

Five traits of the successful CIO in tough times

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When the going gets tough, CIOs need to get going. Simon La Fosse and Sam Gordon describe the characteristics you want to see in an IT leader during an economic downturn.

Tough times never last but tough people generally do. As we start to edge out of recession and into, hopefully, a sustained recovery, it is a good time to reflect on what kind of CIO you witnessed in your organisation during tough times and ask what this portends for the next few years.

In this article we highlight which behaviours are desirable in a CIO during tough times and which may *appear* to be positive but should actually be of concern to an organisation.

If you are a CIO yourself, hopefully this can either affirm your leadership or provide a wake-up call in terms of where you need to up your game.

Visibility

A good CIO should be visible to their team and to the rest of the business. In tough times this is even more critical. The CIO should be out there, in front of people, understanding the challenges being faced by their colleagues and on hand to offer support and counsel.

An organisation should understand the role IT can play in helping the business through tough times and they won't get that from a CIO who is navel-gazing, and hunkering down waiting for the storm to pass.

A CIO who sees a downturn as an excuse to run silent and just keep the lights on is missing the point.

Sacrifice

When a business falls on tough times, everyone has to be prepared to make some kind of sacrifice. Because the IT department often has high operational and capital expenditure, it can be an obvious target for budget cuts.

The question is: what sacrifices did the CIO choose to make and did they adequately consult the business on the nature and consequences of these sacrifices? Did they consider the impact of these decisions on the ability of the business to quickly respond when more positive market conditions arrive?

Today's cost-cutting hero can be tomorrow's inhibitor to growth.

Leadership

In tough times it can be hard to lead with purpose as uncertainty tends to go with the territory. Any changes or downsizing that affects the CIO's team should be handled with respect for those involved and as much clarity as business leaders can muster.

Did the CIO work hard to retain key employees and the ones who had skillsets that would be very difficult to get in the upturn, even if they were under utilised for a period? Did they ensure that the IT function saw its role during the downturn not as a target for cost cutting but as a central tenet of the business response to recession?

Innovation

The CIO should position the IT department as the group that drives innovation across the business and builds innovative thinking into all technology initiatives - regardless of the economic climate.

Whether this is through efficiency savings, creating new ways for the business to interact with customers or helping to create business solutions that can make a positive impact to the top or bottom line, no other part of the business is as well placed to innovate.

This is not just because of the inherent possibilities in new technology developments but also because no other business function is as well placed to affect business change.

A downturn is when innovation matters most and any CIO who lets this slip is forgetting what their role is.

Energy

Downturns can be some of the most demoralising times for an organisation - they can sap the strength of even the sturdiest business. IT often feels this the most as it is increasingly a lean operation and cutting heads can place an increased burden on already stretched staff.

CIOs need to rally their teams. More than ever, their passion, enthusiasm and energy will ensure the team responds positively to tough times. If your CIO exhibited this behaviour during tough times then chances are their team will be moving into the upturn with vigour and drive.

Although there are many aspects of an effective CIO, these key traits are core to the role, particularly in tough times.