



How to Avoid Bumping Heads Between IT and Business Managers

– Mark Goulston, MD, CIO

“Do this, do that, get it done now, and I don’t want to hear any excuses.”

Ever hear these words—explicitly or implicitly—from your CEO or another CXO demanding that you either fix or implement something? They think it’s just a matter of turning a switch, but here you are on the verge of a huge project, and they don’t want to hear about it. This endeavor will take a drastic reshuffling of manpower, may necessitate money the CFO will resent spending and could require what they least want to give you, namely their cooperation and patience.

Before you go down the road of feeling victimized (even though to a certain extent you are) and make matters much worse by acting like a victim, take a deep breath, exhale and listen carefully to what I’m about to tell you.

If you’re an IT person, there are three things that are likely to be true about you: 1. You’re better with things and information than you are with people (especially where confrontations are required). 2. With regard to technology, you’re as focused on what needs to be done to make IT work as you are on what it might actually do for the business. 3. You’re most likely male.

Now consider where many top business-side executives, especially those with marketing and sales backgrounds, come from: 1. They’re better with people and information than things (Jack Welch said, “I was afraid of the Internet...because I couldn’t type.”). 2. With regard to technology, they’re more focused on what they want IT to do than what needs to be done to make it work. 3. They’re most likely male too.

What is the significance of you both being male? Men will do anything to avoid humiliation. It’s the “pride” thing. (Women suffer this less because any sense of their pride is usually bludgeoned by the way their children treat them every day.) Men feel humiliated when they feel incompetent and will do almost anything to prevent that sense of incompetence from being exposed in the light of day to others and to themselves.

Men’s comfort zone is directly proportionate to their competence zone. The less competent they feel, the more uncomfortable. Nobody (CEO, CFO, COO or CIO) likes to be pulled out of their comfort zone, and they will fight it tooth and nail. Rather than feeling reassured by someone else’s competence, men often feel out of control and at the mercy of the more competent person. This is especially true for a CEO who has mistreated a CIO and now needs his help.

Business executives resist being dragged into their area of incompetence, the world of “things.” Technologists resist being dragged into their area of incompetence, the world of people (especially people in conflict). And here’s the rub for many CIOs: These business executives are comfortable dealing with interpersonal conflict and confrontation (after all, their negotiation skills have helped them get where they are), whereas most CIOs feel like they’re in way over their head in such settings.

So when a business executive demands that you get something done and get it done now, you stand transfixed like a deer in headlights. When they blast you with what they want, then stonewall you when you start to ex-

plain what you need from them (time, money and patience) to get it done, you are frustrated. No, that's too mild—you're appalled. You're infuriated.

And you don't do infuriated well. You dig in your heels to weather the storm and stop yourself from saying that angry, but oh-so-relieving career-ending retort to this S.O.B. who crossed over from respecting your dignity to abuse a long time ago and who is making his unrealistic expectations your fault if you don't meet them. If you were a hard drive, you'd crash.

So what's a mild-mannered, "just let me do the work you want me to do and get off my back" guy like you supposed to do?

How to Talk to Your CEO

Step 1: Make sure your expectations about your CEO's behavior are realistic, not just reasonable. You might reasonably expect that you will be treated with respect if your CEO (or COO or CFO) wants to motivate you. But that may not be realistic. Don't expect an impatient, over-the-top CEO to not act that way if he's frustrated even in the least.

Step 2: Establish leverage as soon as the boss gives you an assignment. Get him to be explicit and detailed and then repeat back to him the following, "Let me make sure I get exactly what you want me to do, so I don't surprise you later on. You want me to [state here specifically what they have asked you to do] by [state the deadline] in order for you to accomplish [state the near term goal they're working on]. Now tell me once again, you envision IT helping you by providing..." This is where you should have the CEO restate what he believes the technology will provide.

Step 3: After you finish Step 2, say, "What else should I know to pass on to my people? I get the best out of them when they understand why we're doing what we're doing."

When you follow the above three steps, you accomplish several things. You empower yourself to have an exchange rather than feeling frustrated at being talked down to and doing nothing about it. You slow the CEO down and gain his (and your own) respect, which will cause him to treat you better by talking to or with you instead of over, or at, you. You cause the boss to see you as an intelligent person who can think, instead of a trained domesticated animal that just provides a function. Finally and most importantly, you will be able to take the following step.

Step 4: Say to the CEO, "If and when we run into obstacles, roadblocks and bumps in the road, and after we have come up with the best way to solve them (you don't want to worry the boss that you'll need him to solve something in his area of incompetence), the most time-effective and efficient way to apprise you of it and obtain whatever additional resources we might need is..." Here you should pause and let him fill in the blank, which you will then refer back to if and when you hit those bumps.

It's pointless to expect "reasonable" behavior from impatient top executives whose typical approach is to hit you with unrealistic expectations and then rough you up if you do anything other than comply. Rather than allowing them to run over you with a diatribe, engage them in a discussion and, if possible, a dialogue. Do this by getting them to be more explicit and specific about what they want you to do, and then say back to them what they have told you. This will let them know you listened and understood them, and that you should not be treated as if you were mindless.

Feeling a little resistant right now? It's because I'm trying to pull you out of your comfort and competence zone as someone who may prefer to avoid confrontations with your CEO (which is what the above thinly veiled four steps are). It's analogous to your trying to pull them out of their comfort zone and have them think more deeply

(and realistically) of how to best use you. Just because you think you won't be able to do this doesn't mean you can't. You can and should, and you may be pleasantly surprised with your CEO's response.

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