



Managing Records and Information Programs: A New Blueprint for Success

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There has probably never been a more challenging, frustrating, but also promising and rewarding time to be in charge of a records and information management (RIM) program. Organizations of which they are a part are experiencing “fast, turbulent ... exciting, scary” change; leading a company these days is like flying through a hurricane, according to *Leading in Turbulent Times* by Kevin Kelly and Gary E. Hayes. Bob Johansen calls it “VUAC” – volatility, uncertainty, ambiguity, and complexity – in *Leaders Make the Future*.

RIM programs are navigating in comparable rough weather. These obstacles include managing with limited resources; aligning information with enterprise goals; struggling with scattered information produced by social collaboration technologies; making information available for analytics, decision making, and other strategic purposes; ensuring legal compliance; and continually making the business

case for information management demand constant attention.

RIM programs need creativity, improvisation, and the ability to rapidly adapt to thrive in this turbulent environment. Managers can expect several management dilemmas over the next few years:

- Managing with limited or modest and, at best, very slowly increasing resources as organizations emerge from the recession
 - Continually defining, redefining, explaining, and advocating for their programs even in settings where information is recognized as a key strategic asset
 - Meeting the challenge of measuring the outputs, outcomes, impact, and bottom-line value of their work
 - Dealing with constantly evolving information technologies and tools, including guiding their deployment and managing the avalanche of unstructured information they produce
 - Fostering compliance with legal requirements, which shift as court decisions are handed down
 - Networking and partnering to get things done while at the same time preserving autonomy, visibility, and a sense of professional distinctiveness
 - Integrating younger, more tech-savvy, but also more independent, workers into RIM program teams
- Bill George, former CEO and now a business professor, provided a useful, integrated overview of the new

style of leadership and management that is needed in his April 30, 2010, article “The New 21st Century Leader,” on his website, www.billgeorge.org/page/the-new-21st-century-leaders.

“The craftsman-apprentice model has been replaced by learning organizations, filled with knowledge workers who don’t respond well to ‘top down’ leadership,” George wrote. In the future, “the most successful leaders will focus on sustaining superior performance by aligning people around mission and values and empowering leaders at all levels, while concentrating on serving customers and collaborating throughout the organization.”

This management work has four aspects:

- **Aligning.** Align people around the organization’s mission and shared values, and align your program with its priorities. Aligned employees “commit to the mission and values of the organization and want to be part of something greater than themselves.”
- **Empowering.** Empower leaders at all levels, but hold people accountable for results, and they will respond with self-motivation and dedication to the work.
- **Serving.** The compelling focus needs to be on serving customers – anticipating and meeting their needs, and when possible, exceeding their expectations.
- **Collaborating.** Challenges these days are often too fluid and complex for individuals, or even individual

programs, to solve alone. Collaboration – between people and between a particular program and other offices in the organization – is needed for lasting solutions. Eliminating internal silos, politics, and competition and replacing them with a culture of cooperation and information sharing are essential.

Seven strategies should be useful to managers of RIM programs.

1. Develop your own management style.

In unsettled times, managers need to develop and apply their own management approaches that fit the setting, circumstances, and their own personality and values. Some useful actions:

Anchor in your own “true north.” Former CEO George advanced the notion in his book *True North* that managers need to identify fundamental personal values, articulate them clearly, and stay true to them, particularly in times of crisis. The key to handling problems is to be open, transparent, and straightforward, never dissemble or hide the truth, take responsibility for mistakes, communicate openly, and show how actions align with values.

Don’t act tactically when you should act strategically. Solving the immediate problem or putting out today’s fire may be less urgent than pulling back, seeing the long-term and the big picture, looking for patterns, and gaining insight into long-term cause and effect.

Reframe particularly difficult questions. Managers need to deal with ambiguity, connect the dots, bring clarity, or find connections not apparent to others. Sometimes, just looking at the issue differently is all that is needed. Johansen refers to this as “dilemma flipping,” which is the process of examining dilemmas (problems that can’t really be “solved” but won’t go away) and looking for opportunities or incipient new approaches within them.

Look beyond “either/or.” Management strength can be the ability to lead breakouts from confining mental boxes. Roger Martin in *The Opposable Mind: Winning Through Integrative Thinking* refers to “the opposable mind” that can consider two diametrically opposed proposals or ideas, side-step impasse or selecting one or the other, and instead reflect and produce a synthesis or new model that is superior to either of the original positions.

Balance assertiveness and consultation. John Baldoni in *Lead Your Boss: The Subtle Art of Managing Up* refers to “reflective assertive leaders” who “dial up or dial down” assertiveness depending on need. Show confidence, get the facts, listen, consider alternatives ... but don’t dither, do take action, and follow through. Honing this approach will establish trust, build confidence, and dispense with small problems before they can become big ones.

Explain to employees that disturbance and disequilibrium are the new norms, buffer them from crises when possible, depersonalize conflict, and distribute leadership responsibility.

Take care of yourself. Don’t overwork and internalize stress, both of which will diminish your effectiveness and affect how you interact with staff. Take time to relax, reflect, and recharge. Keep learning and growing, which are hallmarks of a good manager.

