A Conversation with Jeanne Casares, RIT's Chief Information Officer
Facilitated by Luke Auburn

Luke Auburn: You're listening to the RIT Professional Development podcast series. I'm your host Luke Auburn. Our guest today is Jeanne Casares, RIT's Chief Information Officer and the Assistant Vice President in charge of Information and Technology Services. Prior to joining RIT Jeanne spent 15 years at Paychex leading web technologies, enterprise support, implementation services, and change management activities. Today she leads more than 110 staff at ITS. We'll discuss how she's created an environment that supports professional development and allows your staff to push their careers forward. Jeanne thank you for joining us. Some of the people who work for you describe you as someone who really values professional development. Why do you consider it so important?

Jeanne Casares: I believe professional development is critical to the success of any organization or group. Professional development is about moving people's skills and competencies beyond where they are now to somewhere where they could be. Without the development of individuals an organization's success stays static. It doesn't move. With professional development the organization can soar. So if you make that investment in your folks and what they do, their skillsets and their competencies, the organization steps forward and everybody wins.

Luke Auburn: How do you approach it with your staff? How do you help them professionally develop? Have you created formal processes or do you take a more organic approach?

Jeanne Casares: You take both approaches; both organic and formal. In order to develop people you need to take both approaches to be successful. A formal plan to start, and then an organic approach to apply to that plan. So, for example, we started with a competency model

here that identified what key competencies our IT folks needed to be successful. We organized those 10 competencies under three key areas; for example, managing yourself. The second one being leading others. The third one being leading the organization. And under each broad key area there are three to four identified competencies within. So, for example, that creates a model that folks can look at, understand what's expected, and participate in.

This model gives an organization the opportunity to deliver shared expectations to their people. It creates a common bar in terms of how you're assessing how folks are doing. And it frames and helps you deliver the training and development efforts necessary to help move people along that development continuum within those competencies. So in essence it gives you a plan, and without a plan you're just haphazardly hoping that things happen.

Now on the other end of that framework we use a secondary or complimentary nine box framework that helps us assess where an individual is, both from a success in their current role and from a leadership potential. And those two axes allow us to plot out where someone is in their development path and it gives us an opportunity to be able to watch and, kind of, monitor that outcome and work with that person to continue to move them along the competencies. This really helps us develop people further for their next role or new assignment. And in between these two models is the real work or the organic work. We will send people for specialize or focused areas of training in their specific discipline or even in a desired competency model; for example, a conference on strategic planning or leadership development.

The organic part becomes important because that's where you can provide stretch assignments; and what stretch assignments are, are assignments that might be a little bit outside the role or responsibility that the current employee has that more organically provide the development opportunities while they're actually doing the work. So someone is able to try something out in a supported environment where we stand on the sidelines and, kind of, coach them along, and they're actually excelling in the role while they're doing the work and receiving that development on the job enrichment. It's a great way to expand an employee's skill and

competency while achieving this greater quality work. It's truly a win for the employee and the organization. It boils down to trusting people to be great at something they've never done up until now.

Luke Auburn: So are those like special projects that come along or what are some other examples of stretch assignments?

Jeanne Casares: A good example would be a few years ago we wanted to put together a social media team. Students and staff that would help respond to some of the social media opportunities in front of us. And we had a manager who had done high quality work, had some bandwidth and was looking to do the next thing, and so we enriched her role. We were able to add that particular assignment on and coach her to do something broader than the aspect of her current job and it developed her further as a leader. She created a program from nothing. It was-- didn't exist. She had to work cross functioning across the institution, whereas her previous role had her a little bit more working within her department. So that's a great example of an on the job stretch assignment that allowed that person to develop a whole set of skills that they would have never had the opportunity to do.

Luke Auburn: So in your opinion what are the main competencies that people need to be successful at RIT?

Jeanne Casares: Now RIT's an interesting example because we're fortunate to be rich with great people who have notable expertise in a number of areas. This campus is made up of experts. This alone will make folks here very successful. However, those that excel even further are those who've expanded their competencies to be broad as well, kind of meeting that t shaped employee. The vertical line of the t being deep expertise in their particular area or discipline, for example, like an application program developer. The horizontal line of the t being their competencies in other areas like collaboration, leadership, critical thinking, effective decision making, strategic planning. Those employees that achieve that t shaped status often are quite

successful here at RIT. They tend to be able to traverse the organization, they tend to be more influential, and they tend to be able to get more things done. And I think those are important competencies for folks to be successful here at RIT.

Luke Auburn: So it's, sort of, like know something about everything and everything about something.

Jeanne Casares: Exactly. Exactly.

Luke Auburn: So it seems like technology is impacting just about every job in the workplace today in some capacity or another. What advice do you have for people who have little to no tech skills? How do they start and catch up with the field?

Jeanne Casares: Well find someone who can help you get started. There's a number of people who love technology, and they're all around us. And my first recommendation is to see if someone like that would be willing to sit down with you and get you started. Most great techs or tech lovers love to help people figure out how to use technology for their specific needs. But you can also go online and there are hundreds of thousands of great tutorials to do anything, but even more specifically around the utilization of technology; and they range anywhere from YouTube videos to online learning consortiums like Khan Academy, to forums, to blogs and you can pretty much learn anything you want to learn, whether it's from configuring a server to changing the brakes on your car online today. So I would say for beginner to expert level, go online, grab a PC, find a friend, you can head to the nearest library if you don't have a PC, and get online and that'll get you started on what path technically you want to, kind of, go down.

Luke Auburn: That's great advice. So looking back on your own career how is feedback from you colleagues and customers played a role in your professional development?

Jeanne Casares: It's played a huge role. What you do every day in your job is one thing; the feedback you get from others is even more important. And it's not just feedback from your manager or boss or mentors but it's also feedback from your peers and your direct reports, kind of that full 360 view. And over the-- the course of my career the feedback that I've received is what helped, really, to get me to where I am today as a leader. Look being a leader today isn't about your style or how you want to be; it's about really understanding and morphing your style so that you can meet those that you work with. And that takes time that takes feedback. We all start out on this leadership path within the confines of our own style. But over time, through feedback, you learn what works for certain people and what doesn't, what's valuable in the conversation and what isn't. It isn't one tool for every scenario and so over time feedback really enriches your tool box of response and ways to work through certain scenarios.

All along my career I've been very fortunate. I've had formal feedback, whether it's for full blown 360 reviews. I've had informal feedback, feedback I sought out, feedback that's been delivered to me. I've had great feedback and I've had feedback that's not so great. And all along my career that-- that-- the momentum of that feedback has allowed me to develop into the leader that I am today because it's given me the chance to either strengthen an area and further develop in a particular skillset or further develop my strengths and leverage those even further based on that feedback. And I think that that is probably one of the greatest impetuses in your career if you can stay open to feedback and find ways to absorb it into your toolbox, if you will, that you'll find the journey along the path is that much more smooth.

Luke Auburn: So you've given some great advice and what final piece of advice could you give to someone who is looking to advance their career professionally?

Jeanne Casares: It would be ask for feedback. Find out what holds you back and then be open to fixing that or changing that or enhancing that. We're all on a continuum of self-discovery and destination and that feedback is the signals of what you need to pay attention to and that, I think, is a very powerful way to increase your ability to influence people, to be able to paint a

strategic picture, to be able to lead an organization or lead a group or lead a project, and that feedback would be critical to that success.

Luke Auburn: Well Jeanne thank you very much. It's always a pleasure. That concludes another edition of the RIT Professional Development Podcast Series. For more information on how you can develop your career visit rit.edu/cpd.