How to Become a CIO

Eight skills you’ll need, and some practical advice

I’m a bit concerned that aspiring CIO’s are looking for a “silver bullet,” a magic solution that they can easily apply and thereby instantly qualify to be a highly paid CIO. The real world isn’t like that. Many years ago I had an employee who wanted to be promoted to a higher level position, and he kept telling me that if I promoted him to the higher level then he would show me that he can perform at that higher level. My answer to him was always the same: show me that you can be a star in your current position, and demonstrate some of the skills that go along with the higher level position, and I’ll promote you. But the work comes first – not afterward.

The same thing applies to aspiring CIO’s. If you demonstrate the capabilities that a CIO needs, and if you get some proven business successes under your belt, then you can qualify for a CIO position in your current company, or you can convince a CIO recruiter that you can do the job elsewhere. But you must have the successes first. That’s what recruiters are looking for – proven success stories – not people who have the potential to succeed.

Eight Qualifications for a CIO

Here’s my own list of qualifications that you’ll need to develop to become a CIO. First, you need the same kind of skills that are required for any senior executive position:

1. The ability to inspire confidence and trust. Some call this “poise;” others call it “charisma.” It’s a quality that’s hard to describe, and even more difficult to develop and achieve. It comes from experience, self-confidence, self-reliance, and knowing that you’re going to be successful at anything you attempt. And what’s more important, you make others know – without you telling them – that you’ll be successful at anything you attempt.

2. The ability to communicate clearly, succinctly, and emotionally to any audience, whether it’s stockholders, investors, your board of directors, or an entry-level clerical person. When I use the word “emotionally” I mean that the communication has to occur at multiple levels. At the surface the communication is intellectual, conveying facts. But at a lower level there’s a communication that makes the person want to agree and comply. At this lower level you’re doing more than communicating – you’re motivating and inspiring.

You may have noticed that the two skills I’ve mentioned thus far are the same abilities that politicians
need. That’s true, but if these are the only skills you have, then you may find yourself described as an “empty suit,” and you’ll certainly never be successful at an executive position. So we need to add a conscience and a belief system:

3. Consistent, demonstrated ethical behavior. You know what’s right – for yourself, for your organization, for your company, and for your country and the world – and your actions consistently demonstrate that you want to move things in the right direction.

With these first three qualifications we now have an ethical politician, but we need an agenda.

4. Intelligence and wisdom. Intelligence to comprehend and truly understand what needs to be done. Wisdom to know what shouldn’t be done, and to understand the best way to accomplish things.

This fourth qualification has ruled out most politicians, so we’re beginning to zero in on good executives.

5. Good judgment. Knowing the time and place to say or do what needs to be said or done. Good judgment comes from experience. Unfortunately, experience comes from bad judgment – either your own or the bad judgment of others. The only way to get good judgment is to learn from your mistakes and from the mistakes of others.

6. Recognition of your own limitations. This might seem to contradict Skill #1, in which I said that you know you’re going to be successful at anything you attempt. But if you truly know your own limitations, then you won’t attempt something that’s beyond your capabilities. You’ll constantly extend your limits, but you know the difference between being aggressive and being foolhardy.

7. Motivation to be a CIO in spite of all of the responsibilities and headaches that come with the job. If you don’t live and breathe to be a CIO, then you probably won’t get there.

8. A strong interest in applying technology to improve the business. You probably wondered when I would mention technology. But note the words I used in describing this skill. A successful CIO doesn’t have to be a technology expert, and in fact most CIO’s aren’t technology experts. People who are highly motivated to become technology experts typically don’t have the other seven skills. Some CIO’s may have come from a technology background, but if they were technology experts in their past, they’ve now left that skill behind them.

How Do You Become a CIO?

First, be realistic. Do you have the eight qualifications I’ve listed? If not, then can you get there at some point? Some of the qualifications can be developed over time, but I believe that some of these qualifications are a result of who we are – our basic personality type. There are some people who will never be a CIO, and that’s not a bad thing. What is a bad thing, however, is seeing some of these people deceiving themselves into believing that they can overcome insurmountable obstacles. They obviously don’t have skill #6, and it’s unfortunate that these people won’t find happiness until they recognize their own limitations and focus on things that truly do make
But let’s say for the sake of argument that you do possess all eight of these skills, or you’re close to possessing them. What do you do next? Recognize that having the skills themselves doesn’t make you a CIO; you have to create business successes to be recognized for what you are. And I emphasize the word “business;” technology successes don’t get you the recognition until those technology successes translate into specific measurable monetary business success. Use technology to make your company a star (like eBay), or to make your company more competitive (like Wal-Mart). Use your technology to improve productivity (like UPS) or to change an industry (like CheckFree). Technology leaders usually aren’t leaders of technology – they’re leaders in the use of technology for business purposes.

You don’t have to start at the top, and in fact no one does. You can apply CIO skills to your job as an IT project leader or as a department manager, or even as a programmer-analyst. But you have to remember that CIO success comes from business success, and business success comes from thinking from your customers’ viewpoint.

How do you become a CIO? It’s not a leap – it’s just one more step in a continuing career progression of meeting and exceeding business needs.


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