CHAPTER 1

Dislocated Stakeholders

"Where is the 'any' key?"
(Homer Simpson, in response to the message, "Press any key")

Stakeholders, as one of my colleagues once said to me, "should be tied to one". He was definitely in the "Joan of Arc" school of stakeholder management. "It's all very good when they are feisty and swashbuckling," he continued, "but when they start to get irritating, you should tie 'em to a pole and light a bonfire." This approach has obvious attractions, but there are few people who can avoid the scourge of the irritating stakeholder whose mission in life is to make your life a misery. King Henry VIII, the sixteenth-century King of England, was one of the few heroes of history who was able to buck the trend. As most British schoolchildren will know, Old Henry had a penchant for doing his own thing. It was never a good idea to be his wife when he got bored (which happened at least five times it seems). Kings in olden days generally didn't have that many stakeholders to worry about especially if they had bags of charisma and a large, loyal army at their disposal. Henry therefore pushed the boundaries of his not inconsiderable power to the limits. During his reign he worked his way through six wives, as well as starting a war with France (which is something every good British monarch feels they have to do). He also created the Royal Navy (Loades, 2009) and is even thought by some to have written the quintessential English song *Greensleeves* (Trow, 2010). Henry was certainly a colourful and decisive monarch and he knew how to please a crowd. When he became King at the tender age of 17, one of the very first things he did was to order the execution of the two men his father had employed to collect heavy taxes from the fair folk of England. All but two people in the land thought that this was a great idea. He was also fond of hunting, gambling and dancing. It is said that he only spent an hour a day on government business (Spartacus Educational, 2013).

Perhaps Henry's biggest moment in history came when he decided to divorce his first wife, Catherine of Aragon. Popular culture suggests that Henry grew bored of Catherine. Knowing the response he'd get from Pope Clement (who wasn't much of a fan of divorces, especially when they involved Catholic Queens), he apparently decided that he would stick his fingers up at the Catholic Church and invent a whole new religion. This we now know today as protestant Anglicanism. While it is true that Henry was eventually excommunicated by the Pope, the divorce from Catherine was probably only one symptom of Henry's problems with his stakeholders (Weir, 2002). Henry was a fiercely independent chap by all accounts and his motives and methods were devious—at least when it came to finding ways that allowed him to operate in a completely unconstrained fashion. He was also thought to be a good Catholic, but Henry just couldn't live with the concept of an old guy with a beard in far-off Italy telling him what to do. Between 1532 and 1537, he instituted a number of statutes that dealt with the relationship between himself and the pope. For example, in 1534 he mandated that the clergy could only elect bishops nominated by him. For an encore he then declared that the King was the only "Supreme Head on Earth of the Church of England". So there! All in all, Henry must have been a very fine megalomaniac even if he did over-eat a bit as he grew older.

We, unfortunately, do not have the freedom of action enjoyed by people such as good King Henry, or any other historical giants for that matter. We therefore need to understand the identity and motivations of the stakeholders who hold influence over all that we do (at least in the work place context). Tudor-style, summary execution is frowned upon today. This means that it is a relatively unlikely outcome if you do somehow become detached from your stakeholders. But be warned, there are plenty of other nefarious and deeply unpleasant methods of punishment available to people in corporate life today. Dislocation is painful and if you do not rapidly connect things back together properly, then they will become detached forever and it won't be long before someone decides to put the pieces in the air-lock so that they can be blasted out into space.

So who are our stakeholders and what do they want?

Wooden Poles with Holder

In its simplest sense, a stakeholder is a person, group or organisation that has interest or concern in an organisation (Business Dictionary, 2013). The days when people felt they needed to carry wooden poles around with them disappeared with the wizards of Middle Earth. Stakeholders also have nothing to do with vampires, though if you do unhappily have a vampire infestation on

your hands, driving wooden sticks through the hearts of the un-dead while they sleep in their coffins is widely considered an effective pest control measure. These days life is much easier. Modern vampires tend to be good-looking teenagers with a conscience. It was never like that in Bela Lugosi's day.

"We don't vanquish vampires so don't call us stakeholders!"
Jackie Sadek

So while a few of our stakeholders may be brandishing wooden sticks, more often their weapon of choice is the pointed word. And you will find plenty of those out there—both words and people. There are of course, a wide range of different stakeholders who are affected by IT. In fact, pretty much everyone in the company, together with all your suppliers and customers, receive the delicate ministrations of your organisation in some form or other. Figure 1.1 shows some of the major stakeholders you will encounter. The strong arrows show the strong connections while the dotted arrows represent a looser stakeholder engagement. There may be some corporate outward-looking IT functions which have very intimate relations with customers and suppliers but for most of us, it is the Board of Directors and the leadership of the company, our beloved middle managers and the common or garden users who will demand most of the management time of an IT leader. We should look at each in turn.

