

GRAHAM WALLER ET AL (2010). THE CIO EDGE: SEVEN LEADERSHIP SKILLS YOU NEED TO DRIVE RESULTS (BOSTON: HARVARD BUSINESS REVIEW PRESS), PP. 220, (H/B), RS. 995, ISBN 978-1-4221-6637-6.

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This book is based on the assumption that 'soft skills yield hard results' in even as technical an area as information technology (IT). This formulation works as a *strategic refrain* in the arguments presented here: it is partly an assumption, partly a belief, and partly a discovery on the part of the authors. Chief Information Officers (CIOs) in the IT sector should therefore concentrate, they argue, on soft skills to get the strategic 'edge' that the title of the book promises them. This book however will be of interest to anybody interested in the *behavioural dynamics of CIO-CEO interactions* and the strategic aspirations of CIOs in the IT sector. The argument in this book is an interesting analogue to the idea that has been floated by HR experts in the context of HRM on how HR personnel can make a successful transition to 'strategic HR' from the routine of benefits administration in contemporary firms. This transition up the value chain however depends on having IT applications in place that will take care of routine administrative matters. Likewise, it is important for CIOs to ask under what circumstances, if any, they can make a strategic leap up the value chain both in IT firms and in the world at large so that IT administration does not become a mere service function. The advice that the authors come up with is also analogous to what is dished out in the context of HRM where HR personnel are asked to pick up technical skills in IT along with a greater understanding of the business as a whole. To this strategic

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combination of competencies, they are expected to add a dash of leadership skills as well so that the *combination of skills* available will be of interest to CEOs who are preoccupied with either problems of strategic and/or general management. Here, CIOs already have the technical, i.e., IT skills. What is required therefore is an understanding of human behaviour in firms that is studied in perspective areas like HRM, organizational behaviour, and organizational development. The 'professional and personal pay-offs' that can result from such a process of learning are spelt out in detail to help CIOs motivate themselves.

Another analogue that the authors work with - like HR personnel in HRM - is the idea that it is important to put 'people (first) before profits'. In IT parlance, this is understood as the need to put 'people before systems'. This may seem 'counter-intuitive' at first, but is gradually gaining acceptance as a necessary condition to doing well in the technical sectors. It is almost as though N.R. Narayana Murthy's interest in talent management, people management, and mentorship is being emotionally 'worked-through' and intellectually 'thought-through' by the IT profession as a whole. This is an interesting instance where 'the exception has become the rule' giving us thereby a clue to the scorching pace of growth and assimilation of best practices in the IT sector throughout the world. Some of Murthy's leadership attributes are now deemed mandatory in the personality profile of the CIO irrespective of whether he is serving an IT function in a given firm or actually working in the IT sector. An important task that the authors set out for themselves as consultants affiliated with Gartner and Korn/Ferry is to delineate these personality traits and compare them with what is expected of CEOs. These personality profiles then provide the theoretical platform necessary to observe and understand 'CIO-CEO dynamics' as an organizational problem. The attributes necessary to develop the strategic edge more or less require CIOs to double if necessary as HR personnel. While this approach may seem utopian, it is often the case in some leading IT firms where the top leaders have got to where they are by picking up a whole range of people-based skills including the ability to

communicate effectively. The typical 'mind-sets of CIOs' before and after they make a successful transition to thinking along the strategic edge are also discussed here. The authors don't necessarily claim that it is easy to make such transitions. Instead, they focus on the need to build in the relevant skill-sets since technical skills can only be deployed in behavioural contexts, and therefore the people dimension is not outside the scope of how CIOs should define the ambit of their professional skills. The importance of these skills is also related to the fact that most IT professionals work in wired environments that are 'hyper-connected'. Communication errors in such environments can prove to be much more costly than is usually the case; hence the need to factor in 'globalization' and the rapid 'evolution of consumer expectations' in contemporary firms in IT and allied sectors.

The authors also discuss what is at stake in building teams, improving group dynamics, thinking analytically, and acting collaboratively. Those CIOs who worry about how to lead virtual teams will not have any difficulty in identifying with the requirements listed here. The different cognitive styles associated with high-performing CIOs are also discussed; the typology that the authors introduce comprises those who are 'action-oriented, flexible, complex, and creative'. Likewise, they set out a typology of high-performance leadership styles comprising those who are 'task-focused, social, intellectual, and participative'. The leadership styles of CIOs are compared on this scale of leadership types in order to understand the relationship between *how they think* and *how they lead*. CIOs that are action focused in thought are task-focused in leadership style, those that are flexible in thought are social in terms of leadership orientation, those who are complex in thought patterns are intellectuals when they lead, and those who have creative minds are participative when put in charge. There is also a lot of leadership advice here for CIOs like in any other book on leadership. The authors are at pains to emphasize that 'softness doesn't preclude toughness' since they understand the cultural machismo of technology-based firms. Their goal is not to feminize CIOs but to make them more empathetic to employee aspirations, concerns, and goals. Developing

a sense of empathy for employees will have an unexpected pay-off; it will make it possible to build an alliance with the CEO and 'overcome' the differences between the traditional functions of a CIO and a CEO irrespective of whether or not the CIO himself aspires to become a CEO later on in his career. The differences between a technical management and a general management orientation are also discussed as a way of getting CIOs and CEOs to understand each other's points-of-view. Spending time with CEOs also makes it possible for CIOs to understand how they must deal with employees who probably have a greater amount of technical knowledge than they do themselves. It is extremely important then to invest in relationships with top management if CIOs have to lead effectively both within and outside their domains. CIOs should therefore work on upward, downward, and horizontal communication in order to 'amplify the impact' that the strategic combination of hard skills and soft skills can make possible. Only then will they be able to consistently derive and deploy the competitive advantage that the authors promise under the aegis of the term 'edge'.