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From Hell to Leadership

Introduction

When I received the invitation from Bruce Mccullough to write about "Leadership", I questioning myself on what exactly made me sometimes "a leader" while I stayed in other occasions just "the boss" or the "commander". It cannot be my personality or my management skills as I always did similar things depending on the circumstances. So the difference between a leader and a boss has to be in a combination of circumstances and a special environment where people want to achieve results by cooperating as a team. This

following story tells you the first time in my life I got the recognition of being a leader... and I have to admit, I really felt great that day. This growing to leadership was the result of an 18 months struggle to make IT work in a difficult and complex user environment. The whole process took indeed very long as the job was huge and the recognition a result of several "breakpoints".

So it all started in the middle of 1997 when I decided to leave a major Telecom company due to an uncertain period as the company was merging with two other major Telecom giants. Suddenly, we had 3 IT Infrastructure managers and I decided not to wait and take a position as IT director in a higher education environment in the South of Paris.

Besides the fact that I could keep the same team size (around 20 people), this new position should give me several advantages:

- 1) Social positioning: From a simple IT manager, I now became a Director with a company car,
- 2) Work conditions: I could leave the city of Paris and work in the middle of a forest – far away from traffic jams and pollution,
- 3) Power: as IT Director, I should have complete control on all IT services. No longer bargaining with the Infrastructure manager to get software deployed and no longer waiting for the helpdesk to be ready. I was in control, as I would control all the different IT teams and run the projects.
- 4) Sweet environment: A higher education environment should be cool – no critical production system, no complex accounting systems, no external customers... far away from the high demanding and fast paced Telco industry.

There was also a question mark as I was part of a facility management contract and it is rather strange to find an IT Director position subcontracted... but why not?

But things were quite different ...

We do not need another hero

DAY ONE:

I arrived early in the morning and the acting Account Manager showed me around to the premises and introduced me to the team. During the tour, I noticed some inefficiencies but I was impressed by the number of people I met and the "cool reception". Just a small hello and handshake. One guy also mentioned welcome number six. I did not react but it indicated clearly that I was the 6th interim manager on the site... a high number for what I imagined to be an easy site.

At the end of the tour, I told the account manager I did not see clear through the organisation as I have noticed a lot more than the 20 people I had to manage so I asked him who of them were in my team and who of them were working for another subcontractor or were still directly employed by the University.

The answer was astonishing: "Oh, about 54 but it is your mission to reduce this number to 20 – didn't they tell you that?"

Time stopped and I did not know how to take my breath for a moment. This was going to be an extremely tough ride. I then asked him to see the P&L of the account and I could not believe the numbers. We were spending 5 times more than we were paid for. I knew that 5 times was impossible but numbers don't lie and before I could study the details, one of the supervisors entered to alert us that the whole campus network crashed so I had my first emergency case before I could ask more details on the man numbers and the cost structure.

That day... we had 3 other crashes so I was in the middle of a gigantic IT firework.

When I returned to my office after the second crash, the acting account manager asked me why I ran around so fast just as if people were in high danger. When I said the messaging server had crashed and I needed to get it up again, he just told me that he used to work for an airplane company and the crashing of an internal mail server was not an emergency. The crashing of a server controlling a Boeing full of people was an emergency to run for. So if I wanted to run next time, I had to be sure to save the life of people. If not, I could just do the job without the running. I knew it was a very nice lesson but I preferred to continue running that day to win some time to get the systems up again.

My first day was ending around 7:30pm and I was cleaning some papers on my desk when suddenly a truck arrived with 22 brand new desktops. Those desktops needed to be installed immediately in the new wing of the campus as the official opening was scheduled for the next morning. Of course, my desktop technicians were not keen to stay late that evening but there was no other solution. I took off my shirt and tie and pulled on a white T-shirt and I started moving the boxes to the new wing. At that time, my technicians saw they had someone to assist them and also moved to the new building to install the desktops.

We installed all desktops that evening and we left the campus shaking hands saying, "thank you – we did it".

