“World Class Excellence” – what does it really mean?

So, you are an ambitious IT professional and you want to get to the top of the tree. You’ve come to us asking for career advice...What are we going to tell you?

As any headhunter would say to any good candidate: think about how you can differentiate yourself from your competition. Focus on those things that make you different, and better, than everyone else who will be in the queue for the kind of positions you want. Make sure you are the perfect “slam dunk” for the role and that you outshine and outperform anyone else, ticking all the boxes.

But, I hear you say, what are the boxes? What exactly does good look like, and given the strength of the competition, what in heaven’s name does that old cliché, “world class” mean?

No need to panic, take a deep breath, let’s start with the assumption that your ambition is to become CIO. Throughout your career you will have ensured that you can demonstrate technical depth, ideally, but not necessarily, having come up through a development and delivery background – with some service delivery and architecture strength to ensure a sound understanding of the various components of an IT function. You will certainly have a number of big solution delivery programmes that have delivered real business benefit and enabled business transformation, under your belt. You will have worked in a complex, international environment and can show real organisational intelligence – confident of being able to navigate successfully in difficult, political environments where conflicting interests, cultures and personalities have presented real challenges.

You will have the strategic ability to plan effectively three to five years ahead, with clear road maps, and a flexible, pragmatic approach that keeps the confidence of your teams and your stakeholders as you undertake that journey.

Undoubtedly, you will have a keen business sense, able to get under the skin of the CEO and the CFO (and the other key players on the Exec), so much so that, you are one step ahead of them when it comes to HOW their strategies can be made real. So for example, if you are in the retail or grocery sectors, you will have alerted your peers many years ago to the need for investment in the IT and distribution systems that would enable them to be now competing effectively in the online market place. You are the one who can deliver a change in the business model – do you have the business awareness and the understanding of technology trends in your market to make the case to your CEO? Do you have the influence and the credibility? Or are you seen as the corporate plumber, the CEO’s go to person when s/he can’t work their iPad?

Just as much as the CFO, you need to be commercially canny. You may well have the biggest budget of any of your peers. Are you getting the best value from your suppliers? Those guys at Accenture and CSC are very clever – do they do this for a living – do they have you over a barrel? Are you paying a lot and not getting much back? No? Good, I’m glad to hear it. In which case, you will definitely be impressing the Exec with your innovative commercial arrangements and the fact that your supplier’s top execs actively want to showcase their partnership with you.

Now for a really important skill, which many of the IT professionals we meet think they have, but actually don’t have a clue. Relationship building and influencing are critical to your upward trajectory. And once and for all, this is nothing to do with...
building a good business case and knowing how to get a well-structured Powerpoint presentation across. All that comes under the heading of strong business and commercial sense. What we are talking about is far more subtle and sophisticated. It’s about understanding who has the power and who the key decision makers are (and it might not be who you think it is); how they relate to each other (who is hand in glove with whom, who despises whom and who is desperate to impress whom); and what their individual drivers and hot buttons are. It’s about being able to change your style and your argument depending on whom you’re talking to, identifying your supporters, getting others to lobby for you, negotiating, doing a bit of back scratching...watching, listening, making the right move at the right time. Understanding the politics but not being dragged in; keeping your eye on the ball, and being trusted by everyone, because of your ultimate focus on what is right for the company and the integrity you show in achieving it. And this can’t be done from the comfort zone of your office, or by simply focusing on delivery – you need to be out there in the midst of it, all the time, observing, assessing and biding your time till you really understand the lay of the land.

One more thing: to be world class means operating effectively in a global environment. Thus fluency in a foreign language is critical. Those pesky Europeans can always outdo the Brits on that front. When you get posted abroad (which you really need as part of your track record) make sure you take the time to learn a new language. And a plea from the heart, if you feel it is too late to gain a half decent amount of German, Spanish or French, please do your children a favour and make sure they do!

Well done, you’ve ticked all those boxes – what is going to make you truly world class? Well, as the adjective implies, only a very few deserve this appellation. Cathy and I are privileged to know the majority of the CIOs in the UK. A very few stand out. Interestingly, although their styles are all to a degree different, what they have in common is true inspirational leadership. They inspire genuine loyalty and real enthusiasm in their teams, who trust their judgement and are excited to work for them. As a result they will put everything they can into their responsibilities to the best of their ability, having a very clear view and understanding of the importance of their contribution. They will be rewarded not necessarily financially, but with attention, respect and real support in their personal and professional development. And as a result, the very best want to work for these CIOs, who are therefore build the strongest and most talented teams.

These leaders all communicate exceptionally well. They are highly intelligent, but clear in articulating the nature of the challenge and what needs to be done – often using vivid and descriptive analogies and metaphors to bring that vision to life. They are straightforward, with clear values and principles, they act with integrity and expect the same of their teams. They are brave, bold and fearless, but consistently demonstrate excellent judgement. They are calm under pressure and, with an acute sense of emotional intelligence, they know which battles to fight on order to achieve the longer term objective.

As a result, they inspire confidence in their teams, their suppliers and most importantly in their Exeecs, and, as in a virtuous circle, this enables them to deliver ever more effectively. And with so many supporters and fans, their reputation goes
before them and they become the natural target for those challenging, difficult roles that ensure their world class reputations.

See? Easy isn't it?