

7 Steps to the TOP

By [Hank Marquis](#)



Most IT departments have tools that monitor their systems and create log files. Some are product specific, others are generic. But no matter what the tool, it's always the people using the tool who matter most!

One common problem in IT is that many times those supporting the system do not use the system. This results in the common Business/IT divide – the conversation goes something like this: The business says, “The system is not working!” to which IT responds “But the lights are all green!”

There are two gaps here. First, between IT and the business, but there is a deeper gap as well. The real problem is the gap within IT. Obviously, if IT systems say the system is working, and the customer says its not, there is a problem.

Once again, the IT Infrastructure Library has a low-cost, practical solution – the Technical Observation Post, or TOP. Following, I describe the TOP, how to set one up, and the benefits it delivers.

The ITIL® promotes continuous improvement. To solve the Business/IT gap and the IT-IT gap, ITIL proposes the Technical Observation Post (TOP).

According to the ITIL, a TOP is “a prearranged gathering of specialist technical support staff from within the IT support organization brought together to focus on specific aspects of IT Availability. Its purpose being to monitor events, real-time as they occur, with the specific aim of identifying improvement opportunities or bottlenecks which exist within the current IT Infrastructure.”

The TOP may be used in Availability Management, Problem Management or anywhere else you need to solve a tough problem. [See [‘Availability Management on a Budget’](#) for more on using a TOP with Availability Management].

The TOP should be able to locate the cause or causes of the difference between the observed performance of the system as reported by the existing tools and the problem reported by customers. Often these types of problems occur at the boundaries between systems, where tools do not measure or have visibility.

In other words, instead of looking at dashboards (the green lights), a TOP has deep access across multiple systems. The TOP tries to get “underneath” the “green lights” to see and understand what is really happening.

You can convene a TOP at any time, but make sure you have the right people with the right system-level access. Then, in real-time, the TOP can watch the IT service or system, and spot what is really going to happen.

Here is a simple plan:

1. Gain management commitment to establish the TOP
2. Identify the problem IT service through observation or User complaints

3. Identify a specialist from each technology silo the service traverses
4. Gather the specialists into a dedicated room, with sufficient system access and tools to allow them to examine real-time activities
5. Allow the group to observe the IT service in real-time, as it operates
6. Capture all observations and recommendations of the TOP team
7. Create an action plan to drive either the Availability Plan or a SIP

The benefits of the TOP are many, including:

- Identifying areas for improvement in people, process or product
- Forming inter-process bonds between TOP team members and their groups
- Cost effectiveness -- its often much less expensive than hiring consultants
- Departmental learning -- working together to solve a problem means the knowledge gained stays in the organization
- IT Service improvements
- Closer relationship to the business

The key to success with the TOP is to remember is that the TOP is not a virtual activity. Do not try to set up a TOP with experts working apart from one another. The group dynamics and new ideas that the group raises together are where the TOP gets its power. Also, do not place barriers to ideas or concepts at the TOP, or steer the TOP toward its goal, but encourage them to think “out of the box” -- this is the purpose of the TOP.

Summary:

So, the next time you hear a Customer complain but the lights are all green, take it to the TOP!

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