Thoughts afterwards: As I drove home that night, I was too tired to think clearly but my first day on site had surely too many bad surprises. What should my wife think if I told her I moved boxes around on my first day as an IT Director. Of course, the

moving of boxes was a good point for me as it allowed me to noticed people ready to do the job, even after work-hours without asking questions. It also indicated clearly that my so-called demotivated team contained some good people that just needed some guidance. And of course not to forget, I also received some recognition from them as a hands-on person ready to help the team in critical moments.

DAY TWO

Even before I arrived at my desk, I received a phone call from the University Head of Services who wanted to have all troops mobilised to install the desktops for the new wing. When I told her we finished the job last night, I received after a short silence an "Oh! I am going to check immediately" and she hung up.

I was wondering why she had to check what we did last evening. I told her we did the job so why did she had to walk to the other side of the campus to check me? I imagined that it was just to check the details as she was probably also responsible for the opening ceremony that morning.

In fact, I found out that she had had some bad experiences with previous delivery managers who announced things as being delivered but in fact still ongoing. So she wanted to check if we did not limit our efforts in "dropping off the boxes" without installing the equipment.

In the afternoon, I met the different people at client side. They were all polite but I received several times the same question "I hope you are going to stay longer than a week with us?" and I started repeating the same answer "Oh, quite more than a week but as you know, nothing is permanent in live".

The way they behaved was of course the result of the numerous account managers and delivery managers they had met during the last year. To make it somewhat fun for them, they started betting on

the length of my stay. During my tour, I did noticed that several people had a small paper in their hands or on their desks but I could not imagine they were writing down the time they expected me to stay. I found out 6 months later that most people gave me between 48 hours and one week – except one person that made a bet on one full month.

In the evening, I joined the acting Account Manager for my first "User Meeting" with the different user representatives. I did not interact as I was still learning how things worked out here. I read the previous memos and noticed that a lot of the discussions were handling SLA numbers. They were discussing numbers – not the issues that caused or explained these numbers. Numbers seemed to be more important than the service levels.

The only question that I received during the meeting was "So what great things are you going to do for us?" With my mind on the 5 previous interim managers that failed, I replied with a "I have no idea. If you want, I can bring in a sales person if you want promises but I do not promise. I just deliver what needs to be delivered."

The answer seemed to please them – especially when the Finance Director instantly added that I was good in delivering boxes and he congratulated us for the work we did last night. The news went fast around.

Conclusion: My second day was very slippery. The client did not believe in another new "account-hero" that was going to solve the problems and was tired of having ever-returning promises. By promising nothing and just doing the things that needed to be done, I tempered the bad expectations people had in me – and it gave me a chance to start delivering.

I also noticed that "rumours" were important on the campus as it took less than 4 hours to get the news around of me moving boxes. Rumours were more powerful than instant messaging.

The next days were exactly the same. I kept running around to solve lots of different issues – not knowing what incident was going to happen in the upcoming 5 minutes. I was fire fighting and there were fires starting everywhere. It created a lot of stress and very long working hours to make the basic services work.

I was really wondering how long I could survive in this environment and if I could do better than the 5 previous delivery managers. Should I dismiss from my new job and confirm I did not stand out in these difficult circumstances? How could I explain to a future employer that I could not handle the stress at my first Director position? And I also knew I would not receive any support from my wife who still thinks IT is easy as you just have to push a button to start a PC and know how to hook-up a printer.

With my thoughts on the people I met asking if I could make it longer than a week, I decided to do everything to keep my position for two weeks - just to show them all they were wrong.

In my thoughts and to motivate myself, I changed the advice of my account manager... if I still do not have a dead user on the campus, I can still run around.

I am here, I am there, I am everywhere

I got up to speed in the next weeks and what a speed. I left every morning my apartment at 6.40am to return at 11pm in the evening. I did not loose much transportation time as I drove almost twice as fast as the authorized speed limit. There was no time to think, only to act and time was money so I had to be on the job.

At noon, I just took 50 minutes to have dinner – of course on campus. The rest of the day, I was running between the different

emergencies and between the different campus buildings. I joked with it saying I was doing a home-run through the different campus wings, trying to come back in one piece to my helpdesk. Between the different runs, I just had enough time to treat the more than 300 daily emails I received and to verify the pending help desk records.

