5 Tactics IT Leaders Are Using to Step Into Increasingly Strategic Roles
Modern information technology (IT) teams, as they pertain to the blurred lines between IT and other departments (data analytics, systems integrations, etc.), have unique leadership needs. Not only do they require a leader with technical expertise, they also must have a leader who has traditional business skills, can build relationships inside the company, and act as an advocate for the team and their initiatives.

Leadership in modern IT is complex; it is not enough to just be a good programmer or administrator. IT leaders need to understand how IT fits into the context of the company’s operational goals and how they can utilize their own knowledge and their team’s expertise to help the company meet those goals.

They are also responsible for:

- Ensuring their team is operating as efficiently as possible
- Collaboration with other departments, and
- Consistent and clear communication with both the C-suite and company stakeholders

As a result of the increasingly strategic nature of these responsibilities, leaders in the IT space are implementing unique strategies to keep up with the changing technology landscape, prepare members of their organization to meet the unique challenges they are facing, and drive overall company success.

Whether you are a seasoned IT professional with many years of experience or are interested in making a career change into IT leadership, there are skills you must have and steps you must take to lead a team with confidence and skill.
Hone your soft skills

According to Dr. Boxiang Dong, Assistant Professor of Computer Science at Montclair State University, soft skills are crucial for IT leaders because you will not only have to coordinate with other teams, but also because, “[IT leaders] serve as the mediator between the clients and your engineers, so soft skills are very important.”

There’s a stereotype that IT professionals are hidden away in a dark room, feverishly programming in multiple languages. In reality, IT leaders can most often be found closely collaborating with executives and other team leads.

The growing need for IT collaboration requires skills both to effectively communicate and to develop productive, professional relationships across departments.

Communicating with colleagues as an IT professional can be uniquely challenging: IT leaders are usually dealing with problems and products that are highly technical (and not always easy to break down into simpler, more understandable terms). To be a successful IT leader, it is crucial to develop the communication skills to make IT-focused ideas and challenges understandable for coworkers outside of their direct team.
The abilities to negotiate and resolve conflicts are also vital soft skills for IT professionals. In order for a given project to succeed, IT leaders must be able to work together with colleagues who have other areas of expertise (and their own unique ideas and challenges) to find a solution that works not just for the IT department, but for all departments/stakeholders involved in the project.

Honing soft skills like communication, negotiation, and conflict resolution will help you develop positive relationships with your coworkers and build a solid reputation as you move through your career.
Without strong leadership and project management practices in place, a team of IT professionals could quickly spiral out of control and find themselves behind on projects.

Be proactive about project management

Whether you are working on large client-facing projects or handling smaller internal initiatives, proactive project management is key to successful leadership.

IT departments deal with constantly changing technology. They also often manage the technology that their colleagues depend on to do their jobs, requiring them to be flexible and able to pivot quickly between projects and tasks. Without strong leadership and project management practices in place, a team of IT professionals could quickly spiral out of control and find themselves behind on projects.

There are a few different methodologies that IT leaders can implement, such as agile project management or waterfall project management. Each methodology has pros and cons, but in the end, they will only be successful if a competent, organized, and proactive leader is executing the project plan and managing and supporting the team.

Successful IT leaders need to be able to dynamically manage projects, coordinate their team’s workflow, and continue to stay focused on the “big picture” in order to keep teams working toward their company’s operational goals.
Develop an understanding of AI integration in the future of business

The impact of artificial intelligence (AI) on the future IT landscape cannot be understated. The progression of AI within day-to-day life continues to grow at an astronomical rate, from Google predicting the time of your morning commute to robotic-assisted physical therapy, a variety of AI applications are positioned to have a substantial impact on the future of business. According to Dr. Dong, “It is going to be massive...In short, in the future you’ll either write programs or design programs.”

As AI continues to grow in accessibility and day-to-day utilization by businesses across industries, IT leaders will increasingly be expected to oversee the implementation and management of AI programming and software.

Many AI experts believe there’s no limit to how AI can be utilized. AI is already prevalent in the education, healthcare, customer service, manufacturing, and tech industries. As AI continues to grow in accessibility and day-to-day utilization by businesses across industries, IT leaders will increasingly be expected to oversee the implementation and management of AI programming and software. Leaders in IT need to prepare for this increased managerial expectation; it’s not a matter of if it’s coming, it’s a matter of when.
In addition to the technical skills needed to work with and manage AI, IT leaders will need to have the contextual knowledge required to safely and ethically implement AI solutions within their companies. While AI has many applications that could ultimately help people, AI can also automate some of humanity’s worst impulses, including bias against people of color and weaponizing surveillance. IT leaders will be at the forefront of ensuring that AI technology is helping people and improving their lives, not violating their privacy or furthering discrimination.

