



Leadership in an IT World

Knowing that my audience were all going to be CTOs, CIOs, leaders in IM, IT, ICT, and any number of other acronyms that stand for roles that a lot of people don't fully understand, I wanted to be confident that I had my finger on the pulse, so I went out and asked 40 top people a few key questions.

Half of these people were senior post-holders I know in the industry, just like you.

The other half were colleagues of theirs who depend on people just like you to manage, organise, make available, and protect the information that is the lifeblood of their organisation; or to design, engineer, iterate, and maintain the technical infrastructure that enables them to function; or even, to create and innovate the technological advantage they depend on to win against their competitors.

I was staggered at what they told me!

I asked them **“what are the three things that the technology function in your organisation does least well?”**

Both sides of the business / technology interface seemed to agree....

Top of the list was...

"Engaging effectively with the business"

Second in line came...

"Influencing strategic decisions"

In third place by a small margin was

"Business Transformation and other Projects",

In order to illustrate a point today, in the context of speaking about leadership, I'd like if I may to take the last point first.

Depending on the source of the statistics, we are told that between 51% and 73% of IT related projects fail to deliver the business benefits intended.

So, take a look around you right now.

Go ahead, take a look. Check your colleagues out.

Right now, it would be easy to interpret these particular statistics, as meaning that you are currently standing amongst a group of professionals, at least half of whom are apparently failing to deliver business benefit!

But statistics can be dangerously misleading, and certainly they can distract us from the real issues.

And these particular figures, whilst perhaps startling, are also dangerous and distracting, because they seem to suggest that responsibility for realising business benefit from IT related projects falls only at the feet of the technology function. It also infers that IT related projects fare worse than other projects in this respect, and, most crucially, encourages us to believe we need to improve our project management. When in fact, I believe these findings challenge our leadership. Of ourselves, of our key business relationships, and our people.

Leadership is about change. Without the need for change, we need only manage.



So what should startle the top level leaders amongst you about these figures, is that when I asked the same questions four years ago, I got the pretty much the same answers.

In four years, whilst technology and the possibilities it presents have advanced rapidly, it seems our **reputation** for effectively delivering useful business benefits has advanced slower than a sloth on sleeping pills!

I speak generally of course, and I'd be interested to hear your take on this, but I don't think these sort of stories are inspiring to those of us who aspire to lead as well as manage.

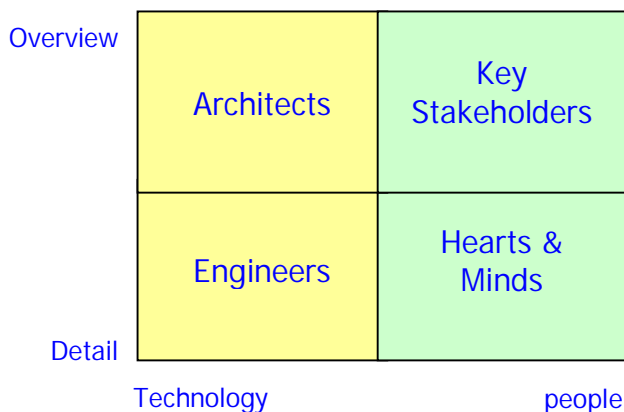
Let me plant a seed in the fertile soil of your mind.

What people think about matters.

When we think about what is possible, about what has to change, about our own abilities... then we begin to use our minds to bring into existence what we think about.

All advancement follows this process, as does all social, business or personal change. If you are not directing and focusing the thinking of the people you lead, someone or something else is.

And here, I think, is a key to how we might improve our leadership to increase business benefit realisation:



Typically, as engineers and technologists, we tend to focus on architecture and engineering - the 'nuts and bolts' that gets resourced in projects because it's tangible.

Engagement, on the other hand, needs to focus on building powerful relationships with key stakeholders in the business, and, more broadly, winning hearts and minds at all levels of interaction – on speaking their language, using their concepts, understanding their world view – this is where I believe we can make a significant improvement in delivering business value, and is the area that tends not to be specifically resourced.

And, because business areas as well as IT have squeezed out investment in the intangible in the quest for efficiency, there is no latent capacity or skill on either side of the partnership to pick it up and run with it.

My own experience, working with executives from all disciplines, is that technology functions, and particularly ICT and IM functions are those most often derided by peers as lacking business value or credibility.

I quote one respondent to my short survey this month (a chief scientist), he said... ***“Our services are entirely focused on what the IT department think we should have, and bear little relation to what we need or want. As users, we are here to service the IT***



department and learn complex systems to make their life easier. Consequently, IT is very unpopular”.

If ever there was an example of disengagement, this must surely be it.

And I ask you this question. If you encountered this response from a senior business colleague; would it draw you closer into this relationship in order to fix it; or would it push you away because it seems to reject you and all you have worked hard to achieve?

For the executive in charge, this presents a major emotional and psychological barrier to forming united and inclusive professional relationships that will enable IT functions to be welcomed as true business partners.

As leaders, we can adopt a passive, frustrated outlook, and accept the disillusionment of our business colleagues; or we can decide to own our reputation, demonstrate leadership, and engage the business to influence their perception.

Which leads me to talk about strategic influence.

It's hard for me to imagine IT influencing strategic decisions from a seat at the top table, in any environment where technology or information management is still seen as a somewhat disconnected service function, rather than a key business success partner.

And to be seen as a business partner, Senior IT executives need to demonstrate at least a short history of equal interest in delivering what the business exists to deliver, as in what technology can deliver for the business.

