

Communications Skills and the Changing Role of the CIO

Earlier this month, I attended a Technology Leadership Council meeting sponsored by the Hunter Management Group of Westport, CT, an IT strategy and organizational development-consulting firm. One of this conference's key speakers was Mark Polansky, a top IT search consultant with Korn Ferry International. Mark discussed the changing role of the CIO and its evolution from the DP Manager and MIS Director of years ago. One of his most interesting comments was that the CEO, CFO and CIO are usually the only senior executives who have a true enterprise-wide view of business issues. Everyone else in top management has a view that is influenced by their own niche, be it marketing, operations, sales, etc.

Now more than ever, the CIO has the power, ability and obligation to make an impact upon every part of an enterprise. S/he must seek out opportunities to leverage IT that will make a positive bottom-line improvement either via increased revenues or cost savings. The opportunities now available to a CIO are unprecedented, but it is incumbent upon each CIO to rise to the occasion. To do so, they must be equipped with some basic tools and skills. Critical among them is the ability to communicate effectively. IT executives are still trying to shed the image of the back-office techie with the pocket-protector. One of the best ways to do that is to speak clearly, directly, authoritatively and with confidence.

At the TENG Stamford Chapter meeting last week, I noticed that many of us were uncomfortable presenting our ninety-second "elevator speeches". In some cases, presentations were not very clear or concise; in others the speaker downplayed their roles and accomplishments. I was surprised by this latter behavior, because this was an occasion where bragging is allowed, albeit factually. Many of us were uncomfortable discussing a topic with which we are intimately familiar, namely ourselves. Others hesitated too much and some raced through their presentations. Since everyone had advance notice, with plenty of time to prepare, I was shocked by this outcome. Perhaps I am placing too much emphasis on this, and maybe such an exercise is not that important to you. Nevertheless, I later wondered how successful some of our members would be attempting to convince top management and a board of directors to spend millions of dollars on a new initiative. I have eliminated and have seen clients disqualify many search candidates because they displayed poor communications skills. Understand that I am making these comments out of a desire to help you and not to ridicule you.

It may be valuable to tell you something about my background. I grew up in the 1950's and 1960's. My parents are not college educated, but from the time I was a child they made it clear that I would be. Both of them worked very hard at jobs that offered little career growth, to be polite. They not only impressed upon me that well-educated people had better jobs, but also that people who communicated well had the best ones. I have been a lay reader in my church on and off for nearly forty years, and I worked for a few

years as a part-time radio announcer, disc jockey and newscaster to pay my way through college and supplement my income early in my career. My undergraduate degree is in English. As an Air Force officer, I spent the last year and a half of my career writing very explicit policy and procedures concerning communications equipment maintenance management. Speaking to a group of people is not a stress event for me the way it was in my younger days. If you do something enough, your skills and confidence improve each time. Certainly I still feel some pre-meeting stress when I have to address an audience, which is normal, but it is driven more by a desire to do my best, than by the discomfort of raw fear.

Many people who make it to senior management didn't necessary plan to go there. They begin their careers as programmers, accountants, sales representatives or engineers. Their early careers represent a labor of love and their high level of achievement vaults them into the executive suite. For others, this early phase in their career is simply the path of interest to be followed to their ultimate goal, which is executive management. In either case your skill set has to change dramatically for you to succeed in this new role. Your duties have changed from being more hands-on, tangible, direct and operational, to being more indirect, intangible and managerial. Whenever you take on such a role, your communications skills take on greater importance. As a senior executive, every time you open your mouth you are selling yourself and your ideas, to your superiors, peers and subordinates.

Twenty years ago I met a consultant working with Hay Associates, a leading human resources consulting firm. His work included helping corporate clients to interview, evaluate and select internal candidates for promotion to management. He commented that he found engineering, IT and technical people to be challenging since they tended to be quieter, less conversational and not the most polished communicators. Frequently, CEO's and Presidents are former sales and marketing people, generally possessing outgoing communications style and who relate best to people who display these same attributes. They can be very intimidating to a more taciturn person.

If you think that your situation is hopeless, you're wrong. You do not need a frontal lobotomy, mind-altering drugs or a personality change. Being a CIO is one of the most stressful jobs in the business world. To succeed, you must be equally effective dealing with business and technology issues, which makes your job one of the most challenging and complicated. Moreover, you must possess the confidence, poise and communications skills that you see in your superiors and peers. On a moment's notice, you must be able to speak with credibility to a total stranger, who may become an ally critical to your success. You must be able to assimilate complex issues on the fly and offer meaningful feedback. This is not for the faint of heart, but then again if you expect to earn \$250,000 per year and more, you are at a level where pressure is intense yet commonplace and people play for keeps. Sins and rough manners that are forgiven at the lower levels may earn banishment from the executive suite.