Weekends did not longer exist for me as I recovered the whole Saturday sleeping in bed. Sleeping was perhaps a big word as my mobile phone woke me up 4 to 5 times to treat emergencies. The Sunday was also oriented work, as I needed to treat all the emails I have put on "low priority" and I also checked all the closed helpdesk calls to check how we performed and how we could do things better next time. Every Monday morning, I had an action plan ready for my people but also for the end users to reduce the number of incidents.

In less than 3 months, I lost 15 kilograms and needed to wear glasses as my eyes were to exhausted.

During that period, I was so tired at 3 occasions that I could not make it back home in the evening. I had to stop after a 10-minute drive to arrive in a last effort on a parking lot on the highway next to the many trucks where I spend the night sleeping behind my steering wheel. Waking up at 6 am when the first truckers started their engine, I returned immediately to the office where I took 5 minutes to shave myself and to change my shirt.

Conclusion: I really gave the impression that I was always on campus and present in all buildings. I was reachable and taking care of all issues. I also went seeing people so the users saw a face, not a voice over the phone or a simple email user. This made that all users knew me and knew I was treating his/her problem. They saw action plans executed to avoid their problems would reappear.

This created high expectations and an important volume of emails in my inbox but I became an integral part of the campus... almost like the furniture.

It was also important for my team as they saw I was fighting with them to make a better world and I was never too tired for a new battle. I was not only the general... I was fighting in the frontline. I still don't know where I found the forces to realise everything I did on such a short moment of time. Even with an important fatigue, I performed extremely well and did what needed to be done. To become a leader, you need to distribute lots of energy.

Don't worry – I will fire most of you

One of my main missions was to reduce the number of people on the account from 54 to a staff of 20 people.

A part of the reduction could be executed by optimising internal procedures, using a better information workflow, implementing an industrialised desktop and replacing the low-performing supervisors. One of the major difficulty consisted to re-motivate the people and especially, keep them motivated when I was at the same time, reducing the headcount.

To make things clear in my mind, I took a piece of paper to write down the different ways I could handle this situation with the pros and cons for each solution.

Should I split my mission to reduce headcounts into tasks and delegate them to each supervisor, knowing they were already weak performers and accusing the other teams to be low performers? This option would not create a dynamic environment and not leverage the tasks between the different resources. It would create extra tension between the teams with lower performance.

A second option was to create a more agile organisation by running in 2 different modes – a daily operating mode and an emergency mode. The 2 could deliver nice results as a part of the team was dedicated to the frontline, solving the user emergencies while the major part of the "backline" was doing the daily work without being interrupted by the hourly fires. The main problem of this option was to create that back-office as everyone was used to work in the frontline – with a lot of user contacts. Reducing the number of resources in the frontline could increase the pressure on them as they would have more user contacts while the back-line will have almost no less user contacts and could feel unimportant on campus. Above this, the weak performing supervisors would not take in hand new upcoming problems because they would criticise the new organisation chart at the first incident.

I decided to go straight ahead and play it the hard way. I was going to replace the supervisors, mix some teams together to have fewer supervisors, define priorities on a global basis and not on user-relationship bases and promote some motivated people to become the new supervisors.

I invited my whole team together in one of the large meeting rooms and while indicating them the extremely bad financial situation, I also made the compliment they had some qualities but most of them were not suited for the market. Most of them had major lacks in their skill-set. To solve this, I needed from each of them an updated resume so I could work with each one a personal development plan. My intention... reposition them on the job market with a stronger skill set and a better markability and an aligning of their salary to market rates.

Why I did this for them... because the number of people on the account needed to be reduced dramatically so we all needed to win this challenge. Those who would stay on campus where those with

the best skill-set on their resume and the best motivation. Those that would leave could be fired or promoted... and I prefer promoted. At the same time, I modified the organisation by reducing the number of services from 6 to 3 and announced the new supervisors.

Before they could react on the new organisation chart, which was certainly a shock for most of them, I announced a very short deadline of 3 days to receive from each of them their latest resume. I explained the delay was short as the mission was important and we had no time to loose if we wanted to succeed. In reality, it was to give them no time to react against the new organisation chart.

