

Sam: Welcome to the UP Tech Talk podcast. Coming to you from the new multimedia studio on the University of Portland campus. Produced by Academic Technology Services. With your hosts Maria Herb and Sam Williams.

Welcome to UP Tech Talk podcast. Today we have with us Curt Pederson, who is the CIO at the University of Portland. Thank you Curt for joining us.

Curt: Oh you are very welcome. My pleasure.

Sam: We had you on today because we wanted to talk about your style of management and some of the things you embody as a leader and one of the things you brought to the University of Portland that I know my department embraces and I know many others in IS do as well is this idea of 'We listen, we care and we respond'.

Maria: Can you tell us a little bit about where that came from?

Curt: I can. That's something that I've used for 25 years. It's been with me, historical context, I've been in five diverse CIO jobs in the last 25 years. I was at a public utility, workman's comp, state CIO, Oregon State University, Oregon University and now UP, all as a CIO. My bio know includes having a CIO gene which is something I just discovered it because I retired from Oregon State University December 2012. I obviously had no hobbies or no desire to have a lot of leisure time and it kind of drove me crazy. It influenced me - also I had a couple health issues and I realized how precious life is and I just sort of said to my wife 'I'm not done yet'. I'm going to go out and do something else and the neat thing in my life was I was able to choose something to do, I wanted to do, that I would love to do and that I didn't have to do. That's such a good freeing thing.

My overall philosophy as I've worked 25 years and in mainly the public sector, it's not what you take, it's what you leave behind and I wasn't through leaving stuff behind. I had a passion to try and go out and make a difference again. My arrival at UP April 2013, it was great other than when I arrived the morale seemed low. There had been some tragedy, the turnover was pretty high and it was actually more attractive because it was more challenging. You didn't just come in and say well that's a hard act to follow, it was a hard act to follow and I'm better for it. There's 44 employees at UP in IT, three departments - tech services, academic technology services, web and enterprise services - it was just a great mix of certain functions and skills.

My initial focus was on engaging the leadership team and all the employees. I got to know them, I got to know their family. I don't have any here but what I have here I let down. I decided to be a participant and really got to know people whether it was bowling or battle of the bands or whatever was coming up.

I also have a philosophy that says 'You look through the windshield, not the rear view mirror'. I very rarely look back and I don't have a lot of worry and regret. Now I finally get to 'We listen, we care, we respond'. I have used that slogan or tagline or philosophy

at least three or four times in the 25 years. I started using it and it always was for the same reason. I came into a new job and they had giant posters on the wall that had mission, goals, objectives, plans, whatever it was and no one could remember what they said. I have this philosophy that don't do anything like that unless you can print it on the back of your business card so that's where I came up with 'We listen, we care, we respond' and people have said for many years well what does that mean. I say exactly what it says - whether it's a student, whether it's a colleague, whether it's somebody that directly reports to me, just really do active listening, care about their issue and then respond and responding doesn't always mean yes. Responding could be an alternative, responding could be no but you owe them the response that you give them and it's worked really well for me. I don't have to remember lofty goals or missions or a lot of objectives and I go back to that.

As I was here the first year, I started having employees tell me that that works. Then I had customers that saw it as a byline on someone's email and they mentioned the director whether it was Sam or Lisa or Michelle or Anne and they say I've seen evidence of that at work. They list to me, they cared and they responded and I'm really happy.

Going back in time, there wasn't a time when I was as pleased as I was with information services but I have changed my mind. It has to do with the way that customers treat it.

Sam: I will say, as one of the directors, that we were blessed to have you come to our campus. It's been an amazing adventure with you at the helm. This idea of 'we listen, we care, we respond', it just feels right, it feels good. It's this idea that we're providing the best customer service that we can and we have had people reach out and say, I've had people send me an email directly and said you've embodied the 'we listen, we care, we respond' and we had it as our tagline and sometimes you don't think people actually read to the bottom of the email but it was really nice to see people notice that. It has been in our Salsburg center mentioned it. We've heard it here on campus and I've heard other people mention it about IT. I'm glad that you brought that philosophy to us.

Curt: Well thank you. I'm just tickled to death the way it was embraced. People didn't think it was hokey, or oh we're going to be into slogans. You started seeing it enough and then you started trying it and that's all it takes is you have one experience and that leads to success, success leads to success.

