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inside:

APROPOS

LETTER TO THE EDITORS

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apropos

by Tina Darmohray

Tina Darmohray, contributing editor of *login:*, is a computer security and networking consultant. She was a founding member of SAGE. She is currently a Director of USENIX.



tmd@usenix.org

Increased Visibility

A friend recently called me from an airport bookstore and said he was thumbing through a book I might find interesting. After looking it up on the Web, I agreed and ordered *The Accidental Leader: What to Do When You're Suddenly in Charge*, by Michael Finley and Harvey Robbins. The book is split into two main areas: what to do if you unexpectedly are tapped to run the show, and how to do it, including specifics on identifying and leveraging your assets, managing teams, and even firing people.

As with most of the things I manage to read these days, I carried this book with me and squeezed in a couple of pages of reading in between errands, standing in lines, and, yes, during meetings. Interestingly, this book seems to have a provocative effect on people, since I received many comments from folks who observed me reading it. Predictably, people talked about climbing the corporate ladder or looking for new employment. Many wondered if it was a good book. Those who know me well asked why in the world I was reading that book.

Like so many techies, I've loathed the trappings of management and tended to give greater respect to technical achievement. I've now decided that becoming a leader may happen by accident, but becoming a good one is far from accidental. I think my delayed understand-

ing of management's integral role in achieving overall success results from the fact that they suffer from their own workplace success, just as we system administrators do, i.e., "If we're doing our job well, no one notices."

The very best managers may be so smooth at their job we don't even notice what they're doing. In reality, they're working toward a key set of top-level tasks that are essential to our success. They set priorities, identify resources, match assets to goals, leverage team strengths, defend turf, provide feedback, and boost accomplishments.

Being the manager of system administrators is a double-whammy of the "suffering from your own success" syndrome: If you're doing a good job and the folks who are working for you are doing a good job, no one knows that you're doing a good job of managing what they're doing a good job of. Whew. It's clear, if you're in the position of managing system administrators, good old-fashioned PR has got to be one of your top priorities. Here are some ideas on what's newsworthy and what to do with it.

Toot Your Horn

Take advantage of opportunities to let your user community know that things are getting done. If you're having trouble thinking about what to talk about, take a mental accounting of the status reports you request in your team meetings. Chances are some of these same topics would be suitable for user updates. For example, when you make upgrades, let people know, and make sure to put it in "what's in it for me" terms they can understand. Short newsworthy sound bites can go a long way – for example, "Storage capacity on the central mail servers was doubled over the weekend, preventing the need to decrease users' mail spool allocation."

Create and Measure Metrics

At raise time, I used to complain that other managers could cite the number of lines of code their employees had written over the year and I could only say, "We kept the network and servers running." Of course it wasn't that clear-cut, but you get the idea. Keep track of your work. Create metrics and track performance against them, e.g., number of uninterrupted days servers are up, number of help-desk calls answered, number of patches applied, etc. We tend to view these kinds of things as "all in a day's work," but although individually they represent short time-slices, they are still deliverables, and when they are tracked and presented as a total deliverable, they have a pretty good think factor.

Document Milestones

System and network administrators are all about staying ahead of the curve. It takes sustained effort and know-how to keep systems current and poised to accommodate the future. If you upgrade the OS on your server pool, swap out all your old routers, or change to a new higher-capacity backup system, make sure you document these "unseen" milestones and get credit for staying "ready to meet future business needs." Make sure these milestones are shared with your higher-ups so that they know you're on board to ensure the success of the organization.

Manage Expectations

Communicate out, up, and down. Let your peers, your higher-ups, and your users know what to expect. Be proactive about giving status when things are good and when things are bad. Let people know what is going on and, as much as possible, avoid surprises. This applies from service outages to personnel changes.

letters to the editor

Raise Awareness

Phones, heat, light, serviceable rest-rooms, and computers are the things we expect to “be there” for us when we get to the office each day. Depending on whether you’re a glass is half full or half empty person, you may feel that means system administrators are essential or close to, ahem, well, we won’t go there. Computers and networks are no longer dispensable in the workplace, and the folks who make them run aren’t either. Use every opportunity to position your work as essential to accomplishing the goals of the organization.

Becoming a successful manager is no accident; it takes deliberate effort in the key areas that are essential to the success of your team. For managers of system administrators, raising the visibility of system administration accomplishments and their role in the overall success of an organization has got to be a top priority. Keep at it, and keep visible!

To the Editor:

I very much enjoyed the focus-on-security issue of *login*. However, I wish to take exception to one statement in one article. In Abe Singer’s article “Life Without Firewalls,” the very first sentence ends “. . . four years without an intrusion on our managed machines.”

I have no doubts at all that SDSC went four years without detecting an intrusion. But there are two possible explanations. The preferred explanation is that there were no successful intrusions. The ugly second explanation is that there were intrusion(s) that were so skillful and sophisticated that they could not be detected.

I know and respect Abe, and I know that he’s aware (or at least, Marcus’s cat has assured me, there’s a 95% probability that he’s aware) of this distinction, so I put this sentence down to compact prose. But I have met at least one senior government official who honestly believed that if they had not detected an intrusion, none had happened. He could not be persuaded that the second possibility even existed. Given the state of diplomatic relations between the country in question and the US at the time, I believe that he was almost certainly wrong.

Sorry to be pedantic, but that’s one of the statements I simply won’t let past without comment. (The other one is “Encryption ensures message integrity” . . . so don’t say it.)

Greg Rose
ggr@qualcomm.com

The author responds:

Greg is correct. I intended an aside or footnote to point out that we had no compromises *that we knew of*, but it was omitted. Mea culpa.

Abe Singer
abe@spsc.edu