The team reacted hesitating, as they did not know what to think. Yes, there was once again a new organisation chart – no surprise as there was one each 2 months... but for the first time, they had to give their resume and discuss their future. There was also a promise of getting extra skills and a market-rate salary. There was also their new supervisor – an old team member that got rewarded for his efforts so it also could happen to them in the next months.

I also announced the separation in frontline and back office and announced I was changing all our telephone numbers (except of course my number and the one of the helpdesk) and all our individual numbers would be on a hidden list so the users could not call us anymore. This was the only way to direct the user to the helpdesk – and to empower the system.

The first real reaction did not come from my team but from some of the administrative staff of the University that were questioning the efficiency of my "big-bang restructuring" and the high risks of having an IT running with un-experienced supervisors and the fact they could not longer call their IT contact person. I tried to assure

them by explaining it was a necessary step. They should call the helpdesk so problems could be tracked and it was better for them to have new high-motivated supervisors. Of course, if they experienced a service problem, they could always join me and I would take care of their problem.

When I received most of the resumes the next day, I discovered several hidden qualities inside several people so I could tune my new organisation with some almost-fitting skills. Some hesitating people saw that 85% of the people delivered their resume so they also gave me their resume. In less than 4 days, I had all resumes of my team. During the next 2 weeks, I have met every member of my team to discuss his future and we developed for each an individual development plan. Some of them received internal training (like the laptop guys forced now to install desktops) and some received external training so we could deploy more efficiently our software packages.

The reaction of the team was astonishing as they realised they were working for their future – or at least to have a better resume in the next 6 months and leave with a promotion.

Conclusion: It was a risky step to do what I did as people could reject my proposition and gather around the old supervisors. But it did not happen as the old supervisors got isolated and I created for each individual a win-win situation.

It was also clear that internal rumours went fast as it was the administrative staff that reacted to protect the old organization but fortunately, they all were also aware of the personal development plan so both aspects of my plan were "rumoured around".

At the same time, people got motivated and I could start the reducing of the headcount in a very positive climate as each

person leaving the site was considered as having a 'new professional experience'.

The fact I transformed this loss/loss environment (no one wins with layoffs) into a win/win environment for each individual and for the company could be considered as my first major step to leadership on the account.

The total breakdown... but not IT Services

On a certain Saturday afternoon, the central network chassis broke down and the whole campus was without a network and no one could work.

The escalation procedures worked fine and even when I got some key members of my team on mobile phones to solve the problem, we decided to come all to the campus to solve the problem. The material was not supported by any maintenance contract and our regular maintenance company did not work during the weekend. Result, we had to figure out a solution ourselves and take definitive steps on Monday morning.

As we did not get the chassis running, we decided to search in the basements where we found an old chassis together with some network cards. Even running on a 2Mbs network, we could connect 75% of the people to the network but everything would be extremely slow so I decided to inform everyone on campus of this major incident. This information should reach them before they arrived in the building so I decided to print a huge number of A4 leaflets indicating the major network incident. I could not allow having people discover the problem in the hallways or at their desk when booting their desktop as this was too late. If a colleague made the remark in the hallway, everyone should answer they were aware of the network problem.

To attract the attention to this door-flyer and to make it user-friendly, I decided to print them in colour, blue text as most relaxing color and I also added a cartoon character of a workman to indicate we are working on the problem. And I stucked them onto all external doors of all buildings. I also did it in the elevators for the people arriving by the underground parking lot.

I also mentioned our helpdesk was unreachable on Monday as the ACD server relied completely on the down IT network. When I left the campus on Sunday evening, I knew I had done everything I could do but I was wondering how people should react. I was also uncertain for myself as I have seen people fired for smaller technical incidents and I was now responsible for the infrastructure and the problem resolution.

That Monday morning, I walked in all the hallways to meet all bypassing users and to explain the situation and this to calm down all people and to control the situation. While this was accepted in the administration and faculty buildings, the situation was overheated when I arrived in the student areas. Surrounded by more than 50 agitated students that came in earlier that morning to finish a paper but could not hand in their work. I explained the situation, that we came with 4 people on Sunday and that we could only give them an extremely slow network as we replaced it with some old material we found in the basements. I also explained that all the network equipment was owned by the University and it was the University that decided not to have a maintenance contract for that material. I was waiting for the University to take a quick decision. The whole situation calmed down when one of the students shouted he would call his dad who was a general of the army to send his army. I calmly thanked him for his proposition and replied that I was interested in their help as long as they brought with them a new

network chassis to make the network run. The students around me started laughing and the group splitted amused about the situation. We managed to get the broken switch up and running at noon and we had the same performance by 2pm.