Here are a few tips to keep in mind:

- You may be the brightest person in the world. You may be a brilliant visionary and strategist. You may understand the answers to leveraging IT as a competitive business weapon before others know the questions. If you are unable to articulate your thoughts to all levels of the enterprise, your value to it is compromised.
- Someone once told me that about eighty per cent of our sensory intake is visual, eleven per cent is auditory and the remainder is via our other three senses of touch, taste and smell. Knowing this, it would behoove us to speak in a way that will allow our listeners to develop mental pictures.
- If you are uncomfortable addressing groups of more than a few people, try joining Toastmasters or some other organization that helps professionals overcome this very problem. This is not a cause of embarrassment or shame. Some people place this training on their resumes though it is not necessary. They want potential employers to know that they have gone to the trouble to become more polished speakers. If your schedule doesn't permit this, investigate the many self-help audiotape and CD series that are available. They will offer series on building your persuasive skills and on becoming an effective conversationalist. Nightingale-Conant sells a wide variety of audiotape and CD series on these and related topics. Many of the best ones sell for less than sixty dollars. You can listen to them while commuting to work. You may also wish to consider hiring an executive coach to help you overcome these and other developmental issues. Some corporations will provide this service to their executives. If offered to you, take it. It is a wise investment.
- Pause for a split second before answering a question. This works well in one-on-one meetings as well as in small and large groups. You are creating an impression that you are a careful and thoughtful person, rather than a "hip-shot" who blurts out the first thing that comes to mind or who says whatever they think their questioner wants to hear. It helps to create the impression that you are deliberate and analytical, always considering the consequences before you act. Use this brief pause to compose your answer. If you want to see a good example of this, watch President Bush's Press Secretary, Ari Fleischer answer reporters' questions.
- Limit your usage of verbal attends. Some of the big offenders are any terms such as "I see", "I understand", "that's great", "cool" and the like. Instead, try to offer value-added input. When you can, offer ideas that build upon your conversation partner's comments without playing "can you beat this". This approach shows that you are listening carefully, that you remember what they are saying and that you care.
- Avoid using "filler" words such as, "like" (this is "Valley Speak"), "you know", "she said / he said"(used repeatedly) or "uhhh". Routine use of these and other similar expressions can be very distracting to a listener and are viewed by many as evidence of poor education and inattention to detail. Ask a family member or someone close to you how often you use these expressions. If your usage is fairly high, you need to make a conscious effort to change your speech to eliminate them. Top management wants you to give them the headlines, in a crisp, cogent and concise manner. Back in my college days, my World Literature professor constantly reminded his classes that brevity is the highest form of wit. Come to the point but don't talk around it. People who ramble or speak aimlessly are not

valued assets. Last year I was performing references on a very talented and well-educated executive. Though the job market was slow, he had interviewed with a few companies but never received an offer. I spoke with his references, which were very supportive and polite, but each avoided the central problem that this man simply talked too much. One reference finally confessed that my candidate took three paragraphs to state something that required three sentences. No one has the time to listen to a boring, rambling speaker. This reputation preceded him throughout his industry, which deprived him of several other opportunities. Back in the days when the pace of business was slower people who rambled were tolerated. Now they are viewed as inconsiderate. They have the same value as the typewriter and carbon paper.

- Come to the point but don't rush. If speak too fast, your listener won't hear and digest your message. You must speak with a pace that enforces the importance of your content. If speak too rapidly, your subtle message is you feel what you are saying not important, or that you are trying to escape the scrutiny of your listener.
- One of the bigger sins of sales people is "selling through the close". State your facts and be quiet. Many sales people kill potential deals because they don't know when to stop talking. This may be a nervous trait that is annoying at best.
- Silence is golden. Pausing for a second or two to collect your thoughts or to emphasize a point can be very effective. Some people are uncomfortable with silence and they chatter incessantly to fill every second. Learn to use silence as a weapon. Experts such as Ted Karass, who sell books and audio series on effective negotiating, know this well. Visit www.karrass.com
- Make your listener feel you are speaking to them. If you are speaking one-on-one or in a small group, establish regular eye contact and hold the gaze of your listener. When addressing a group seated at a conference table, move your eyes randomly among the members of your audience and connect with each of them. When addressing a large group in a hall or auditorium, it may be best to look just over their eyes, perhaps at their hairlines. If you are concerned about "stage fright" you avoid the intimidating stares but give the impression of connecting with them, because your eyes are almost meeting theirs. Many public speakers, presidents, politicians and preachers alike do this. Some speakers have their speech in a book, widely spaced, in a large clear font. It may include prompts in the margins, such as, "look right", "look left" or "look them in the eye". PowerPoint presentations may give the some added visual support to a speaker, but they won't cover for a poor speaker.
- Know your material. Whenever you are meeting with your management and peers, rehearse your thoughts whenever possible. Refer to notes, but don't read from them.
- Don't shout, but learn to project your voice. Some intentionally speak softly because it forces their listeners to work to hear them. If you have to speak using a microphone or public address system, try to check it out in advance.
- Avoid moving unnecessarily, jingling change in your pocket or fidgeting with a pen. These are all very annoying distractions for any listener.
- Don't use big words and complex sentences to impress your listener. Keep your vocabulary simple and to the point.

I have barely scratched the surface on how to improve your communications skills. There are many excellent books and audio sources already on the market that can help you. Not everyone can be an orator, nor should they try. It is incumbent upon each of us to understand that everyone has different ways of listening and assimilating information. By presenting ourselves clearly and succinctly, we will be doing them and our careers a big favor. Only those who communicate effectively as senior executives will succeed as CIO's.

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