



ALL ABOUT MISUNDERSTANDING

by Jerry E. Durant, Managing Director

I have never been one to sit by and simply accept the conditions of life. As my wife often asked, “don’t you get tired of swimming upstream?”. While I applaud her persistence I often respond by saying, “if I don’t make the effort then I have no right to complain about the condition”. Fool hearty as this might seem it strikes a cord at the heart of my character. I love to blame my earlier career, as an EDP auditor, because our job was basically to criticize. In retrospect, I’m not sure that the level of frustration is any less, since it seems that energies fall of deaf ears and life keeps teasing us with the allure to follow the mainstream.

The pre-emptive paragraphs draws to mind the ebb and flow of the consulting business and how we seem to all desire an audience with the Pope of IT, the CIO. Our desires are fueled by the funding control that these individual have. I have often asked my colleagues, “if you were to gain this sometimes illusive meeting, what would you say or do to make it work for you?”. Sometimes I am met with blank stares but often I get an extended retort about the services and the value proposition that will occur if you buy my services. There is after all a tendency for us to feed that bit of information about our life’s work and the goodness which is has. Sometimes out of pride, but often out of fear that we won’t get the opportunity to sell again are reasons behind our unabated enthusiasm. Too often these occasional meetings, and sometimes oft informal dialogs do not yield results. If one is really foolish we relate this to bad timing, not being on the ‘A’ list, other priorities or some other whimsical rationalization that will keep our spirits high. Realistic thinkers delve deep into the reasons why, especially if there is a recurring theme.

The stark reality is that we need to understand the evolvement of the role, CIO. Early in my career the role was titled, EDP Manager (later to evolve into the Director of IT). The EDP Manager was someone who served as a department head and dealt with such matters as budgets, staffing, policy and staffing. Often coming up through the ranks the EDP Manager was someone who had been successful operationally and was now give charge over the entire EDP domain. As time passed and we moved from an EDP centric enterprise into a Information Technology (IT) world we saw a shift in focus. We went from the function to a center being placed on the information. What was once hosted in one or more locations was shifted to the control on individual desk tops. Even today we see a further broadening from technological control to business ownership control. Each jagged step presents new challenges and opportunities.

So where does this leave the CIO? As consultants that are looking to sell our services we must develop a better understanding of the role of CIO (and also whether our services match their needs specifically). This individual is not about the “how it will be done”, as characterized by the EDP Manager, but is more about the “what”. Some who have not fully transitioned themselves into the “what” mode are still lingering with feeble attempts to address business support issues with technical solutions. In large part, consultants sell the “how” to middle management because these individuals are the ones empowered to implement. One would be fool hearty not to address this audience since it’s your revenue stream. Unfortunately the sporadic nature of mid-level funding is customary and thus creates a never ceasing pursuit of business. When a consulting enterprise reaches this conclusion then the quest for ‘C’ level management

connection is on. Small to medium sized consultancies are envious of large companies who are on the preferred list. There are a multitude of reasons why this happens, some reasons are sound and credible and others are much less so. This is a reality and one that, despite my temperament to make change, is one that is fruitless. Ergo Jerry's 2nd rule... "You cannot change a person's behavior, only the climate in which the behavior exists".

When given an opportunity to sell at 'C' level management it is essential that we understand that our message must address the "what". It is worth discussing what the "what" entails.

The "what" is comprised of several amplifiers, what...

- Problems do we face,
- Alternatives exist,
- Value (and cost) propositions can be expected, and
- Impact will it have on our business.

In the course of my career I have not only been a part of the transition in titles and roles but have also had the pleasure of meeting some truly wonderful CIO and those that aspire to be. Even those that would be best categorized as a "royal pain" were surrounded with turmoil about their role and the expectations that the organization had for them. We are talking about major behavioral change that must takes time. As we well know, behavioral modification often takes time and is usually unsuccessful when it's expected to occur in short order. A point of fact that reflects this is in the area of turnover rates. The good news is that we are getting better at becoming appropriate positioned CIO/CTOs. A study conducted by Deloitte & Touche reflected turnover at 17.5% and 18.8% for 1992/1993 respectively. In 2000/2001 CIO Magazine reported 10.5% and 8%, nearly a 50% improvement. However, the turnover rates are higher than would be considered acceptable. Leadership and organization stability requires leadership stability as well.

