

CIOs: Here are 10 ways you can support your CEO

- **Date:** April 27th, 2009
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To build a strong future with the company and gain an ally at the top, CIOs need to understand the challenges facing their CEO and find ways to offer value and support. Here are some strategies for helping your CEO — and ultimately, yourself.

CEOs are desperately seeking input from their CIOs — whether they realize it or not. In fact, “The CEO needs you now more than ever,” says Joel Garfinkle, an Oakland-based executive coach to companies such as Google, Hewlett-Packard, Charles Schwab, Cisco Systems, Bank of America, and Eli Lilly.

The pressures on business leaders today are enormous: surviving the recession, being transparent and accountable while still growing and creating revenue streams, engendering customer loyalty and killer customer service, complying with growing regulations, pleasing shareholders, and inspiring employees amid layoffs and pay reductions. Here are a few ways you can help.

1: Put yourself in the CEO’s shoes

First order of business: Do you have a solid understanding of what your CEO is facing on a daily basis? Do you really understand the top business challenges and competitive threats? If not, find colleagues inside your organization who can help you gain that insight. When you expand your abilities beyond a technical focus and start “acting like a CEO,” you’ll become more valuable, Garfinkle says.

2: Get on the CEO’s calendar

Depending on the size of your company and your CEO’s schedule, this is probably more easily said than done. Nevertheless, if you haven’t had much contact with your CEO in the past, now is it time to start scheduling regular meetings. Begin the first one with a pitch: a business-forward idea you want to share.

3: Capitalize on your analytical nature and process orientation

Systems thinking and process expertise are skills that executive recruiters often highlight in terms of strategic value for the business. Present yourself as an expert in this area to your CEO — not only through reminders of how you have applied the skills to the IT department but of how you can apply them to business problems. “A good CIO is pretty much equipped to be a good wingman, more so than any other C-exec,” says Gordon Lovell-Read, CEO of CIO Development, an educational and coaching firm for CIOs based in Reading, UK.

4: Become an operational genius

CIOs are often custom-made for operational roles and should offer ideas on how the company can be more efficient. Start with the IT department. “Imagine running your IT operations as if you were running the world’s biggest factory,” says Lovell-Read, who recommends a focus on developing flexibility through solutions such as SaaS. “Fixed costs are extremely bad news for a company in a recession.”

5: Play the numbers game

CEOs are obsessed with a few things: sales, expenses, and profits. You should be, too. IT can be an enabler of revenue-growing activities with the right approach. Garfinkle suggests three areas of focus: emerging technologies that can grow or create new revenue streams, IT’s role in bringing products to market more quickly, and IT’s role in helping a company run more efficiently and therefore save money to invest in products and customers. According to Lovell-Read, “There isn’t a CEO on planet who isn’t carefully looking at the process around turning orders into cash... and IT systems are at the heart of that. How can a CIO accelerate the order to cash process?”

6: Think like a VP of sales

Your sales and marketing managers should be forever on the lookout for ways to attract new customers and grow existing ones. Sometimes that means a week’s notice to bundle together products and services for customers at a discount. For the CIO, that entails configuring new product codes and ERP requirements — on the fly. “Imagine all the things they may throw at you and be ready to catch the ball,” says Lovell-Read. “You don’t want to be a barrier to implementing things quickly to help the business survive and stay viable with customers.” Naturally, anticipating new requirements means having a tight relationship with your sales and marketing leads.

7: Think like a VP of manufacturing

Continual, incremental improvement is the name of the game here. This is what Lovell-Read refers to as *business process adjustment*: “It’s less than reengineering but minor tweaks to make things faster or more efficient. Do what the Six Sigma guys would do and look for every bit and piece.” This can apply to IT operations and to the business at large.

8: Use your network

Just like your CEO, you’re not an island. If you’ve never had experience helping grow a company’s revenue, reach out to other CIOs and C-level executives in your network of friends and colleagues to garner some advice. Put together a team of advisers to help you determine, from a technology standpoint, how you can improve operations or deliver better customer service, Lovell-Read says. If you aren’t using a social networking site by now, sign up and start experimenting. And don’t forget about getting input from your own IT team: The ambitious will

be happy to have their voices heard upon high, and you can even create incentives (an extra vacation day?) for the best ideas of the month.

9: Be honest

The CEO does not need a yes man. “Be honest about the challenges, issues, and concerns that you’re seeing... and challenge the CEO’s ideas,” Garfinkle says. “That fosters trust.” Since chief executives are often visionaries, they may not be completely in tune with frugality, nor with the tough decisions your company needs to make to survive now and compete later when the economy recovers.

10: Make the CEO look good

Regularly offer viable, strategic ideas and encourage your CEO to present them as his or her own to larger groups. You’ll be helping your CEO grow a positive reputation with employees, customers, partners, and shareholders. The benefit to you: A strong future with your company and an ally at the top.

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