Maria: I think that what Sam said at the beginning we also want to talk a little bit about your leadership style and some of the philosophies around that that you embrace. I want to say as an employee, that you've definitely been the most unique upper boss that I've ever worked for and it stands out to me so much because you're the one who remembers everyone's birthday, you're the one that feels it's very important to do these human touch kinds of things. That's so unique, that really stands out and I'm just wondering, where did that come from?

Curt: I think that came from maybe a family of seven children. My parents had their own business, we worked really hard, we all supported each other and I learned a long time ago when I left the utility that I rose pretty quickly there and became an executive and

had a nice long title and I decided one day I didn't want to work there anymore and I didn't have another job and my brother, it drove him crazy I wasn't working, coming from the background I did so he brought me back to the cabinet shop that he had bought from my father and he gave me the title of director of marginal employees and it really was and I was happy because I could make a difference. I could replace some of these marginal employees or help them with employees that really did want to build cabinets and work there.

Like I told my brother, don't just hire the next person that comes through the door, hire somebody that really wants to do this and at the end of the day, the nice part about building cabinets is you always knew what you did that day. You could see the end product sitting there by your bench and say I built that. You don't always have that in the public sector, it's sort of a long term goal to accomplish something. I think my roots help with the sort of, I think everybody's equal, my parents made sure that I grew up knowing that nobody was any different than anybody else. Everybody was the same, everybody has the same feelings, the same desires, the same goals and the more you look at that, we all have common denominators. I want to be treated the same way I treat other people. The only way you can have that happen is to treat other people that way and then it seems like they have the same respect. They listen, care, respond.

When I got ill, even when I was here, people gave so much care and tolerance and everything that I will always appreciate that. I think it's just your upbringing, being raised in a large family, sharing a lot, helping each other. I had a sister that was profoundly disabled and spent time just being with her and being around somebody that didn't get as many gifts as we all did.

Sam: I say definitely going back to, I pulled a quote out from earlier, it's just focusing on what you leave behind. With the furniture, you're leaving behind these great pieces and even with all your stories, your impact, you're leaving everybody with these great memories and these mentorship moments. Leading into that from the mentorship side, I know you've talked recently about this idea of multi-generational departments and you have a unique philosophy on that. If you could tell us a little bit about what is coming up with you or some of the stuff you have around that multi-generational?

Curt: Sure. I have given this a lot of thought because of an invitation from something called the CIO Forum that's being presented in Portland Thursday and Friday. They wanted to know if I would be on a panel to discuss with all of the participants how do you lead a multi-generational workforce. I gave that a lot of thought and I did some reading and I had all these different techniques that suggested on how you deal with this generation and that generation. Being the oldest employee that works in my department and probably one of the oldest that are active at UP, I don't see people by generations.

I have this philosophy that said you treat everyone the same, you lead everyone the same, you take an interest in every employee, you find out what makes them tick, something about their interest, their family, their significant others, and it's back to the listen, care, respond. I don't think of people being different because they are in these different generations. You get to know them and it's kind of a humanistic approach. I

think they would think it's phony if I tried to adopt two or three different management styles depending on the audience I work for. I don't believe you ever, I don't like segmenting groups and saying this group is this, this group is that. I think it hurts you building a relationship with them and I value age differences. I think if we didn't have people from their 20's to their 60's at UP in IT, we wouldn't have diverse conversations or thoughts and I think that really helps. The energy of the youth combined with the experience of the older people, I think that's really powerful.

Maria: There's a number of things I want to say. Again what stands out to me repeatedly is how unique this is. Their just, you really walk the talk, anyone can say what you're saying but I see you do it all the time and that's what's rare and that's what really stands out. I still wonder how did that happen?

Curt: I think it's just the way I'm wired in my DNA. When I've been up in the hospital with health issues, the doctors say they wonder why I look much better than I am, they say I look much healthier than I am. I think it's because you're happy. I had a philosophy I shared with some people in the chronic malignancy lab, think of that, and told a couple of them one day, you don't have to be healthy to be happy. I'm not going to spend my life feeling like a victim, or feeling sorry for myself or have somebody sitting there crying because I have some challenges that everybody has in life. I'm going to face them straight on and I'm going to strive to be happy regardless of anything that happens in the world and I think that really makes a difference. You get up in the morning and you're happy, you go to bed and you're happy. You don't worry or regret the things you can't change. You embrace them and live with them. They are part of you.