AI has broad applications in many industries, and successful IT leaders in any space will recognize its importance and strategically implement AI to supplement and improve their team’s efforts.
Proactively manage your department and work toward improvement

Part of being a leader is keeping the “big picture” in mind at all times. Leaders have a unique position and insight into their team’s performance and priorities, far more than anyone else within the company’s organizational structure. This gives them the ability (and the responsibility) to use that information to make positive changes on and for their team.

Typically, IT leaders are somewhat removed from the day-to-day, nitty gritty details of their department’s work. Instead, they have a bird’s-eye-view of the projects their team is working on, interactions with other teams, the department’s budget, and how efficiently their team is producing. “IT leaders should have a deep knowledge in programming, algorithms and architecture design,” Dr. Dong said. “More importantly, they should be good at collaboration and getting people to work.”
While it can be tempting to simply address issues as they arise and move on, effective IT leaders are always looking for ways to improve their team’s performance and make their jobs easier. Whether it’s communication with outside teams, workflow, or the allocation of resources, IT leaders should always be looking for ways to make their department more efficient and, ultimately, more valuable to the company as a whole.

This strategic proactivity also requires a thorough understanding of what your department needs to function effectively. What equipment does your team need? What software programs will help them complete their tasks quickly and correctly? What is creating roadblocks for your team? Is your team too small to carry the workload assigned to you? Is there a role that may be a better fit for a given employee and allow them better opportunities to succeed?

The answers to these questions are critical for IT leadership to understand. They will help you not only maintain your department’s workload but also improve your output and support your employees and your company’s operational goals more effectively.
Intentionally stay on the cutting edge of innovation and developing technologies.

On one hand, technology that automates and simplifies work or provides new opportunities can make a huge difference in a team’s output. Technology can open new doors for IT teams, and it can enable them to successfully take on challenges they couldn’t before. IT leaders need to keep abreast of new developments and evaluate when there is a new tool or product that they should consider implementing. They also need to be able to bring those solutions to the C-suite and demonstrate why they are worth the investment.

IT leaders know better than anyone that technology is always changing, and they understand that the rapid changes happening every day can have both positive and negative effects on their company.
On the other hand, IT leaders need to be aware of ways that advances in technology can have a negative impact on their company. Not only is the number of hackers growing, they are changing tactics along with the rest of the tech world, quickly becoming smarter and adapting to defeat the security measures put in place to protect data and hardware. A strong IT leader is strategic and proactive about cybersecurity and champions security and compliance from both a high level company view and in day-to-day operations.

Strong IT leaders also position themselves as security leaders for their entire organization. It’s not enough for just the IT team to understand the importance of security. A phishing email sent to an employee in any department can quickly expose the entire company to a hacker if that employee doesn’t know how to identify and handle fraudulent emails. Being able to disseminate security protocol effectively through the company is imperative.
Taking the first step toward a career in IT leadership

This program is designed to accommodate both students who are already working in the field as well as those who would like to step into an IT role. For those who are new to the field, Montclair State University offers bootcamp programs to help them get up to speed before entering the MS program. Once you are admitted into our program, you’ll be introduced to a wide range of IT subjects and will graduate prepared to meet the challenges that IT leaders are facing every day.

Our ideal student is one who is motivated and ready to apply themselves every single day. Our students are driven to succeed not just for personal gain, but also for their families, their companies, and their communities.

If you’re ready to take the first step toward a career in IT leadership, visit our website today to learn more about our program and begin the application process.

Our MS in Information Technology degree with an emphasis in Applied IT will prepare you to step into an IT leadership role and lead your team into the future. Whether you are new to the IT industry or are currently in an IT role and hoping to advance your career toward leadership roles, our program will prepare you to be an effective leader.
The 43,800-square-foot Center for Computing and Information Science features state-of-the-art research labs and instructional spaces for areas such as cybersecurity, data science, image processing, parallel and distributed computing, human-computer interaction and computational sensing. These spaces include a unique mix of classroom technologies, active learning solutions and state-of-the-art professional equipment – such as laser projectors; 55- and 85-inch displays; robotic pan/tilt/zoom cameras in collaborative spaces; and wireless microphone systems provided by strategic technology partner, Sony Electronics.

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