Five Questions for CIOs

For many years of my career, I was the young buck who was constantly challenging the status quo. I would look at the old gray-haired guys and gals as obstacles to my progress, as people to avoid at all costs. But now that I’m one of the old gray-haired guys, I hope I am not an obstacle to progress. My goal is to be a catalyst—to be constantly engaged in strategic investments of technology and to be getting the very most out of every dollar spent on IT services.

During the thirty-plus years of my career, I have had the good fortune to work with some truly gifted technologists and to participate in some really fun projects. One project that fundamentally shaped my thinking dealt with reimbursing IBM employees for travel and entertainment expenses. For a young kid who grew up in the grape vineyards of Northern California, I was amazed to be working with the biggest tech company in the world on a system that touched every IBM employee.

The team did an outstanding job: the project saved IBM literally millions of dollars, had a payback measured in months, and was given rave reviews by all involved. However, when IBM CEO John Akers was told about the project, he thanked everyone and invested the saved money in something other than what we were recommending as the next project to use the technical architecture we had developed. What in the world?!? How could he miss what we were offering him? This was my first experience with technical elegance not being perceived as strategic.

That experience started my multi-decade journey to understanding how to become strategically relevant to an organization. Since then, I have been a CIO at four organizations: once for a Fortune 500 publisher, once for a large private university, once for a global non-profit, and now back in academe. During this time, I have been lucky to be involved in many fun and demanding strategic-change efforts enabled by technology. What I have learned from these experiences is the importance of asking the right questions—though not necessarily of having the right answers.

I have found that the following five questions are critical if a CIO wants to be engaged in the strategic discussions of an organization:

1. Whom do we serve, and what do they (those we intend to serve) want/need/have to do?
2. What services do we provide so that those we serve can do what they want/need/have to do?
3. How do we know we are doing a great job?
4. How do we provide the services?
5. How do we organize?

Often, when I share these questions with others and tell them that this is at the heart of what I do as a CIO, they look at me with a “that’s it?” expression. I typically respond by saying: “Just try to answer the questions for yourself. If you are really brave, have your leadership team answer them, and then share the answers with one another.” My experience is that the first time team members answer the five questions and then share the answers with one another, inevitably a very interesting discussion ensues.

Let me offer a little insight on the five questions. The first two are central to an organization’s value proposition. Alexander Osterwalder’s Value Proposition Canvas is an excellent tool to help answer the first two questions. Question #3 is the test of a value proposition in that it clarifies how to know if you are headed in the right direction. If you need more than five to seven types of metrics to answer this question, then you probably don’t have clear answers to Questions #1 and #2. Question #4 focuses on processes by which you can create, deliver, and sustain value for those you serve. Question #5 is about an organization’s structure, governance, and resource allocation.

I have found these questions to be useful when describing my own job, as well as the department for which I am responsible and the organization as a whole. I have used these same questions in organizations large and small, in for-profits and not-for-profits, in places that are start-ups and ones that are centuries-old.

In addition, the five questions can be asked in two ways: “do” (for diagnosis) and “should” (for design). The list above is worded for diagnosis. Here is the design version:
1. Whom should we serve, and what do they (those we intend to serve) want/need/have to do?
2. What services should we provide so that those we serve can do what they want/need/have to do?
3. How should we know we are doing a great job?
4. How should we provide the services?
5. How should we organize?

If you are a CIO and you want to become a part of the CxO strategic discussions at your organization, start asking these questions of your peers. You will learn a lot, and so will they.

Note

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