Sam: I love, often times you'll come into the office and you'll say today this is my new normal and it really does bring a different light to the things that we deal with. I'm dealing with some back problems and I always remember, your words always come to me when I want to complain. I'm like no, this is your new normal for the day and it really does help you reset your day.

Curt: Oh absolutely. I've had a couple times where I've been up at OHHSU and I've, they've given me some news and I feel a little bit sorry for myself and I tell people I walk over to Dorn Becker's Children's Hospital, which is next door and just look at the kids. You see these kids that have lost all their hair and they're really sick and you say how blessed I am to be as old as I am and actually have what I have. Just think if you were two years old rather than in your late 60's, it would be so much harder to handle. You wouldn't have all that life that you've lived and all those memories.

Maria: Yeah and again we see this in your everyday and it's just so striking that there's somebody who actually embodies what you're talking about and does it. That's different than just saying it, you do it. When I tell people that oh yeah our CIO is the one that's organizing the birthday parties and signing the cards and doing all these things, they're just incredulous. Nobody believes that somebody is actually like that.

Curt: I think we're all in the this together and because I'm the first one here in the morning, I don't always sleep. I get up around 4am and I come in early and I make the coffee, clean

the kitchen, put the dishes away and people say why do you do that? I say because I'm here first and I've always sort of been that way. I like to raise the flagpole, sweep the sidewalk, get everything ready for everybody else that comes behind me and leave in the afternoon before you have to cross that darn bridge that's so dangerous and crowded.

One of the things I forgot to share was when you asked about my leadership, about 25 years ago I became a facilitator in something called the basic principles from Zinger Miller. I was able to present that course - I didn't teach anybody - but I presented the principles to linemen, to administrators, to staff, to colleagues and I learned more than I think my students did. The basic principles are easy, you always focus on a situation, issue or behavior - never on the person - you just don't focus on people, you focus on what the issue and then you maintain self-confidence, self-esteem of others, maintain constructive relationships, take the initiative to make things better. You always lead by example, that answers some of your questions Maria. Then think beyond the moment, what I'm doing is it going to cause good things to happen or could this be a thing that could be negative. Then I put learn it, love it, live it. I added that to the basic principles and that's been a really guiding force. I've handed that out to every management team I've worked with. Not everybody embraces it as easy as some. I think Sam lives that as do some directors so I'm very happy to be in an environment where that's sort of rewarded.

Sam: I think I speak for all the directors when I say thank you for creating this environment and allowing this high touch style of management because there is not a lot of places that will embrace that. They'll make you go to conferences, they'll make you go to this training, they'll make you go to this stuff and then when you go back to work, it's business as usual. What I think you've created with this community here, and I'll put emphasis on community, is this idea that you walk the walk and talk the talk. You learn these things, you learn these ways of doing stuff better or leading by example but you actually bring it to the office which I think is definitely something you have brought to us is this idea of lighting these candles around us and being like hey - it's okay to try out these different management styles and it's okay to be high touch in your management style and not just very data driven and outcomes driven.

Curt: Thank you. That makes me feel really good and I don't, what I do, I don't generally do intentionally which I think is what makes it easy for me. It just comes naturally and anything else wouldn't. I've tried to change at times. I remember back in my early utility days, people thought you should be more serious because we were having these horrible serious problems and utility had gotten involved and nuclear power and it looked like we were going to go bankrupt. For a while I was the CFO and everyone else had such a sad face and yet I saw it as an opportunity to help settle some of these issues we had with all this debt and everything and to find a nice way to downsize utility and live within our means and was part of that. Yeah it takes its toll because they're real human beings. Early on in life I thought of people as FTE's on a spreadsheet, didn't take me long to figure out they're all people, they all have a story and every time you lay off an employee or you close a program, it's the people, it's not the function itself. Maybe

it's just experience that shaped me the way I am but what I tried seemed to work better for me than other things I tried that were more formal and textual.

Sam: Well I know for me, a couple takeaways for me that I've been writing down is take interest in every employee and don't think of people as different. I thank you for those words plus everything else that you have brought to us today in this podcast.

Curt: Thank you very much. I'm happy I did it.

Maria: We are too.

Curt: Thank you.

Maria: Thanks a lot Curt.

Curt: You bet.

Sam: Thank you for joining us for another episode of the UP Tech Talk podcast. Just a reminder that we post a new podcast every Friday morning and you can find us at techtalk.up.edu.

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