

Lessons from successful CIOs

Six [Advanced Practices Council](#) members recently moved on from their CIO posts to either take on new challenges (e.g., COO, CIO in another organization, partial to full retirement). We captured more than 200 years of their accumulated wisdom to share with current CIOs and those who aspire to the role in a recent Advanced Practices Council report, "Wisdom of CIOs."

Although each CIO shared his own set of top three lessons on how to succeed, three lessons stand out from the others: build your business expertise and relationships; look outside your organization; and pay attention to communication.

Build your business expertise and relationships

"Technology is not why you're CIO," said Ed Trainor, former CIO of Amtrak. "It's critical to understand your business and be a good partner." According to Bob MacTaggart, former CIO of Leviton Manufacturing, "It's important to learn what the business wants to get out of an IT project. People tend to see things as more complicated than they are. The best solution is the simplest and simple is hard! Step back and understand what they're trying to accomplish and then dig down." Bob recommends doing this in a tactful and sensitive way with senior executives who may not understand all the issues involved. "It's useful to write a proposed solution down and ask them what they think. You can help discern what they want if you make a few suggestions first."

"There's no such thing as an IT project," according to Jonathan Palmer, former CIO of the International Monetary Fund. "There are only business projects that deliver business value. You can't do them on your own. Remember, you're producing outcomes not outputs. IT can sometimes get stuck delivering technology that has no effective use."

Bob continued, "I never had much psychological or sales training and it would have been useful. I wasn't clued in to the subtleties. With sales and marketing, it's all about having the right image, acting like you're in charge, and developing your brand." To build these skills, he recommends asking for advice from others, bouncing ideas off many people, and finding out more about fellow executives. "Do something with them to get to know them better – sports, a project, help with their PC – anything," he said.

Look outside your organization

"Find other organizations and see what they're doing well. Don't keep reinventing the wheel. Get a multi-industry point of view and take what works elsewhere and apply it in your own context," stated Jonathan.

Mark Walther, former CIO of the Federal Retirement Thrift Investment Board, highlighted the risk of not looking beyond your own context. If CIOs don't look outside, they "get into groupthink. I've

learned how hard it is to approach problems out of the box and really think differently. This requires both intuitive skill and intentionally building diversity."

Pay attention to communication

Effective communication must extend to team members, business colleagues, partners, and customers. Listening and observing team members helps you "to assess people's limitations and strengths, especially their emotional and political ones. A good CIO must utilize everyone's skills to build a team," explained Bob. Learning comes by observing how individuals handle issues. "You see their true character in this way. And sometimes, you must push back, especially when you don't understand everything about an initiative." He concluded, "If you don't enjoy working and communicating with others, you're in the wrong job. Life's better when you enjoy people."

Jonathan suggested thinking about how to engage effectively with the business. "IT language is not always understood and IT tends to over inform and under communicate."

Mark added that relentless communication is essential when starting new initiatives. "Ensure you have a change management practice to support new initiatives and transformation. Embed responsibility for change management into every major initiative. We don't put enough effort into this and communication often falls short as a result."

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