

Enduring relevance is a category of research and commentary which was published more than 10 years ago, yet its ideas, arguments and facts are as relevant today as they were then.

Enduring Relevance

Learning from bad leaders

A friend of mine was recently hired as a CIO by an association representing trade union members in the northeastern US. One of the most astonishing discoveries he made in becoming acquainted with the organization was the certainly obscene amounts of money paid to consultants for all sorts of menial tasks. He soon figured out why this situation existed and it reminds us what is the right and wrong culture in which to cultivate and manage a disciplined IT organization. That's the thing about reminders; they are useful because they reacquaint us with ideas we never should have forgotten in the first place.

One of those ideas is how bad it is to hide behind consultants as a way of inoculating against bad decisions and any accountability for them. Consultants can offer real value to organizations but they should not be used as a fig leaf in poor management's attempt to pass the buck. This association, which oversees benefit administration and other union support functions, is led by people who deliberately spend profligate sums of money on a small consulting firm charging north of \$300 an hour to tell the client what the new CIO could have

told his bosses for a \$3 latte. This consulting firm just submitted an invoice of \$25,000 for this activity: it scoped out an entry-level IT worker job description for posting at Internet job sites and area newspapers. For this kind of money, the organization not only should have gotten a clear job description, but the perfect candidate interviewed, screened, vetted, and hired, and 75% of the new hire's first year's salary paid for.

But this is the modus operandi of the stoat-like, fiscally careless leader interested in perpetuating his tenure no matter the cost to the organization and people he supposedly has a fiduciary responsibility to. If something goes wrong with anything having to do with IT, they can always say, "The consultant made me do it."

The gutlessness is surpassed only by the sums wasted: \$25,000 here, \$50,000 there, and before long you are talking real money. These, ahem, leaders felt compelled to operate in this matter because of a fear of reprisal should any technology investments go bad and wreak

negative consequences on the organization. The fear is certainly legitimate. In many ways this little union association is an IT-driven organization. IT drives its stewardship functions -- benefits administration as well as compliance with federal regulations and other support processes. Major IS failures mean real people -- union workers-- can be hurt. The provisioning, implementation, and maintenance of IT is a key operational imperative for this organization. Let's deconstruct this little scenario and consider what we are reminded of:

One: It is typical that many decisionmakers (I mean leaders, the people with power, etc.) have no literacy in IT, which is exotic, very complex, and intensely arcane. Since they are wholly ignorant of it, they operate out of irrational fear, which is what this little scenario typifies. Bad leaders will use Byzantine maneuvers like this one because these tactics are very effective at protecting managerial ineffectiveness.

Two: In order to overcome the fear in number one, good leaders accept their ignorance and hire good people whom they can trust to do the job. Ironically, these individuals in charge might have made the best decision of their careers hiring this CIO who is very sharp, deeply experienced, attentive to detail, organized, and honest as the nights are cold. It is unfortunate it took so long.

Three: Acting upon number two is the first step to disciplined IT governance. These people instinctively knew how important was IT to the functioning of this association. But instead of acknowledging the need for a formal governance design to inject some competency and insight into important IT decisions, they opted for the "Cover You're @*?#! " approach quite popular today.

Is this scenario familiar? Many organizations endure "leaders" like this. Not only do their IT strategy and operations suffer because of it but unscrupulous consultants exploit these dysfunctions, giving honest, well-intentioned consultants a bad name. No one needs to be reminded that this type of manager exists. However, reminders of this mentality and how it contrasts with disciplined IT organizations can represent the first step to positive change.

