

WHAT MAKES A GREAT CIO

By Richard Citrin and Michael Couch

This month, the Pittsburgh Technology Council celebrates the best and the brightest of the Chief Information Officers in our community. The awards to these talented CIOs will include those from education, to non-profits, to big and small private and public companies.

Leadership research suggests that the characteristics of great CIOs, while similar to leaders in other areas, have some unique qualities. In similar fashion to other organizational leaders, great CIOs are:

Results-Oriented: Effective CIOs tie the focus of their departments to the mission of the organization. No need for fancy R&D, but instead a focus on how to measurably grow the business.

Self-Aware: This leadership quality provides an ability to realistically see one's strengths and flaws and fill in the gaps to make certain that the job gets done effectively. Additionally, accepting and acknowledging one's shortcomings creates an authenticity that builds trust and confidence.

Great Connectors: Just as the wired and wireless connections bring data and information to every desk and mobile device in the enterprise, so too does the CIO need to reach out and build a vibrant and collaborative network.

Ready to Step Up: Hiding in the corner of the C-Suite board room is not an option for any leader, but since information is so critical to the lifeblood of the organization, the CIO must be prepared to take on any and all challenges, and great ones don't hang their heads when volunteers are asked to solve a problem.

Resilient and Flexible: Perhaps nowhere do things get turned up on their heads more than in the situations faced by CIOs. Adjustments to strategies dictate shifts in priorities, and rarely are people completely happy with what they have. Being able to learn from circumstances and bounce forward from them gives the effective CIO a leg-up on everyone else.

As we mention above, these are some leadership traits that CIOs share with other leaders, and in addition, we want to add some leadership traits that are de rigeur for CIOs but may not be for other leaders in your organization:

Rule Favoring vs. Rule Questioning: CIOs are often called upon to serve as arbiters about how workflows and data management are handled. In some situations, following established processes works best, but in other circumstances, considering different approaches and alternatives may lead to a better result.

Anticipatory Visioning: Every leader has to be strategic in their thinking, but CIOs have to be anticipatory about what could happen. Cyber-security, for example, an area that often falls under the CIO's review, is one in which understanding and preparing for any and all eventualities has to be on his or her radar.

Decisiveness: Other than the CEO, a CIO's decision-making impacts the entire enterprise more than that of any other C-suite leader. There will always be winners and losers around information technology choices, and the CIO has to be clear about and effectively communicate the impact of their pronouncements.

Innovation: When we meet with client companies, they all tell us that they want to be innovative but few truly require innovations that do more than make incremental improvement. Not so for CIOs, whose choice around a software selection or reengineering a supply chain's digital management will fundamentally create opportunities for efficiencies and revenue enhancement.

The Big Risk: Great CIOs do more than make important decisions; they sometimes have to pull out all the stops and go for broke. Will this multi-million-dollar software package actually solve our problems and how do we know it will serve our clients and employees? CIOs bring it all together. When push comes to shove, they're not afraid to put it all on the line

This month, we celebrate all the nominees and winners of the Pittsburgh Technology Council's CIO of the Year awardees. They are unique leaders within their organizations and in our community and we salute their skills, smarts and guts.

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