Active Involvement Is Key to Project Success

Question: Why is it so important to get business executives actively engaged in an IT project? You make a distinction between "ownership on paper" and "ownership in practice." Can you clarify the difference between the two? Do many CIOs settle for "ownership on paper"?

Hajela: There are no IT projects — there are only business projects. And business is a team sport. If a project is to succeed, every member of the team must participate — actively! Each member of the team brings a unique and critical capability — skill and experience — to the table, without which the team will not succeed. If any of them is not actively engaged, then that capability is missing and the team is bound to perform below its real potential.

Some business leaders sign up for an initiative because they are expected to, some are asked to, and some just want to be there because it is their nature to be "seen and heard" everywhere. These leaders are on the team and have taken ownership of its success or failure "on paper." They typically do the needful — attend meetings and receive presentations — but are not really participating in the process in any other way. Real ownership or "ownership in practice" requires each team member, especially the leaders, to actively contribute to the success or failure of the team. Real owners take accountability for the success and failure of the team. They do so not through words but through deeds.

CIOs settle for "ownership on paper" because of many reasons. Sometimes they themselves do not understand what it really means to "align business with IT." They think it is IT's responsibility and the only thing required of the business leaders is to be informed. Some others buckle under political pressure. Some others do not want to "rock the boat" and displease their "customer." Effective CIOs know that they are not order-takers but as much a "business leader" as the others. They know that business is not a "customer" but a "partner" in the process of creating value from IT. They not only expect but demand active engagement and participation from other functional colleagues — their peers.

Question: How should CIOs select the appropriate business stakeholders to be involved in a project?

Hajela: CIOs should not select the business stakeholders for a project nor should it be the other way around. This is a joint decision and, like any partnership, relies on a messy process. But the end result is a team that is truly representative of the best the organization has to offer to tackle the problem at hand. A team — whether it is a sports or a business team — must select the right players. This means not only the right skills and mix of players but also avoiding duplications and other potential disruptions.

This team sport called business requires many different skills on the team. So which business stakeholders should be on the team? There are some who will ensure funding, some who will clear "roadblocks," some with the business area knowledge, some with people expertise, some with communication expertise, and some with technology expertise. This sounds like a lot of people, and sometimes it is, but the idea is not to fill the roster. The idea is to fill it with the right people. The idea is not to exclude someone. It is to include all who are absolutely required.

Question: Good communication is seen as an important part of any business project. What are the best ways to communicate with the various stakeholders?

Hajela: There is no single best way to communicate with all stakeholders within an organization, nor are there "best practices" applicable across organizations. Good communications require three things: right message, right medium and right time. An effective communications plan answers the question: "Who needs to know, what, when, where, why and how?" It identifies the communication strategy for each stakeholder. For example, CEOs do not need every team presentation in their inbox every day or week but they do need periodic updates. This should be done in person. Other stakeholders require a different approach. The bottom line to effective communications is not only providing information but prompting action on the part of the recipient.