(C) The Bald Truth: Technical Leadership (repost)

FROM: Charles H. Berlin III
SID Chief of Staff
Run Date: 01/02/2004

(U//FOUO) Note from SIGINT Communications: This article appeared on October 24th.

(U) Some of the feedback from my previous articles asked about my thoughts on technical leadership. As usual, I have an opinion - let me know if you agree.

(U) First of all, we are a technical agency and always will be. Our technical capabilities and high tech nature are found in the brains of our people. Fundamentally, technical leadership has something to do with leading technical people. We need to have strong programs to hire, develop and retain technical people (BTW, as a former East German linguist, I include language analysts and such as technical people). We have some pretty good programs for this. Technical leadership will have to be focused on the human capital. Senior technical people have to lead, mentor and take responsibility for building our future. Technical leadership also entails keeping yourself current in your field.

(U) But there are several other aspects of this domain. First it is a legitimate function of a technical leader to "tell the geeks when they are done." Seems flip, I know, but no disrespect meant when I tell you what you already know: software is never "done" and somebody has to declare victory. Perfect *really* is the enemy of good enough. We have pretty high standards, so "good enough" never means shoddy or compromised, but let's face it: the job has to be finished *sometime* . This decision is a skill that can be learned, but it essentially comes from an exquisite understanding of the requirements and a solid business sense for when they are achieved (remember "Business Acumen"? You are supposed to have some if you are a leader).

(U//FOUO) A second aspect of technical leadership is what I call alignment. In the 70's we often built things because we could - if it can be done, why not build it? In the 80's and 90's it had to be feasible and also important. Now we have the third criterion: can we afford it? This means that there are ideas and systems that are feasible and even important that we will not build. No kidding, we could have a lifesaving idea that will not make the cut. Technical leadership has to draw that cut line. A technical leader does this by reviewing the guidance and priorities that come from the strategic plan and ensuring that every project and program conforms to that plan. Further - and this is where the real technical part comes in - the technical leader ensures that the solution is as efficient, reusable and networked into the service-based architecture. For instance, if you are building a database that does not use the PKI architecture (or worse invents its own), then you are wrong. A technical leader ensures this does not happen.

(U//FOUO) Technical leadership insists on a rigorous scrub of requirements and alignment - it just has to be habitual and ingrained in our culture. This third aspect is necessary for our technical reputation but not sufficient. The last aspect of technical leadership is the mandate to create. Technical leadership is about sheer creativity. To be successful in the future we have to actually invent new ideas, techniques and applications. We will look to the technical leaders to come up with some no-kidding killer applications. We want to massively surprise our enemies with capabilities they cannot imagine. Our technical leadership can imagine them and will. Invent anything lately?

(U) One last question: Is technical leadership an oxymoron? I don't think so. Being a "techie" is not a license to withdraw from the leadership field. Neither is grade. Wherever you find yourself, whatever your grade, you must lead. Just do it.

"(U//FOUO) SIDtoday articles may not be republished or reposted outside NSANet

without the consent of S0121 ([DL sid_comms](#))."