

## **Information Technology Unit Managerial Competencies: The Four Pillars**

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## **Abstract**

*The “Information Technology Unit (ITU) Managerial Competencies: The Four Pillars” was developed to establish and define the expectations for all managers within the department. “The Four Pillars” provides staff with clear descriptions of behaviors that an effective manager should incorporate in his or her interactions with direct reports and with superiors. Managers, through self assessment or with a supervisor, can chart a personal development path to improve on competencies that need strengthen. Leadership retreats sponsored by the ITU for all managers can be directed to competencies that need overall focus and prioritization.*

*The ITU’s Four Pillars are designed to help its managers acquire the knowledge, skills and abilities that will make them competent in their managerial roles. Supervisors make a commitment to negotiate an agreement with their manager to develop the needed competencies and to provide opportunities for managers to practice these skills.*

*Furthermore, ITU managers at all levels are expected to be effective leaders, particularly with respect to leading change. The mission of the ITU is to advance the University’s strategic goals, support learning, enable scholarly endeavors, and improve institutional management. Clearly the fulfillment of this mission requires leaders who can identify the need for change, design and implement change strategies, and assist staff and customers in dealing with change.*

*The four “pillars”—Knowing the organization, Leading and managing people, Managing resources, and Communicating effectively—form the basis of the managerial competencies the ITU expects at all levels of the organization. The Four Pillars do not stand independent of each other, but form a unified whole, one set of skills building on and helping to develop the others.*

## Introduction of the Organization

The ITU's mission is to advance the university's strategic goals, support learning, enable scholarly endeavors, and improve institutional management by effectively leveraging the resources of the ITU's constituent units.

The ITU is comprised of divisions and departments that provide library and information technology resources, systems, services, tools, and training to the university community. The ITU is responsible for maintaining and improving the university's technical infrastructure.

The ITU is made up of several hundred employees, ranging from doctoral scholars to field technicians, from directors partnering with faculty to part time hourly employees maintaining equipment. The Vice President for Information Technology and CIO leads the ITU.

The ITU's constituent units are:

“Administrative Services Department” which facilitates communication and coordination throughout the ITU by providing centralized administrative services. This group interfaces with the university's Human Resources department for ITU staff.

The “Division of Instructional Technology” (DoIT) which serves as the “front door” to instructional and technology support services for students, faculty and staff. This group assists the university in using technology to support excellence in learning and teaching. To this end, DoIT works collaboratively with individuals, with academic and

administrative departments and support units on campus to initiate and sustain projects related to its mission.

The “Security and Project Office” provides computer users and systems administrators the tools and information they need to secure their systems. It also supports consistent project management practice to enable project leaders to successfully deliver their promised value to their customers.

“Technology Systems Divisions” (TSD), provides the technology infrastructure for George Mason University. The voice, video, and data networks are planned, operated, and maintained by TSD network engineers in the Network Engineering and Technology (NET) department. Personnel in the Database Application Services (DAS) department implement and maintain integrated central and distributed information systems and associated databases that support the business needs of the University. The systems engineers in the Enterprise Servers and Operations (ES&O) department acquire, install, implement, maintain and operate enterprise servers and systems for administrative support, academic research/instruction, and electronic messaging, as well as operating a 24 X 7 data-center.

The mission of “University Libraries” is to participate in and contribute to the teaching, learning, research and scholarship, service and outreach, and cultural endeavors of the university community. A further mission is to serve as a resource for the Northern Virginia region supplementing individual, educational, business, professional, governmental, and/or cultural information requirements. The mission is fulfilled through

innovative library programs and services that anticipate changes and trends in educational practice, research, scholarly communication, publishing, and information technology.

## Statement of the Problem/Initiative

The Information Technology Unit (ITU), a large and diverse organization in a rapidly growing university, relies on its managers to lead teams and departments successfully for the entire unit to be considered successful. Managers were often hired from within and were frequently people without managerial experience. New managers were seeking guidance on expectations, how to improve performance as a manager and identifying training needs for themselves.

Directors of the various departments within the ITU wanted a comprehensive and consistent definition of managerial competencies. Although their departments' responsibilities and employee requirements cover a wide range, the directors felt there were common elements of managerial knowledge and behaviors. Also, a common set of expectations would be a positive statement for the entire ITU. The topics of leadership retreats sponsored by the ITU could be guided by the competencies.

With a matrix of competencies, managers could assess their own progress and develop strategies to improve in specific areas. Conferencing with their supervisor during the annual performance review could be concentrated on the published competencies.

The consensus was that the common set of managerial competencies needed to be developed and communicated as the ITU grew to meet the needs of an increasing population of students and staff.

## Design

The ITU's leader formed a Leadership Management Group to develop a common set of competencies. She assigned a core group of experienced directors who represented the major departments and asked if any staff member with an interest in this topic to volunteer to join the group. The group of six people started to meet and define the task in summer of 2004.