2. Practice adaptive leadership.

Perhaps the most helpful new leadership or management framework is “adaptive leadership,” developed by Ronald Heifetz, et al in *The Practice of Adaptive Leadership: Tools and Tactics for Changing Your Organization and the World*. With today’s mix of “urgency, high stakes, and uncertainty,”

the old standbys – analytical problem solving, crisp decision making, and articulating sharp directions – won’t necessarily be up to the task.

Leaders need to acknowledge the value of legacy practices, but also change them where appropriate. They need to distinguish the expendable from the essential. Instead of long-term plans, which take time to construct, consider shorter plans and more experiments to see what works and what doesn’t. Designate more things as “prototypes” to avoid establishing premature expectations and locking into a new practice too soon. Explain to employees that disturbance and disequilibrium are the new norms, buffer them from crises when possible, depersonalize conflict, and distribute leadership responsibility – get others to assume responsibility for figuring things out, improvising solutions, and piloting the program through rough times.

According to Heifetz, adaptive organizations have these five traits:

1. Meetings and discussions are open, frank, and searching; no issues too sensitive to be raised, no questions off limits. People in authority expect to be challenged and welcome it. Incipient problems and brewing crises are identified early and addressed.
2. Everyone shares responsibility for the organization’s future in addition to the obligations they feel for their own roles and functions. Cross-functional problem solving is routine.
3. Independent judgment is valued. People speak up. Changing one’s

position after hearing a counter-argument is commonplace.

4. Leadership capacity is built throughout the organization. Building the capacity is one of a manager's specific duties.
5. There are provisions for institutional reflection and continuous learning. There are regular retreats, after-action reviews, opportunities for professional development, robust communication channels and forums, and adjustments to plans as new information arrives.

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3. Put hard times to good use.

"Never waste a good crisis" advise several change advocates; use it as a launch pad to a stronger role. Budget reductions are an opportune time for streamlining, belt-tightening, and dropping non-essential functions. But they are also a time to take stock, refocus, and reposition the program for a more strategic role as the hard times ease.

"Every downturn opens a window of opportunity to drive transformation," observes Donald Sull in *The Upside of Turbulence: Seizing Opportunity in an Uncertain World*. "An economic crisis marks a sharp break with the past that lowers resistance to change and cuts through complexity." Hard times are opportune times for planning and launching new initiatives or even imaginatively inventing a new future. RIM programs might consider asserting leadership in enterprise-wide strategic information planning; becoming the enterprise-wide expert, advisor, or guide on cloud computing, collaborative

technologies, and other emerging tools; advancing new training initiatives on employees' individual information management responsibilities; or opening new initiatives dovetailing with organizational priorities, such as transparency of operations or analytic decision making.

4. Make strategic decisions systematically.

Improving decision making has been the goal of much recent management analysis and writing (e.g., *Think Again: Why Good Leaders Make Bad*

Decisions and How to Keep It From Happening to You by Sydney Finkelstein, et al and *Know What You Don't Know: How Great Leaders Prevent Problems Before They Happen* by Michael Roberto). The new advice emphasizes what to avoid as much as what to do. Several key points emerge:

Develop a capacity to identify and deal with problems while they are small, including encouraging front-line staff to bring them to management's attention. Otherwise, small problems can grow into catastrophes.

Circumvent gatekeepers – people who hoard, divert, or skew information – by analyzing facts yourself, seeking dissenting voices, and looking to the periphery for fresh insights. Use direct observation and active listening in conversations (e.g., with customers, to get rid of preconceived notions).

Beware of false analogies. Don't assume that because the problem you are facing seems to resemble those in the past, what worked in the past is a good fit for the current issue. Assess the current situation, looking for pat-

terns and discerning what is new and different. Beware of simplistic pattern recognition – the evidence is sketchy and incomplete, but you fill in the gaps based on past experience or what you surmise must be the case.

- Watch out for "cognitive dissonance" – trying to resolve it will cause you to unconsciously embrace confirming information and dismiss contradictory data for a decision you are inclined toward.
- Be aware of any inappropriate self-interest or attachments (e.g., you accept advice based on whether you respect or like someone rather than because of their expertise).
- Study and learn from failures and decisions that in retrospect were mistakes.
- Encourage people to surface information and perspectives unique to them as individuals, and probe and ask clarifying questions.
- Organize group discussion and debate to surface both confirming and dissenting views before making key decisions.

5. Empathize with and empower people.

A great deal of the best new management literature deals with organizing, empowering, and motivating people. This is a particularly important theme for RIM programs where everyone has to pull his or her own weight, there are no positions to spare, and extra initiative and effort may often be needed. Here are three recommended strategies:

Empathize with and really understand people. Managers need to understand what motivates, moves, and inspires employees. They need to develop awareness of where people are emotionally, see the world from their perspective, gain insight into the interplay between emotion (the heart) and intellect (the head). According to Harvey Deutschendorf in *The Other Kind of Smart*, these "people relationship skills" give managers an

edge in recruiting and hiring, discerning depth of commitment, understanding what people excel at because they invest emotionally in it, promoting teamwork and good workplace relations, and tailoring assignments to enhance employee satisfaction.