It's a touch game and not everyone is equipped to play it. Highly talented technologists aren't always your best CIO candidates. Some will even shun taking responsibility for any personnel related matters and opt for the allure of a new technological gadget. Those that desire the path to the CIO have to understand the role (good & bad elements). Not what comes with it, but what behavioral change is required. Getting and understanding this isn't easy. Many CIO, once reaching this level, loose connection with their people. Some adjust well to this and others let the change consume them to the point of effecting rational decision making. The need to adjust is attributable to the need to perform in the CIO role. Connections have to not only established but fortified. What may have been once been an informal/casual relationship now needs to be forged at a strategic intimacy. This involves formal and informal peer interactions with business process owners and the development of relationships with boards and executive committees. Simply put, a time struggle arises out of these new demands and past relationships cannot be given the daily care that once enjoyed. Successful CIOs spend years building these relationships before reaching their CIO role. As a result, their transition effectiveness is facilitated smoothly and they ability to stay connected with their organization remains intact.

IT organizations are not easy to direct. Ask companies that have turned over control to business process groups. IT organizations are steeped in tradition, immersed in technology and gifted with throngs of professionals. It is a difficult and sometime a tumultuous merging (or as some would prefer to call it... unification) of disciplines.

Having been reared in the EDP/MIS/IT world I often viewed business enterprise as a somewhat obvious and often times casual discipline. I now have come to realize that the challenges are on an equal par with those experienced in IT. Is it any wonder that we have some of the problems that we do? Hard technology-hard business, when combined with hard biases, is a formula for failure. To resolve this requires deliberate and conscious teamwork. In the December 2006 Information Week's Optimize magazine, Karenann Terel, CIO for Baxter International pointed out, women CIOs are suited for the role because they possess "nontraditional, business oriented skills". She goes to explain that while most CIOs (men and women) possess sound team building skills, that women deal with team building in a more collaborative and holistic fashion. Regardless who possess requisite talent, the message is that the route to successful IT organizations is exemplified in the Esprit de Corp atmosphere.

A bit of bittersweet reality comes when the CIO, and the team that has been forged, and now face the hard reality of business. Appropriate cost, value delivery, and the tempering of schedules puts pressure on the team. To the technician, consumed with delivery, it's an insult that the value of the art form is not appreciated by all. "If only they knew what goes into this", or "we do these things for a reason", are often the cry. As with the case with consultants who are seeking the 'C' level audience, a deeper understanding is needed. It's not in the 'how' but in the 'what' that is in need of dialog. We are at a stage in our companies where exploration is taking place to drive down cost, foster expedient delivery, and improve business support results. I refer to these measures as exploratory because they have not been tuned to a point where they are reliable. Outsourcing, offshoring, software reuse factories, and increased utilization of commercial off-the-shelf solutions (COTS) has produced a host of colorful stories. Most are about catastrophes, near calamities with an occasional success that encourages us to move forward. A list of all of the things that have gone wrong, and the resulting actions exercised, would result in a very large book. Most are avoidable, and others relate to inexperience by seasoned experienced people and organizations. Rest assured that this can be resolved, managed and changed in due course.

Depending on whether you sit on the throne, as CIO, or sit amongst the masses, there is one lesson to be learned. Understand your audience and know whether you are dealing with the "how" or "what" of things. If you are accountable for the "what" don't go it alone. The poison pill for many a CIOs has been the captivation with self-worth and not realizing that they are dealing with a much different world then the "how" world they came from. Utilize both external colleagues and resources to make your job successful. Even if you have hears in of CIO experience re-examine you service delivery. Those who live with the "how" are wise to remember that things might be intrigues, even captivating, but always be mindful of appropriate context. You will be doing yourself a service if you talk to, and are able to deliver to the "what".

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