Conclusion: That day, I learned the power of good communication, good communication mapping and not to be scared to meet the users. Even if it was a major incident with no one able to work that morning, I took control of the situation and people experienced it as a bad thing to pass... as many things in live. They did not show any particular stress.

The first part of this success was the upfront communication before people arrived in the building. This short-cuttet all negative reactions as people need to communicate to each other and to generate a normal human reaction - criticising the situation and become negative.

The second part of the success was that I walked in the hallways to see the users. They felt they were not left alone and they saw I was more than aware that they could not work and at the same time, I was pushing with all my forces for a quick solution. The IT Infrastructure was down but IT Services were more than alive and made the difference.

Lets strike together – yes?

On a Tuesday afternoon, I got stopped in the hallway by a professor who tried to reach in vain the Helpdesk. I told him it was probably a problem with the configuration on the PABX system and I would solve immediately this technical problem with a top one priority.

With an extra technical problem to solve, I ran back to my office to discover a major problem and not a technical one as the helpdesk people have laid down work.

The 8 people from the IT Helpdesk have read that afternoon in a monthly report of the workers union, the project to relocate ALL call centers inside the central office. This could reduce costs and increase significantly productivity. The fact the project was not only announced by the CEO but also temporarily approved by the unions indicated that this was going to happen in the near future. For everyone in the helpdesk, this meant a forced relocation or to travel an extra 2,5 hours every morning and evening. Of course, this meant they had to resign and find another job in the area. To react to this announce, they laid down work to protest and were trying to join in vain the union representative.

When I arrived in their office, I asked what was happening. I listened to them and took the paper from the Unions to read it. I then spoke with determination to explain that the decision to relocate the helpdesk activity was not the responsibility of the unions neither the CEO but my responsibility as I was responsible for the financial performance of the account. In our case, using a mutulized helpdesk would only increase the costs so this project would never be approved by the CFO. And for this simple financial reason, they could be assured there would always be an onsite helpdesk.

I saw on their faces that this did not convince them, as they did not take up work again. I had to find another argument and at that time, my mobile phone rang and I used it as an excuse to leave the room saying I would return in a minute.

It was a completely unimportant call as I hooked up immediately and started thinking on a tactic to get them back to work.

Should I inform the whole campus we are striking? If so, it would create a very aggressive reaction and we would lose the confidence of the few people that started believing in our services. Second option... should I inform the HQ to inform the CEO so he could send over new guys to break the strike? With this idea in mind, I entered again the helpdesk to play it the hard way – and I would not listen to them as I did five minutes ago.

I explained clearly to each of them that the French law did not allow them to have an unannounced strike. If they continued with their action, I should be obliged to fire them all and they would not have any departure or unemployment fee.

I have a service agreement to respect for the daily functioning of the whole campus... and the users would agree with me laying them off as long as they had their IT service level.

I then mentioned them how to organise an official strike by sending a request form to the Unions and I asked my assistant to search on the web for that request form. I wanted them to start working again immediately and requested them to fill in the form by this evening and I would send it personally to the Unions as I did not agree either with the project of their headquarters but I did not want to get fired neither fire the whole helpdesk.

When I stopped my briefing... a big silence surrounded the room and no one said a word neither moved. Then, after perhaps 15 seconds of silence, the supervisor just said: "OK with the deal" and took up the phone to answer a waiting user call. All people joined him and started answering the phone. The crisis was temporarily finished and IT Services was up and running again.

Conclusion: by pushing myself as leader of the strike, I killed the strike in 45 minutes time. The helpdesk saw I was carrying for their work conditions and I was taking care of the problem myself. When they got confirmation later that evening from the Union representative that each file needed a separate validation from the CFO, they saw I could be telling the truth – at least on the financial part and they decided not to fill in the union request form. I was glad they decided not to fill it in as I would be in serious problems. Imagine a boss handing in an official request for a strike...

