

From CIO to CEO?

Author explains how tech chiefs can aim for the top job.



Author Deiric McCann

The technical skills needed to be CIO make holders ideal candidates for a chief executive's role, provided they can marry that proficiency with an ability to communicate well and motivate teams. That's according to Deiric McCann, author of a new book about the qualities needed for effective leadership.

McCann, whose book *Leadership Charisma* has just been published, believes there's no reason why senior technical people should consider the CIO role as an end in itself. "The particular skillset, if you think of a CIO, is to work in a structured, logical way. It's perfect preparation for someone working towards the CEO's role," he says.

Would-be leaders, especially those from a technical background, must make a conscious decision to work on their people skills. "Soft skills are frequently lacking because they try to manage people in the same way as they manage processes," McCann remarks.

Studies have shown that the best-performing companies – measured by operating profit and earnings per share – are those where the staff are highly engaged. In his book, McCann defines someone who is engaged as being emotionally and intellectually committed to their jobs to give the maximum effort and then to give discretionary effort.

"Managers are increasingly being told they need to get more productivity from their people, but once you've trimmed all the fat in terms of processes, the only way to drive productivity up is getting it from people, and that comes down to the extent to which they're engaged," he says.

When studying successful leaders, such as Apple CEO Steve Jobs or Virgin Media founder Richard Branson for the book, a common theme to emerge was those people's charisma. However, McCann disputes the idea that charisma is a quality certain people innately possess – or lack. Charismatic people have shared behaviours in common, such as the ability to make people feel they will do better after dealing with that person, he said. "Charisma or an engaging personality is not something you have, it's something other people perceive you have."

The best leaders engage better and excel at interpersonal communication, which includes a willingness to listen, to engage the other person and solicit their opinion. However, this isn't about simply faking interest. "The perception has to be altered by a genuine change in behaviour," says McCann.

Successful people's behaviours

In the book, McCann identifies 26 key behavioural trends of successful people, but he said even altering one or two aspects can be enough to affect positively how others perceive that person. "Small changes have a big impact, and people notice."

In many organisations, the promotion culture tends to involve the best salesperson getting the sales manager's job, or the best accountant becoming finance director. "Sometimes, it's the same with the CIO, but a great technical person doesn't always make a good manager."

Most CIOs from a technical background possess a great intellect and the ability to learn, McCann says, and they can acquire the attributes needed to make them more rounded leaders. "If they don't have the communications skills at the level they need to engage people, it's only because it hasn't been sufficiently important for their role. Until somebody makes communication part of their job, they're not going to invest time in it," he says.

In the future, McCann believes being a CIO will mean having to cede some knowledge of the technical side in order to allow for learning other skills. "It means becoming a professional leader who has a technical leaning as opposed to a techie."

"If you've decided that the CEO position is a career move, you're going to take the technical knowledge which gives you an edge on every other department, plus a much more logical, technical rigour that can be applied to business challenges. I think a really good technical person who has decided to be a people manager is unstoppable."

Gordon Smith, Silicon Republic (<http://www.siliconrepublic.com/strategy/item/21420-from-cio-to-ceo>)