So, What Is the Answer? Questions.

AS I SEE "IT"

By Don Hall

Don Hall is the executive director for information technology with the Kent School District, Kent, Washington. He has experience in teaching and administration and is a veteran presenter, author, and consultant. Hall serves as a volunteer columnist for L&L.

As leaders, we are barraged daily by teachers, administrators, and students seeking answers to questions ranging from the simplistic to the metaphysical in their complexity. I am sure you wonder at times, "How in the world can I free up enough time to answer them all?" Well, I hate to break this to you, but you can't, and frankly that is not even your role to begin with.

Wow! That must be quite a relief from your shoulders, but I am sure you are now wondering, "So what is my role then?" Actually it is very simple. Your job is to ask the right questions.

So what are the most powerful questions you can ask to transform your technology department or organization?

- What will success look like?
- How will this affect teaching and learning?
- What if it isn't true? (challenge every assumption)
- How can students help?

What will success look like? Stephen Covey is known for saying, "Begin with the end in mind." This adage is definitely true when it comes to successfully building a systemic vision for technology—or even managing and implementing them later. As an effective leader, you must ensure everyone around you clearly understands and shares a common final outcome that is focused on success.

How will this affect teaching and learning?

Although this may sound simple, I find it is not asked nearly enough. The answer you get back from your team might be positive or negative. That is not really the issue here. As long as there is one, then you can guide the team to the best possible outcome. However, if the answer is "I don't know," then you should start to worry. This question will be one of the toughest for a technology team to get comfortable with initially.

What if it isn't true? Another important role you can play is helping your team challenge all assumptions as they go into project planning or problem solving. Far too often, it is those assumptions that keep us from delivering a better service or solution for our customers. Sometimes those assumptions create the nightmares that haunt us. If you are not familiar with the Abilene Paradox you might want to read up on it. It can be a valuable lesson about assumptions.

How can students help? Students are one of the largest resource pools you can draw from in your organization. Are you viewing them as a distant concern you must guard the systems against, or at best, the reason you have your job. Instead, I propose you develop a healthy respect for the contribution they can make accomplishing your mission. Consequently, it also provides them a fantastic learning opportunity. Who could want more than a win-win scenario? After all, students are not only the recipients of the benefits of technology, but also the messengers.

As I close, here is a bonus question I will throw in for free, "How do we get to yes?" It is amazing what this simple little question can do for the customer service approach within your department or school.

Now you are armed with some powerful tools that can help change the nature of your role as a technology leader. I find this approach allows me the freedom to be more strategic and provides wonderful opportunities to mentor and coach my staff. Am I worried about them thinking I don't have all answers? No—because after all, I don't.