From that day on, some people started calling me "boss".

Using War strategies to survive and destroy the SLA

The month of January 1998 arrived and I was starting my 5th month still in these difficult circumstances. With a reduced team, I had to manage the arrival of a new promotion of students which should give everyone an enormous amount of work as we needed to introduce them how to manage IT on our campus, the services they could expect and help them in configuring their laptops. Besides this difficulty, I did not want to hear once again we did a bad job when we did everything we could do. It was the contract SLA that was unattainable and had created extremely high expectations. It served especially for the client to get numbers and push us into a corner as weak performers which demotivated little by little the whole team.

So I had to realise two different objectives for January 1998: to survive a busy month and to break the SLA. During the whole month

of December, I was preparing myself by thinking on the different elements I could implement and as I found myself in a war situation, survive the attack of a new student promotion and attack the SLA enemy, I finally decided to use some warfare concepts to solve both problems. In a first step, I was thinking of getting back one of the books on war strategy I've read when I was executing my military service. I did not do this as some faculty members were teaching these and could discover one of my methods. Besides that, I also needed to find the time to read the book so I decided to use some of the lessons I learned during my military service.

- 1) **Control the land you are fighting on:** The team was delivering in the past a weak service as the students did not had all information available and they overwhelmed our helpdesk with a lot of simple questions that returned frequently. And of course, the number of calls created a bad performing helpdesk and other services started lacking behind schedule. By writing and distributing 8 small newsletters for the students, they had the information available in leaflets when they arrived and the sheets would also be available in all workplaces. This would lower down the number of calls and even when a student called the helpdesk with a question that could be found on one of the newsletters, our operator could redirected him towards the leaflets and close the call instantly. This created a reaction of reading the material before calling the helpdesk. With less calls arriving, our helpdesk could have the necessary time to treat the real support calls.
- 2) **Show the banners:** Due to the high number of technical problems, IT had gained an extremely bad reputation and scared to meet the users. In the past, there were some technicians running around campus but they were more incognito as the new students did not recognize their faces. I

needed to bring IT in the forefront of the battle so I placed one of the helpdesk operators next to the general reception desk so students knew where to go to ask for assistance... or just asking a simple question when passing by. IT had a face.

- 3) **Occupy the battlefield:** Every morning, I walked in all public areas to investigate the situation of our infrastructure. I wrote down all problems with keyboards, mouses ... and gave this list (sometimes more than 20 incidents) to one of my technicians one hour before the students arrived. We then made our tour to repair all the material or to replace it with a spare. The result is that the students had every morning an up and running infrastructure. At noon, one of the technicians made a second verification by walking through all the student wings. To improve intervention speed, he left the office with 2 full desktops on his lorry and a full set of installation CD's. In case of a problem, he instantly swapped the material with the one on his lorry and the students had immediately a new operating desktop.
- 4) **List your victories:** Each problem we solved in the morning or at noon, and the questions we received on the IT Desk next to the reception, got registered as an individual incident and of course, as it got solved instantly, our SLA numbers got better. I started announcing these numbers on a daily basis and these improving SLA numbers worked as an extra motivation to pass the month of January.
- 5) **Retreat when you are sure to loose:** One of the problems we experienced was one of the student habits to baptism the newbies by sending them their second day with several thousands of junk mails. Of course, this created a high stress on the messaging server and the network and this for several days. To solve this problem, we stopped the messaging server just before the event and took a snapshot backup. Just

after the student body launched the email bombing, we deactivated without any notice a major part of the mailing lists. Of course not all as some of the mails needed to get distributed as we could not get the "old students" against us. This action lowered the charge on the network and the servers but not enough as the server crashed 3 hours later and we also stopped manually the messaging services for the old students saying they were using the same gateway (which was true 6 months ago but we had made in the meanwhile some modifications). Even if we were ready to restart the mail services in 10 minutes time, we announced the breakdown would take more than 2 hours so the student body had to announce the end of the bombing activities. We just restored the email backup – and as we had a low number of waiting messages on our gateways, we could install everything at noon and we had instantly a clean and stable messaging system without any junk mail in the mailboxes.

