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CIO Corner

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CIOs Can Drive Change to a New Strategic Role

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IT exists because of change, our goal being to either respond to it or drive it. Although I do still run into organizations that resist change (in the name of system stability), those types of teams are rare and part of an ever-shrinking pool.

Depending on your industry or corporate maturity, the pace or extent of change will ebb and flow with the typical pressures and forces acting on all businesses (regulatory, market, economic, competitive, and so on). But to survive and excel in IT, you not only have to deal with change, you must also embrace it. Those who do this well will improve both their usefulness and marketability.

Rather than spilling more ink about how to react to change, I want to focus here on identifying where change originates in your organization and how you can leverage it for a new career path. In problem-solving terms, this means focusing more on recognition and discussing how to use that input to create a more strategic response with positive personal impacts. This isn't a quick-fix

approach: at a minimum, it can generate positive impacts on IT's ability to respond; at a maximum, it can lead a CIO to a new strategic role in his or her present or future organization.

Spotting Sources of Change

For IT leaders, change manifests itself in a project or initiative request. The better CIOs aren't surprised by these requests because they've made the investment in personal relationships with business leaders and/or constituents. This "need to know" is also the core driver for trying to get a seat at the boardroom table. Non-IT executives believe IT's motivation for access to leadership is based primarily on ego and secondarily on gaining control of the business. I'll come back to this point later, but suffice to say, this perception can't go ignored.

Back to spotting sources of change. How can you know (or predict) which business areas are the most likely sources of the next big initiative to appear on your desk? If you're really connected

to your business counterparts or really crafty at collecting intelligence, or your business leads are good communicators, you probably don't worry about being surprised. However, short lead times and unrealistic goals are still probably common.

For most companies, the sources of those ideas that get approved are the strong personalities or business leaders who are tightly connected to or supported by decision-makers. In some well-run organizations, interconnected projects with an overarching strategy get the lion's share of the budget, and well-documented initiatives with clear payback or connection to strategy get the rest. Some companies drive their behavior on "customer voice" or competitive behaviors that require a response. These, however, are triggers. The core question you must answer is who originated these requests. The bigger question is whether you can establish a pattern about the sources of ideas and change in your organization.

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Identifying Patterns

Years ago, Jerry Luftman wrote that ideas and innovation have a more structural root source in each organization. He noted that a pattern is ingrained into the organization as to where ideas start and how they flow from approval to execution. My conclusion from his work was that this flow or spin was so ingrained as to be nearly unchangeable (or at least crushingly expensive). If accurate, his work would guide any CIO to find the source of ideas and innovation in his or her organization—and help the CIO focus what little time he or she has on those areas.

With that goal in mind, I propose that CIOs start with the following steps:

1. Look for the pattern of where ideas originate in your organization.
 2. Evaluate the influence the leaders in those areas might have (this includes formal and informal relationships).
 3. Identify where those ideas go next in the flow of approval.
 4. Determine where you can attach yourself to that flow. Doing so has the side benefit of earlier awareness and the ability to impact or influence direction and leverage IT's capabilities.
- While these steps will get you closer to the source of change, they still represent a somewhat "reactive" stance. In the past three years, several of my clients and colleagues have moved from CIO roles to strategic planning positions, typically outside of IT. To make that move, you must accomplish all of the above and then initiate a PR campaign to promote your work.
- Earlier, I mentioned the negative perception that non-IT leaders and executives have of CIOs wanting more board leadership access to satisfy their egos and exert control. CIOs must continuously focus on the goal of "maximizing outcomes" for the benefit of the business and show results to back it up. Once accomplished, these motivations and outcomes must be relentlessly promoted to the top of the organization. These results can't be the tactical, mechanical "on time, on budget" IT mantra. Although important, it isn't the primary motivation (or language) of executives. Your talking points must be about top-line revenue, bottom-line savings, connection to strategic goals, and agility to respond to the unknown. With this reality in mind, I would add the following steps to your plan:
5. Continue to explain that your goals are "better outcomes and agility" for the business, not personal glory, and focus on outcomes as your motivation.
 6. Initiate a PR campaign aimed at the top executives, noting your focus on achieving business goals, and how your enhanced (and early) connectivity has created that impact. This not so subtly communicates that a tighter connection to strategic planning at the highest level would create more tangible (and positive) impact.
 7. Ask for a role that focuses on strategic planning, not just a seat at the table. The personalities of leadership and ownership at each organization differ, so each situation will require a different style and pace to define and land this role.

Although steps 1 through 4 can yield results quickly, steps 5 through 7 are long-haul commitments. If done correctly, you'll be able to dramatically change the perception and actual value of IT—and move yourself to a more valuable role in your current and next job. ■

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IT Professional (ISSN 1520-9202) is published bimonthly by the IEEE Computer Society. IEEE Headquarters, Three Park Avenue, 17th Floor, New York, NY 10016-5997; IEEE Computer Society Publications Office, 10662 Los Vaqueros Circle, PO Box 3014, Los Alamitos, CA 90720-1314; voice +714 821 8380; fax +714 821 4010; IEEE Computer Society Headquarters, 1828 L St. NW, Suite 1202, Washington, DC 20036. Annual subscription: \$43 in addition to any IEEE Computer Society dues. Nonmember rates are available on request. Back issues: \$25 for members, \$102 for nonmembers.

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