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CIO Corner

Tom Costello

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Never Let a Serious Crisis Go to Waste

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US President Barack Obama's chief of staff Rahm Emanuel addressed nearly 100 CEOs at *The Wall Street Journal's* CEO Council in November 2008. In that talk, he famously stated, "You never want a serious crisis to go to waste. And what I mean by that is an opportunity to do things you think you could not do before."

Emmanuel's comment was met with surprise and some criticism. His vocalization of what's probably a common, but callous, practice of political expediency had many heads turning. But Emmanuel knows that there's opportunity in exploiting a bad situation to meet one's desired ends.

In our consulting practices (in which we occasionally work together), we often see situations in which "opportunities" that exist on the edge of crisis are left untouched by the CIO. Just how can the CIO use the current negative economic climate, corporate cost-cutting measures, and general anti-CEO/business sentiment to his or her advantage?

Right now CEOs and board members are under the microscope. The typical CIO, usually struggling for higher visibility and true C-level status, is now in the enviable position of being

just outside the scope of C-level witch hunts. At present, the CIO is a functionary—the plumber-in-chief! Previously, we would have cringed at these characterizations, but when there are water shortages, the plumber has great power.

Addition through Subtraction

It might seem Machiavellian, but a time of cost-cutting and staff reductions can yield the unexpected benefit of being able to rid the organization of slackers, incompetents, and malcontents. Few would debate that the corporate world has moved from aggressive, heavy-handed employee management to a far too soft tolerance of poor performance. This has resulted from a combination of fear of litigation and just poor people skills among managers. Regardless of the reason, most organizations have found (or made) it difficult to deal with these negative types.

The current chaos, though, presents the ultimate opportunity to shed deadweight. Consider the phrase "addition through subtraction." You may find that eliminating poor performers will inspire the team that remains. If you make cuts without considering critical needs, ponder for a moment the morale of "good"

people as they envision their imminent workload given that the poor performers are being retained while people with superior work ethic, skill, and perhaps historical knowledge are escorted to the door. Laying off no one because of sentimental issues or fear of confrontation can equally distress good workers while also missing the opportunity to optimize your shop.

Use whatever premise you need, based on financial exigency, to force changes in clients' expectations. Get them to accept slower turnaround times on fixes, equipment requests, help-desk calls, and more as staff reductions take hold. Consider reviewing your current service-level agreements and revising those turnaround times on the basis of your new staffing levels and expertise.

Keep Your Eye on the Prize


If you ever needed to change process, this is the time. Pull out that yellowed process improvement plan that you developed two years ago and put it into play—the "new rules and oversight" require it. In addition, hunt down and kill rogue processes—don't tolerate deviations that might have persisted because of internal politics.

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Those who embrace crisis fall across a spectrum, perhaps even a bell curve. At one end you'll find those CIOs who go too far and whack away at the organization. In some cases, these will be the result of unplanned carelessness. Others in fact might be professional hatchet jobs, where the CIO was brought in to be the "heavy" and has no intention of sticking around—and wouldn't be loved in the post-crisis world anyway.

But for those who choose to do nothing, the outcome may be the same. The organization that doesn't act to thin the herd and clear the closets might find itself "less than competitive" in the post-crisis world, and the CIO who misses the opportunity might find him- or herself on the street, too. Whatever the case, find your spot on the curve and act accordingly—but in this environment, action is required. 

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