I may be wrong, but my guess would be that this is why an increasing number of CIO roles are now filled by executives with a business rather than pure technology track record.

We have to deserve a seat at the table before we can accede to it. And to deserve it we have to be a business player.

Raising our awareness of, and willingness to embrace, the business critical issues, and being prepared more often to use them to drive technology decisions may provide the evidence needed to open the door wider.

Leading change is not the same thing as managing change. We need both of course. But there is a big difference between making sure the right people with the right skills are where they need to be, in the right numbers, at the right time, doing the right things in the right way; and in getting people fired up and excited, desperate to bring their passion and vigour to their role, and aligned behind shared goals and aspirations that move the business forward.

In most organisations I get to consult with, I see people being urged to do more and more. It's "Busyness as usual". I believe this can create a dangerous illusion of effectiveness that undermines success. Because adding more to do, when we have already stripped out inefficiency and have no spare resource, is a problem not a solution, and the casualties are time to think, time to learn, and time to lead.

Let me use a simple metaphor. It's not much use having a powerful engine in your car if the tyres squeal and spin when you try to get the power onto the road. You end up creating a lot of noise and being the centre of attention, but going nowhere.

In my experience, it is rare to find a function in any business in which the people are not working hard. In fact, I'd go as far as to say most are generally working too hard – long hours, work at home at weekends, snatched breaks, or indeed, often no breaks at all.

If all of this resource is being used on projects and services where expected benefits fall short of the mark in terms of delivery, we should be brave enough to ask why?

As leaders, it's our duty to ask why.

I would suggest that it's harder to inspire, coach, guide, motivate, and lead if you are exhausted, constantly dealing with problems, feeling overwhelmed, and consequently have precious little time to invest in relationships. I don't know about you, but I'm not the best



leader I can be when I'm over stressed and operating in survival mode, nor do I perform at my best.

We need traction to make full use of peoples' abilities, and traction involves effective transfer of power.

By developing enhanced abilities to use your time with people more effectively, by learning how to pay absolute attention, to respond rather than react, to connect before transmitting, not just in yourself, but in those you lead also; you'll notice yourself having more impact, and increasing the power of other people's talent. Because traction comes not purely from technical skills, but from the ability to utilise them powerfully.

The power you bring to your team or business can only be transferred effectively when your wheels aren't spinning, and that requires effective self leadership.

But none of this is news. Or at least it shouldn't be.

Nor is it news, I hope, that the key to improving in all these areas is better relationships...but we have for far too long focused on interpersonal *skills* here.

Think about your best relationships outside of work... is it your skill that makes them great? Or is it something more powerful, and less rational?

I believe it's your ability to connect. And this happens much more easily when it's fuelled by desire!

So you have to want it. And you have to want it bad.

Success is driven by emotion – a territory feared by many leaders... but not by the best.

Ten years ago, I was with the voluntary sector heading up an OD Directorate, and the IT director at the time was primarily concerned with communications and data storage, ensuring that everyone's PC was effectively networked, the server was backed up each day, and peoples' email went to the right place.

Ten years on, and the CIO of today's enterprise is likely to be charged with creating and delivering real competitive advantage, and for leading significant technology projects that transform business, change the very way we operate, and ultimately, shape the way we live and work.

Quite a change, and an exciting prospect for all of you...I often wonder, don't you?...about how far we will have travelled in the next ten years, and how we will describe the journey?

Largely, I believe, how we do...is going to be down to you.

I often ask leaders how they will change the world. In most cases, the thought that they could be that powerful scares them. We're inclined to leave that notion to the great icons that shaped history and the business celebrities of today.

But as former US Presidential candidate Robert Kennedy said...

"Few will have the greatness to bend history itself, but each of us can work to change a small portion of events, and in the total of those acts will be written the history of this generation."

I believe in those words.

Whether you like it or not, you are having an impact. The only real choice you have is *"what kind"*?

Leadership isn't about waiting for change to happen. It's about believing you can make change happen through your influence, persuasion and passion.

Leadership isn't about taking people where they already wanted to go and felt prepared to go. It's about taking people in a different direction than the one they would have chosen on their own if guided by expediency, convenience, or history.



Or perhaps in some cases it's about taking them further and faster than they would have travelled if they had relied on their own know-how and imagination.

And we can't do that without successfully engaging first – without being connected.

Nor, it's important to say, is Leadership about compromising your values; it's about having the courage to stay true to your moral compass when it's tempting to settle for what's easy and convenient.

The French word courage means "heart and spirit." Great leaders have always acted from their hearts, but the definition of courage seems to have been narrowed to simple heroics.

Courage, however, means a lot more, and each one of us in the room today can show it each day in small but important ways.

Courage is the first human virtue because it makes all of the other virtues possible, gives us access to them, enables us to use them.

Ours is a difficult, high performance, high stakes arena, and people will continue to make mistakes in their organizational life as they do in their overall life. It happens.

It takes courage to look past somebody's imperfections to find their gifts, to see what is good and able. If you have the courage to see past the obvious flaws, you have the ability to help the people in your businesses and organisations shine. And the more people shine, the brighter that future looks.

Courage then, is the frontier of leadership, and perhaps what our profession needs right now is leaders with more courage.

More courage to speak the truth, more courage to highlight and address an issue, more courage to make and praise the tough choice.

More courage to be better leaders as we manage.

So in closing I have a question or two for you.

"What is the one decision or action that you have been avoiding taking, the one conversation you have been putting off, the one step you have been meaning to take but haven't?"

And is the choice you are making right now, shaping the future you want?

Keynote by Paul Crittenden

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