Discussion: The CIO role has been around for over 30 years and is constantly evolving. Its history began as the head of technology management and new technology programs. Over the last decade, its role has grown to leading technology implementations across all levels of the enterprise. Present day CIOs must be as business savvy as the CEO, as financially adept as the CFO, and still remain well versed in innovative technologies and implementation strategies. As the CIO role continues to evolve, how are we putting a stake in the ground to establish CIO leadership? Participants can join the panelists as we discuss establishing CIO leadership.

1) What is your definition of CIO Leadership? How do you describe your leadership in your organization?

CIO leadership has become a multi-dimensional activity. This involves things like:

- consistent outreach to key leaders in the enterprise to stay apprised of their changing needs
- innovative funding strategies as budgets have been stretched thin and the internal competition for resources has become intense
- “ruthless prioritization” on where to invest limited resources
- marketing services across the enterprise to units who can and do make their own decisions
- diplomatic engagement of distributed IT resources NOT in the central IT unit
- keeping the enterprise IT infrastructure current and relevant to customer needs
- assessing developing technologies for their persistence and ability to innovate for the enterprise
- dealing effectively with the spectrum of personalities and approaches, and
- telling our story to make sure executives and customer management understands and appreciates the IT value-add for the enterprise

2) We talk all the time about having a “seat at the table with other C-level peers but what helps us get there. Please tell us that breakthrough conversation or event that you felt assisted you in establishing leadership. How did help solidify your seat at the table?

Actually, I think a key piece of a successful CIO is keeping IT issues OFF the C-level agenda. Usually when C-level execs notice technology, it’s because things are working the way they should. In my case, there were lots of complaints about my predecessor: IT did not collaborate, was dictatorial, asked for additional resources to do anything, and didn’t deliver. The result was that units went out of their way NOT to utilize central IT services. This ramped-up IT costs for the enterprise and sub-optimized the IT infrastructure and resources. I came in and listened to our customers, re-tooled the organization to be responsive to
customer needs, adopted a true partnership approach in developing and delivering services, and focused on execution. It took 2-3 years to overcome the past “damage” and build trust and credibility.

3) Once you’ve “established leadership” by building critical relationships, how do you say “no” to your peers/management and maintain your relationships and your leadership role?

Well, you first have to establish credibility as someone who—as noted in an earlier question—is a true partner. You must have a track-record of helping them be successful. They have to believe you would help them if you could. Then when you have to say “no,” the conversation shifts to one about how “we” might go in together to try to obtain the additional resources needed. Together, you can engage leadership on the priority of the need. Even if you get shot down, you still “win” with your partners as they see that you really did try to help.

4) Tell us about an event that occurred where you may have compromised your leadership. What happened and how did you recover? What relationships did you leverage?

Well, I do think you have to try to do the “right thing” every day in every situation. That’s a critical piece of establishing your credibility and your reputation as well as building your own self-esteem and view of yourself as a competent, moral leader. People notice...particularly your subordinates: is what the boss does consistent with what the boss says? Of course what’s “right” can be fuzzy and there can be situations where what you need to do because of organizational rules conflicts with your own moral sense. That’s a BIG problem. The key thing is can you go home at night with a clear conscience and look yourself in the mirror? A personal case study: Early on in my career, I had a capable and competent employee get seriously ill. She ran through all her sick leave and vacation.—this was before the Family Medical Leave Act. Company policy required that I fire her for failure to perform her duties. So I did that, but felt terrible about it. That simply wasn’t right. The result was I decided I could not be associated with an organization that was that heartless, so I left the company.

5) As an effective CIO, one must be able to help align with the business to achieve a common goal. Most CIOs are working with very diverse personalities with their own personal agendas. How are you able to get or influence the alignment on common goals and vision? If possible, can you provide an example of your approach worked for you?

This really is a “personal” business...it’s all about relationships and establishing trust and credibility. Your customer partners have to believe you’re interested in furthering their agenda, not yours. As soon as they think that’s NOT the case, you’re dead. As I noted earlier, you need to learn about their business and be able to help them solve their problems. All that creates a partnership. You also need to be willing to let your personal ego fade into the background and let the customer take the leadership and the credit. Most times, they will share the limelight, but even if they don’t you’ve gained “points” with them that can come in handy later on when (not if) there are problems which are IT’s fault. That’s key to a partnership approach.

A personal example has to do with our new student system implementation. The customer wanted a new online admissions application for students. They speced it out and we built it for them. The system
performed exactly as they designed it…and the students and academic units who had to use it hated the thing! We all scrambled to find a solution. Central IT enterprise leadership recommended outsourcing to an existing cloud vendor. The customer researched the recommendation, agreed with it, and we transitioned to it for the next admissions cycle. Students and the academic units were quite pleased with the new system. And we let the customer take the credit for solving the problem! So we took a situation that could have devolved into finger-pointing and laying blame and turned into a win-win.

   6) **Optional (depending on time constraints, this question may not be asked):** Is creating business value, generating more revenue and saving money the only means of establishing CIO leadership? What are some others?

I find that IT is not the one creating business value in our enterprise. Our customers are sophisticated and knowledgeable. I believe it’s the job of IT to partner with them to deliver on their vision. They have to feel we’re “all-in” to make them successful and that we’re as committed as they are to solving issues for the enterprise. It’s credibility, it’s trust, it’s having a solid track-record, it’s being customer service focused, it’s understanding their part of the business it’s partnership, it’s responsiveness, and it’s communicating with them in their terms, not techno-speak.

   7) **Optional (depending on time constraints, this question may not be asked):** Do you consider yourself a technology leader or a “business leader” in your organization? Why? Would your peers and CEO concur? If not, why?

I see myself as a technology leader...really, more of a technology enabler/facilitator. I’m long past the point in my career where I have any relevant technical expertise or skills whatsoever. However, I do have some skill at bringing people together to solve problems in a timely manner in an affordable way. As well as the ability to describe technical issues in ways that can be understood by non-technical people and explain the impact on my customers’ business operations. I also recognize true technical leadership within my organization and can effectively engage with and organize and manage staff to accomplish our goals. I believe my CEO would describe me as a bridge-builder and problem-solver...someone who keeps IT issues from escalating to the C-level. I can live with that!

   8) There’s nothing worse than a CIO “talking the talk” but his/her IT organization is not “walking the walk”. What are strategies you use to ensure your team is engaged in the business and not just the technology? How does this occur?

Periodic checkpoints with customer leadership. Do the rapport-building needed, so people are comfortable raising issues to you directly...the one-neck-to-choke philosophy. Require your managers to keep you in the loop on any problem that has a significant impact on your customers...don’t get blind-sided. Emphasize the importance of a customer-service mindset for all IT staff. Let staff know this will be an important part of how they are evaluated.

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