Concentrate attention and efforts on your most highly talented staff members. These are the individuals who contribute a disproportionate amount of productivity and output to the program. Don't be surprised if they are challenging and demanding to manage. Guide, don't over supervise; show them the big picture, program purpose, meaningfulness of the work; support and coach; provide recognition; "protect them from the rain" (shortcut bureaucratic hurdles and sweep away red tape when you can), says Rob Goffee and Gareth Jones in *Clever: Leading Your Smartest, Most Creative People*.

Hold people accountable in a positive, principled way. The objective is to hold extensive discussions with staff and get them to internalize the need for change; then, they will take responsibility for achieving it. Roger Connors and Tom Smith describe four helpful steps in *How Did That Happen?*

- Form expectations for achievement that are obtainable, measurable, clear, and consistent with the program's vision.
- Communicate expectations – explain the "why" and make it compelling; be clear about outcomes; specify timeframes.
- Work for alignment – people talk about the importance of their work, give it 100%, invest themselves, and add their own personal touch and creativity.
- Keep checking in, discussing, ensuring acceptable progress, but not interfering.

6. Foster creativity.

Tomorrow's most successful information programs will feature innovation, fresh approaches, and an inclination toward dynamic change. Creativity needs to be baked into the program to meet changing, often unexpected customer expectations and demands through improvised solutions, as well as to derive entirely new ways of meeting information management challenges.

The manager's role is not to originate all the new ideas but to create a nurturing climate, as noted above, and a process for eliciting, evaluating, and integrating constructive proposals. "... rather than simply roll up their sleeves and execute top-down strategy, employees must contribute imagination," notes Teresa Amabile and Mukti Khairi in "Creativity and the Role of the Leader," in the October 2008 *Harvard Business Review*.

They advise managers to tap ideas from all ranks (particularly front-line employees who really understand customer needs); encourage and enable collaboration through networking and between levels in the program; open the program to diverse perspectives because “innovation is more likely when people of different disciplines, backgrounds, and areas of expertise share their thinking”; and create “filtering mechanisms,” (e.g., teams to evaluate proposals, winnow out the weak ones, and advance the ones with most promise).

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The spirit and tone start at the top, so managers need to send the right signals about how much they value creativity; work expectations into performance plans and revisit them at reviews and evaluations; and give people some leeway to experiment and pursue things they are passionate about. It is also important to establish an expectation that not every innovation will work and that occasional failures are to be expected and tolerated.

7. Integrate collaborative tools.

Most managers are aware of the onset of wikis, blogs, Facebook, MySpace, and other enterprise 2.0 or social media tools and platforms, defined broadly by Arthur L. Jue, et al in *Social Media at Work: How Networking Tools Propel Organizational Performance* as platforms that “enable people to connect, communicate, and collaborate,” render workplaces “messy, complex, interconnected” but that will become “a key differentiator” in business.

Collaborative tools have great productivity potential for RIM programs, and enterprising staff members are likely to adopt them even without management sanction. But, without policies and careful application, they can become distractions, proliferate and overlap, and expose the program to liabilities ranging from not being able to find authentic information to legal embarrassment. Several strategies are useful from a management standpoint:

- Develop policies for use of sensitive applications, such as blogs that may

be accessed by people beyond the program.

- Communicate and discuss openly the strengths and weaknesses to engage everyone, stimulate enthusiasm, and identify limitations and underline the need for full cooperation as a prerequisite to success.
- Develop applications that fit defined needs and that have at least general goals and measures. Articulate how social media will improve success, but also show how it will make people’s work easier. Integrate it into workflow and processes rather than making it seem like a burdensome add-on.
- Be prepared for a long haul – getting people fully engaged takes time.
- Provide training opportunities that cover what the application is, why it is being attempted, and the skills people need to use it.
- Consider blending “top down” and “bottom up” approaches – management deploys the system and sets goals and parameters, users experi-

ment, flesh it out, experiment, become proficient, and the application is revised and expectations tightened after some initial use.

- Identify enthusiastic “believers” who are eager to take the lead and convince, coax, and assist others to come along.
- Identify, trumpet, and celebrate early successes; learn from early failures; and keep the momentum going. Gradually, older alternatives will be faded out as the new applications prove themselves and people get comfortable with using them.

Managing With Confidence

The management challenges RIM programs face are formidable, but the potential for service, growth, and impact are also unprecedented. They are issues of a different magnitude and complexity from the ones that are most familiar from our past experience; unsettled times call for flexibility and new perspectives. Precedent and tradition will provide some insight and inspiration, but successful management will require adaptation and inventiveness.

Seemingly intractable problems may actually present unexpected opportunities for applying innovative management techniques. Rosabeth Moss Kanter, in her June 21, 2010, “Innovation/Leadership” blog entry, advises “engaging in a wider search for ideas and getting more things started at a small scale, with modest investment ... try more things.”

RIM programs have excellent future prospects, but steadfast, resourceful management will be required to navigate and pilot them into that bright future. **END**

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For further reference, see a list of books, magazines, and blogs at <http://content.arma.org/IMMonline/informationmanagement.aspx>.