On Being a Technology Advisor


This editorial is intended for instructional systems technology (IST) coordinators at the school building, district, or higher level. In the "good old days" we called such people computer coordinators. The IST designation emphasizes that the focus is much broader than just computers.

This editorial focuses on just one aspect of your job—that of being an instructional systems technology-oriented technical advisor to your boss. If you are a school building IST coordinator, your boss may be a principal or an assistant principal. If you are a school district IST coordinator, your boss may be a superintendent or an assistant superintendent. In either case your boss is an administrator with a wide range of responsibilities. Your boss makes decisions that strongly affect instructional use of instructional systems technologies in your school or district.

Here is a little evaluation form that you can fill out. If you have a good working relationship with your boss, then you can have your boss fill out a modified version of the form. (For example, where it says "My boss has " change it to "I have ".) In any case, the results can serve as a fruitful basis for assessing the current situation and/or for discussion with your boss and with others.

The Instructional Systems Technology Advice Instrument contains six statements that are to be answered on a five-point scale. On this scale (1) indicated "Strongly Disagree" and (5) indicated "Strongly Agree."

On Being a Technology Advisor Instructional Systems Technology Advice Instrument

1. My boss has a good knowledge of instructional systems technologies. This knowledge is quite adequate for making appropriate decisions concerning allocation of resources and in making other decisions that affect their use in schools.

   (Strongly Disagree) 1 2 3 4 5 (Strongly Agree)

2. My boss works closely with other administrators who have a good knowledge of instructional systems technologies. This close working relationship provides my boss with the advice needed to make appropriate decisions concerning allocation of resources and in making other decisions that affect their use in schools.

   (Strongly Disagree) 1 2 3 4 5 (Strongly Agree)

3. My boss has an instructional systems technology advisory committee and meets regularly with this committee. This committee is broadly representative of the people both within and outside the school system who are most interested in and affected by decisions related to school use of instructional systems technologies.
4. My boss relies quite heavily on the advice of instructional systems technology hardware and software sales representatives when making decisions about instructional systems technology hardware and software acquisitions and the use of such facilities.

5. My boss relies heavily on other people (not mentioned above) who are not educators when making decisions about instructional systems technologies. (Examples of such people include electronic data processing staff in the school district business data processing office, professional programmers, secretaries who are computer users, and children who are well versed in using computers.)

6. My boss relies heavily on my advice in all decision situations involving instructional systems technologies. We meet regularly together and I am quite satisfied with our working relationship and how my advice is received.

You can decide for yourself the profile of answers that would be most appropriate to your situation. If you have your boss fill out a similar evaluation instrument, the two of you can then compare your perceptions. If you or the two of you have given a number of low ratings on items 1, 2, 3, and 6, and high ratings on items 4 and 5, the chances are that this is a bad situation.

There are two key issues.

1. Instructional systems technology is changing very rapidly. It is even difficult for a person who devotes full time to this field to remain reasonably well informed.

2. Instructional systems technology has the potential to have a massive impact on education. It is a major (potential) change agent in our schools.

If you are happy with the your boss' sources of information, that's great. If you are unhappy, you need to chart a course of action.

The first step is a needs assessment, and you have done that. Give it a little more thought. What are the strengths and weaknesses of your boss' sources of IST advice? What can you personally do to reinforce the strengths and to decrease reliance on the less appropriate sources?

Next, set some short-term and some longer-term goals. Remember, you are working to change the way a person functions. People resist change!

Next, begin to develop a plan of action. Remember, education is political. On average, school administrators are far more politically astute than IST coordinators. But you are quite capable of learning to play the political game. Also, it is easy to take advantage of your boss’ political astuteness.

We will give just one example to illustrate the point. Suppose that your boss relies on very few sources of advice except IST hardware and software vendors. This is a very bad situation
and can easily lead to major inappropriate decisions. Moreover, it is a situation that is politically untenable once it comes to light.

Thus, you need to engineer having someone hint to your boss that he/she is in an untenable situation. Such a suggestion can come from a school board member, a higher-level school administrator, a couple of parents, a local business leader, a spokesperson for the teacher's union, or a variety of other people. In any case, the hint should be accompanied by a suggestion that an IST Advisory Committee is needed. This committee should play a major role in all IST-related decisions being made in the school or school district.

Don't expect immediate success. Keep up the pressure on your boss. More than likely you will win out in the end. Good luck!