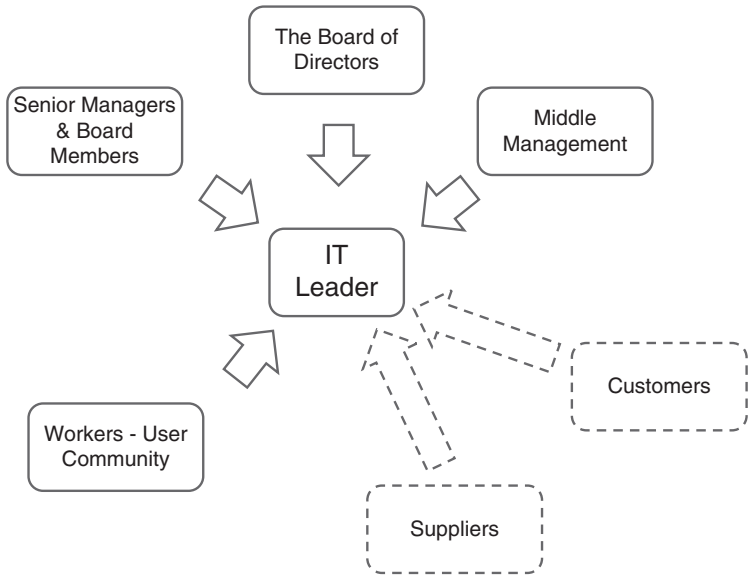


Figure 1.1 The CIO's Major Stakeholders

Because They're Worth It?

Let us look first at our user community, or to use a better term—the workers. They are the most voluminous group of your stakeholders and they are comprised of real people doing real jobs. Workers are really cool people. They actually get to do stuff other than emails and meetings. On occasions, what they do get up to can even be useful to the company. It doesn't matter whether they are on the floor of a factory bending metal, or in an office creating what I believe is known these days as "intellectual property"; these people are precious and you have to look after them as best as you can. However, as far as a voice in IT is concerned, most of these folks will strictly be in the silent majority category.

"Every day I get up and look through the Forbes list of the richest people in America. If I'm not there, I go to work."
Robert Orben

That said, the needs of the many are simple and straightforward—at least from their perspective. When I've spoken to computer users over the years about their requirements, the answers they give me are fairly consistent. I'm sure it will be the same for you. These good folk will want the latest models of phones and tablet computers and they will want to change them as frequently as they change their socks. They believe they cannot live without the most powerful laptops and personal computers known to man. They will also want to store infinite amounts of email in their inboxes and send and receive massive PowerPoint files that run into terrorbytes. They will demand full and unfettered access to the Internet, so that they can use whatever social media, home banking or any other e-commerce sites take their fancy. Some will want you to fund small pet projects because they naively believe that technology will make their working lives easier. Finally, everyone wants a helpdesk that is instantly answered by a beautiful, courteous person who has bucket loads of empathy to hand. Some may even want these people to solve their problems.

While such requests are easy to understand, responding to them sensitively can be tricky. Many IT leaders faced with the enormity of the task just throw up their hands and subscribe to the pleasing mantra "The only good user is a dead user". The security needs of your network will of course, horribly constrain the things that you can do for them, but it is pointless explaining this to anyone. They won't understand and they won't care. Why should they? Your users will just see a computer that's much the same as the one they have at home, except that this machine is probably older and of course they can't change their wallpaper or replace the arrow cursor with a banana that peels itself. When people come to work, they will demand and expect all the freedoms they enjoy on

their virus-laden, spyware-riddled, zombie-bot, home computers, smartphones and tablets. However, despite all the corporate problems, allowing "reasonable personal use" on company computers is a policy you should strongly consider championing. It is a winning (if sometimes painful) strategy. It is particularly helpful if you want to promote computer literacy amongst your workforce. There are of course always unexpected and sometimes unpleasant things that can happen when you give human beings a bit of freedom. Kings worked this out pretty early on, which is why they were so fond of the operating system we know as Feudalism. Basically, they got to be the Lords while the rest of us were "vassals" and had to do what we were told (Abdy, 2012). Back here in the twenty-first century corporate life is slightly more egalitarian. This new freedom allows any miscreants to get up to amazing things. I have seen some horror stories that would make Mary Shelley blush.

Some years ago I recall that we lost a complete night's worth of backups in a data centre I was managing. This was because a computer operator spent his entire shift downloading gigabytes of video files of his favourite soccer team—it was Manchester United as it turns out. The network was so overloaded that all the applications eventually timed themselves out and backed out of the rather important job of backing things up. Imagine people running all around the computer room like headless chickens. Meanwhile the operator in question, oblivious to the chaos he had caused, quietly sat in the corner of the office repeatedly watching videos of his favourite stars with spray tans and hair transplants kicking a ball and waving garish trophies around.