- 6) **Occupy the enemy's staff:** one of the other problems was that most staff and most professors were nervous with the arrival of a new student promotion. This resulted in a lot of unnecessary pressure and we had to do several jobs twice as interventions were badly defined. There was also the user representative to change many priorities and when trying to help, making us less efficient. I decided to occupy the user representative during that first month by sending all badly specified installations to her as it was her role as a user representative to guide and assist her users. Result: she was overloaded with work and she could not find time to change our intervention schedules. She was also forced to deliver us clear installation requests so we could realize one-shot installations. We could work on our own and we increased our efficiency... but it took me a lot of work to occupy this

user representative and a lot of diplomacy so she didn't notice I was overloading her with work.

- 7) **Implement Speed to break the customers main weapon:** Our service contract had an unattainable Service Level Agreement where more than 80% of the calls (including material fixing and account creation) needed to get solved in less than 10 minutes. Besides the fact this was unattainable, it demotivated the team and it was constantly used against us (to push us in our corner) and it extremely demotivated the team (we never going to get good). This situation needed to be stopped as we needed to have an open discussion on important service items and not numbers. I decided to implement one of the contract clauses that said that we could also stop the "10-minute-timer" after a first site intervention. To stop the timer quickly, I dedicated 2 of my technicians as hallway-warriors throughout the campus just to "see the user instantly and stop the timer". Each technician also had a set of CD's and a kit of spare material with him (like a mouse, PC screen, keyboard...) so fast interventions and material fixing.

At the end of the month, I could show my client excellent numbers as we now had 80,3% of all calls closed in less than 10 minutes. Of course, it was not in the 10 minutes after the call but it was solved in 10 minutes time.

Conclusion: We survived the month of January with an understaffed team but it was also the first time the IT department was not longer an emergency team but an environment under control. The frontline handled most issues so our normal services received less calls and could do their work as usual. For the user groups and the executive board, the 80,3% result indicated that the SLA numbers did not mean

anything and we should find new measurements. In the meantime, the old SLA was replaced with 2 simple questions:

⇒ *Did the IT department execute a good job in the past month?*

⇒ *What can IT improve for next month?*

IT was not longer a question of SLA numbers but of user satisfaction and service improvement. We kept calculating the old SLA measurements but they were never discussed again in meetings.

For me, it was a major step as I wanted to get recognized as any other service on the campus and with the same rules. If all other services (like the restaurant) are evaluated on value and user satisfaction, why should IT stay the only service valued with technical numbers?

Working on the User Perception GAP

A lot of things were improving fast with a stable network, applications became reliable and increasing service levels. Unfortunately, we did not get a good appreciation in any of the weekly user satisfaction surveys neither during the monthly user meetings. On the 18 campus services monitored, we continued to find ourselves on the last position.

It was especially frustrating for the executive board that had made major investments that improved the situation significantly but they continued to get a bad feedback from the users. So why are users staying negative towards IT Services?

It took me a long time to understand that the problem was due to a time delay. Every time we implemented an improvement, it took 3 weeks for the users to get convinced of its impact. Of course, as we announced the improvement at the day we deployed it on our servers

and/or desktops, they did not notice much difference and rejected the IT solution as “once again a fake improvement”. And of course, the rumours on campus did the rest.

I decided to modify the user communication so that our deployments were officially announced 2 to 3 weeks after their technical deployment.

I used that time gap to validate the technical improvement but also create the necessary positive rumour on campus. Most of them started with the morning coffee in the cafeteria as it was sufficient to mention to some key people the fact we were working in our test environment on something that would improve this or that... By controlling and creating these positive rumours, I narrowed the gap between the official user communication and the user awareness. Communication was done when the user expected it... not when we deployed our technical improvement.

Result: Two weeks later, we moved from an 18th position to a 7th position. Being listed in the middle of all surveyed services was extremely important for the team as the IT Department was for the first time in years not longer the black sheep in the company.

Aligning the IT services to satisfy the customer

Even when the IT Department was now in the middle of the user satisfaction ratings of all campus services, I believed we could do a lot better by anticipating. We should be there before the incident appeared to the end user and also work with the end user to align our service levels with his/her needs. To do this, I started 2 different projects.

