the community to form organically over time and the number of submissions to grow over time instead of a rush of ideas at the beginning and then a pregnant pause.

The results of the crowdsourcing site have been phenomenal. One month since a soft launch, 57 ideas had been submitted by 310 users who have voted 1,200 times and created 250 comments. Ideas have been appropriately recognized by the community with some ideas flourishing and others garnishing a different response. Through all of votes, comments, and ideas, information technology and the new CIO were held responsible not as the department who says no but instead as the department and leader who facilitated the conversation. The community, not IT, set the priorities and everyone has their say.

Since that first month, the idea has spread and currently there are six active campaigns with about half IT-focused and the other half not-IT focused. Faculty, staff, and students have cast tens of thousands of votes, authored thousands of comments, and hundreds of ideas have surfaced, been vetted by the community, and acted on by teams around campus.

Many of these ideas were acted on in the first year. In fact, SPARK became part of a 100 wins for the campus campaign that ultimately improved the lives of students, faculty, researchers, and students in 147 different ways during that first year. The community held a campus-wide party to celebrate the wins. We are in the midst of our second 100-win campaign.

Some ideas take more resources and time. Those ideas rolled into our strategic plan, which was also co-authored with the community. Resourcing of those ideas is now going through institutional financial processes to ensure alignment with overarching business strategy. This integration of organic crowdsourcing with intentional strategy is critical to organizational success. It balances organization agility, process innovation, and cost efficiency in a transparent manner. In conclusion, crowdsourcing is a new tool in the arsenal of the modern CIO and leader interested in leveraging the collective intellect of the organization.

### KEY TAKEAWAYS

Ideas can be submitted, voted on, commented on, refined, and feedback provided to the community on the idea.

Participation is rewarded with badges, points, and a weekly leaderboard.