Then there was the time when we found an employee who clearly didn't like his job. He spent every single minute of every working day surfing the Internet. He usually started five minutes after he had clocked in and continued until he stopped for lunch. Forty-five minutes later he was at it again, only to finish five minutes before he clocked out. This went on for weeks on end. When we looked at the usage logs, we could even calculate how long it took for cups of coffee to pass through his system. Before you think "too much information", let me reassure you that we could work it out quite simply from the breaks he had taken in between surfing sessions. It was about an hour and half if you are interested. The incandescent HR Director wanted to fire the individual. He was not amused by my suggestion that we put the employee's name forward for some kind of Guinness Book of World Records nomination. Clearly supervision and motivation had failed this person in abundance in his day job, but I certainly couldn't have surfed with anything like the dedication he showed. The individual's manager was the one who ended up with the biggest rocket however. He was told in no uncertain terms that from now on he was expected to harness the dogged conscientiousness of his loyal employees.

My all-time favourite "user howler of the century" story however, happened shortly after the 9/11 terrorist attack in New York. A Middle East-based

employee, appalled by what he had seen, decided to send an email to every other employee in the company. He wanted to tell everyone that people in his part of the world condemned the terrorist action. His plan was to express solidarity with his colleagues in North and South America, Europe, Asia, Africa, Australasia and even a polar station in Antarctica. Normal controls within the network meant that our intrepid hero was not able to simply send an email to the 105,000 employees on the payroll at that time. Bulk emailing was both discouraged and curtailed by company policy. Nevertheless, undeterred by such a flimsy set of obstacles, our hero spent many, many hours and probably several days putting together a dazzling number of distribution lists. The size of each was carefully crafted so that it slipped just under the "number of recipients" restrictions that the computer administrators had put in place. The results were spectacular. Sending off his emails in batches, the disaster unfolded with delicious slowness. First, local servers became clogged, after which regional servers started to choke. Within a couple of hours network diagrams at Network High Command began to glow with angry tones of red. The "Clark Kents" at Network crisis control struggled into nearby telephone boxes to don their "Superman" outfits. In the command centre confused reports suggested that a virulent virus was spreading uncontrollably across the globe. Blizzards of sandy emails marched across North Africa scattering bloated, overfilled, groaning mailboxes before them. Even Field Marshal Rommel and his Afrika Korps would have been impressed as first Egypt and then Tunisia ground to a halt. It took several more hours of headless chicken antics before the panicky network team had calmed down enough to diagnose the problems in the Middle East region. Network traffic was eventually throttled back and re-routed via various improbable countries. The over-impressively large "world domination" screens covering the walls of the Crisis Command Centre began to turn amber and eventually, to everyone's relief, they settled to a soothing, verdant green. Later that day, most of the offending messages had been identified and a mass deletion process was underway. The countries initially affected found their computer systems disrupted for a few days, but the damage was, to be fair, fairly limited. It did take some time however, to persuade the authorities that we did not have another terrorist on our hands. Happily, our employee with a conscience was neither shot nor disciplined nor was he even sent to an American holiday camp on a Caribbean island. Everyone lived happily ever after, except perhaps the network manager, who I am told is responding well to medication.

All this goes to show that everything has its price. Indeed the price of electronic freedom can be very expensive for its custodians. But it is still nonetheless a recommended course of action for the avant-garde IT leader. You will be fine as long as you are the type of person who is not easily surprised by the wit and wisdom of man or woman.

If you consider the business applications that people use in their day-to-day jobs, however, the situation is not good. This is because the views and opinions of actual workers are rarely considered by their leadership when new computer applications are conceived, developed and introduced on their behalf. The average worker must have the patience of a saint when you consider what their senior colleagues have done for them. Many applications designed to help them do their jobs more efficiently don't generally help them one little bit. Indeed, the programs have probably been horribly customised by colluding tribes of middle managers and analysts aided and abetted by geeks from the IT department. The "cool" ideas of the geeks and a range of unsatisfactory committee-spawned, camel-like design compromises may render the application completely unusable. You don't have to look far in the trade press for lurid examples of new processes and systems which have caused untold misery to all concerned. Some shock, horror, noun-stack nightmares even make it to the national newspapers, such as the demise of the UK National Health Service project (*Daily Mail* - £12bn NHS computer system is scrapped, 2011). Some conspiracy theorists out there may even believe that programmers' tool- kits come with all these handy features built-in (Figure 1.2).