The first project was to bring the "availability numbers" closer to the end user by not measuring them inside the main building but from 3 different buildings on campus. We installed in each an old desktop that did some simple availability tests and was sending each 10 minutes a small message to the US that got looped back.

In case of a problem, the machine registered the incident and sends an alert to our helpdesk for immediate action. In most cases, it was just a false alert but it allowed us to take eventual incidents in hand before we received the first user call.

Conclusion: Because availability was measured from user-buildings, we were closer to the end-user and they felt we were taking care of their reliability and their own network speed. By giving access to some advanced users to see these event logs, IT was not hiding information and end users could read instantly a major part of our service levels.

Users became involved and could no longer deny that the IT Infrastructure was up and running well.

The second project was to realize an intervention before an end user could call the helpdesk. My main problem was that I was understaffed so I could not use people to walk around on campus like I did when a new student promotion arrived. I needed to find other resources and could find some allies in the people from other services walking around on the campus like the Security guards, the Cleaning Teams... Every time they noticed an IT problem like a desktop on the floor, a missing screen or keyboard, a network plug hanging out of the wall...they should call the helpdesk so we could realize the intervention. From the other hand, my IT people should not only take care of desktops but also call the other services if we found out a broken light bulb, students having moved around furniture, blocked emergency exits or garbage scattered around after a party.

Even when everyone agreed to work together in a meeting I organized, things did not happen as nobody started calling. So I decided to show the example and start the communication flow myself.

During the next 2 weeks, I stayed on campus until midnight and when I made my tour just before midnight, I noticed all security and cleaning issues and informed all services.

At the same time, I noticed some IT problems that I kept for me until the next morning. When my technicians arrived at 8 a.m., I told them a security guard had called to indicate a problem with a desktop in a certain Wing. The next day, it was the housecleaning team...

Result, with these small lies, my team got convinced that the other campus services were helping them as an overall "user-centric-service" and also started alerting the adequate service for specific interventions. The using of some 3 to 4 small lies created a simple communication network where all services alerted other internal services – allowing each of us to deliver better quality and to avoid some annoyances for our end users.

Conclusion: the result of building a user-centric organisation and with the whole campus thinking as one single team was phenomenal as IT got in less than 3 weeks to a 2nd ranking in all user surveys. From that day on, we never left the top 3 of the best service delivery team on campus.

The IT infrastructure was already well-performing for some time but users now confirmed in writing their big satisfaction on IT Services.

The final recognition: The “Leader”

During his opening speech in January 1999, the Dean welcomed all new students and presented in the second part of his speech, the whole campus infrastructure and student services.

He spoke of all the departments on site like the Library Department, the Multimedia Department, Restaurant Services ... and I discovered on his Powerpoint slide the word “IT-Team”. He did not write Department or Service but the word “IT-Team”.

He did not speak of IT as a collection of desktops or network plugs, some fancy applications or our famous e-learning platform.

He just mentioned of IT as a Team of people you could call if you have questions. It confirmed that IT was not longer measured with numbers or infrastructure elements but as a service.

And then the magic word left the mouth of the Dean... “The leader of the team is our IT Director, Erik Van Rompay.”

At that moment and for the first time in my life, I felt like a leader...and it was a great feeling. I was proud on myself as I knew I had realised something important.

One week later, the school was ranked 3rd in the top 100 business schools in the world.

Looking back several years later, I still can't believe how I managed to transform an extremely difficult environment into one of the best user environments in the world. My way to create an IT leadership was extremely long and realized in very difficult conditions. Most

things just happened like that and I happened to be on the spot at the right moment.

Looking back, I have gone through the following different steps:

- Acceptance by my team and by the client as a person that delivers but does not make promises,
- High personal involvement with a presence around the clock and in all fields,
- Taking care of each person in my team – even through staff reduction or the breaking of a strike,
- Bringing IT to the frontline by approaching the users and implementing some war strategies,
- Change the user expectations by defining IT as a reliable daily service and not a collection of technical stuff,
- Transform the attitude of a part of the company to create a user-centric organisation,

I left the university one year later, completely burned-out but satisfied to have made things happen.