After discussing managerial responsibilities within their own departments, they saw several themes emerge. The group researched several other universities and human resource departments and found several methods for defining and measuring managerial performance. After examination and debate, the group organized the internal common themes and the competencies listed by other organizations into several major categories. Other university evaluation instruments from the Human Resources Department were examined to be sure language used in the ITU managerial competencies was consistent and supportive and that expectations did not conflict with policies and published employee handbooks.

With a goal of developing the competencies with simplicity and clarity, the group formed the four categories of "Knowing the Organization," "Leading and Managing People," "Managing Resources," and "Communicating Effectively." They added a description for each category and developed sub units for each with two levels of competencies. The "Four Pillars" became the overall name of the managerial competencies as a way to visualize the notion that the competencies "supported" the ITU and added strength to the organization. The four pillar model also implies they work together as a whole system

and are equal in importance. The final document was finished about one year after the group first met.

To communicate the ITU's managerial competencies, a web site was created. The talents of the University's Electronic Publications were contracted to develop the web site and graphics. The web site allowed the group to add links to resources for training and more detailed information. Examples of new position descriptions were developed to show how the competencies should be used in writing an advertisement for a job opening with managerial duties.

A sample of one of the Pillars is on the next page.

Competency	Level Achieved	Proficiency (1=Novice, 4=Mastery)				
		1	2	3	4	
		<b>LEADING AND MANAGING PEOPLE</b>				
Performance Evaluation	<i>Level 1.</i> Makes sure staff understand evaluation criteria and evaluation process; works with staff to articulate clear performance plans and goals.					
	<i>Level 2.</i> Works with staff to rewrite position descriptions and performance plans as organizational change occurs.					
Staff Development	<i>Level 1.</i> Identifies staff members' strengths and delegates tasks appropriately; uses rewards and recognitions effectively to recognize staff contributions; encourages professional development within resource constraints; directs staff having difficulties with personal and professional life to appropriate resources.					
	<i>Level 2.</i> Recruits, develops, and retains a diverse and qualified workforce in an equitable manner; employs different approaches to getting work done; expands individual staff responsibility with assignments that increase discretionary range and scope.					
Collaboration and Team Building	<i>Level 1.</i> Identifies and addresses morale concerns; encourages and facilitates cooperation within the organization and with customer groups; identifies and helps resolve conflicts to the satisfaction of all parties.					
	<i>Level 2.</i> Develops leadership through coaching, rewarding, and guiding staff toward goal accomplishments; prevents conflicts by proactively addressing sources of conflict; creates a culture of trust, confidence, and high ethical standards through personal demonstration.					
Customer Relations	<i>Level 1.</i> Actively promotes the ITU Customer Service Guidelines; uses a regular process of service evaluation from all customers; identifies customers and understands their needs; identifies customer concerns and collaboratively develops solutions.					
	<i>Level 2.</i> Analyzes customer input to improve services Proactively anticipates customer needs; seeks continuous improvement in quality of services, products and processes.					

## Implementation

The first challenge was how to communicate the competencies to the entire ITU. All levels of employees needed to know they now existed. A communications campaign was developed to add the “four pillars” to meeting agendas. The web site (<http://pillars.gmu.edu>) was announced and demonstrated at many meetings. The large departments within the ITU already had regularly scheduled manager meetings. These meetings provided another opportunity to spread the word. The “Four Pillars” was a topic of a leadership retreat. Attendees received a framed document of the Four Pillars to display in their offices. At the retreat, scenarios were acted out to demonstrate how the competencies could be used in performance reviews.

Future Leadership Retreats will focus on a competency and define it as stated in the “Four Pillars.” For example, the spring 2006 Leadership Retreat’s theme was “Collaboration,” which is one of the competencies listed under the “Leading and Managing People” pillar.

The second challenge was, and remains, how to institutionalize the competencies. Managers and their supervisors asked if the “Four Pillars” replaced the Performance Expectations formalized with Human Resources. They asked if they had to meet all expectations at a high proficiency level within a certain time frame. The ITU directors informed their departments that the competencies were a way to define expectations and set a course for improvement.

The challenge continues to be how to require the “Four Pillars” be used during performance reviews without frustrating managers with an overwhelming list of competencies that would be difficult to achieve in a short time. The use of the competencies will be modeled and developed for the next evaluation cycle.

## Benefits

Managers now know what they are expected to do as far as leadership is concerned.

Their supervisors know how to guide the managers' development. Staff knows what their manager should be doing to lead them. Leadership development can be focused a defined set of expectations.

Resources for training, whether it is an internal workshop or web based training, can be linked to a competency. When managers request training, they can justify it by indicating that it addresses a specific competency.

Having a common set of managerial competencies, packaged under an engaging title "The Four Pillars," provides the ITU with realistic and achievable goals for all.

## Retrospect

The institutionalization of the competencies was not addressed as the list was developed.

Encouraging the use the Four Pillars needs to be a constant message to all levels. More publicity and a more focused communications plan would have been more effective in implementation.