"So much of what we call management consists in making it difficult for people to work."
Peter F. Drucker

But there is some good news out there. There are some ways for you to calibrate yourself with the datum of reality in the work place. Some companies are really very good at it. A colleague of mine who worked for a large supermarket chain in Europe described to me a fantastic model that I would recommend to anyone. Each year, all the senior managers and executives of the company up to and including the Chief Executive are obliged to spend more than a week of their time carrying out relatively unskilled tasks in the company's retail outlets or distribution centres. Some even got to meet real customers. This laudable act was intended to keep the feet of the anointed firmly on the ground. It also gave the executives a chance to understand what working at the sharp end was really like. Finally it was a great morale booster for the checkout staff as they watched their hapless leaders struggle to weigh a pound of apples or puzzle over the pricing of a kumquat.

When my friend returned from his short sabbatical, I quizzed him on his experiences. First of all, I noticed that he was limping and he had a bandaged hand. "It's a lot more physical than you would expect", was his response when he noticed me staring. "What did you learn?" I asked. He narrowed his eyes and looked at me threateningly. "Doors!" he cried, "I never realised how impossible doors can be." I was taken aback. The only software package I had heard of that had "doors" in the name had nothing to do with retail

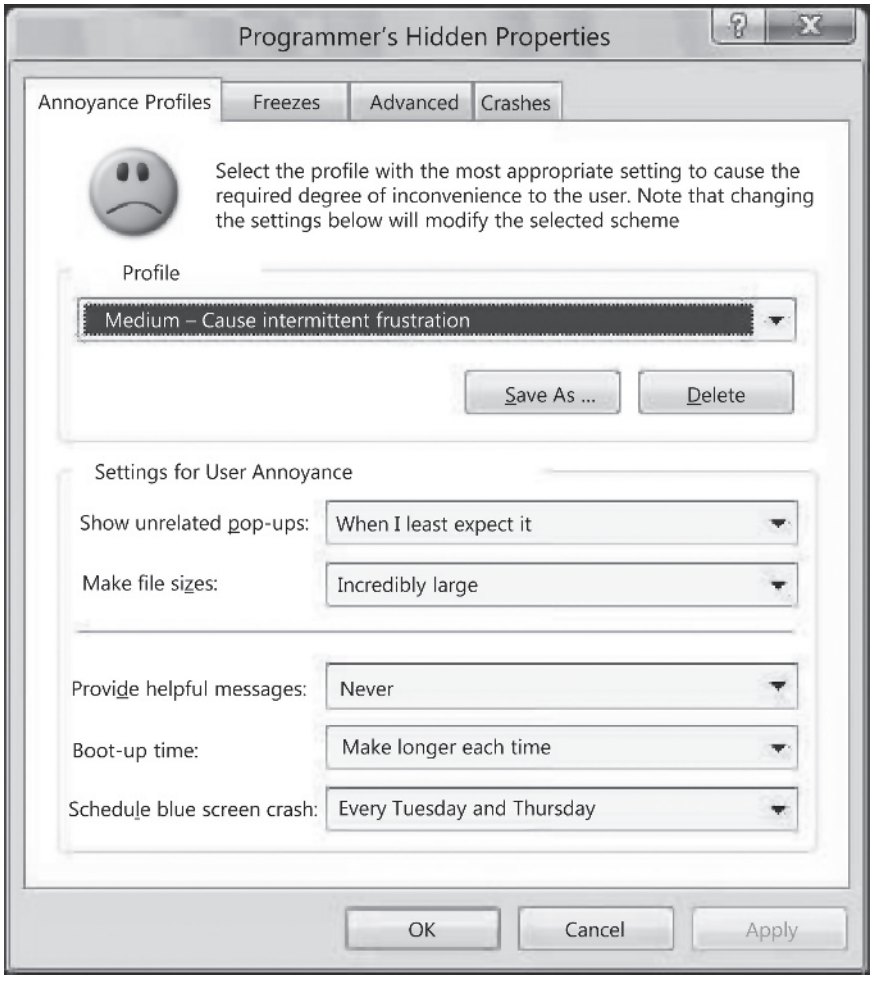


Figure 1.2 How to Win Friends and Influence People?

warehousing. "Well" he continued, "the way that my people designed the warehouse systems means that anyone using it had to walk through at least three doors for every single transaction they did. That's how I damaged my hand. Someone was coming the other way at just the wrong time." With rising emotion he continued. "When I get back to the office the very first thing I'm going to do is to remove all the doors in our warehouses and make a great big bonfire with them. Then I'll make the project team redesign their system from scratch. This time we will really make sure that things work smoothly and reliably. Finally, we'll put the implementation team to work in the warehouse

in real life for a good few weeks. When they complain, we'll make them work a few weeks more. That'll teach them." With a disturbing glint in his eye, he hurried off. It had definitely been a formative experience.

"Great Spirit, grant that I may not criticize my neighbour until I have walked a mile in his moccasins."
Native American Prayer

On the other side of the coin, an example of how to do this "process thing" really well also occurred in a warehousing project. The particular warehouse in question was critical to the company as it shipped over £120m of material and spares each week. The project team had found out that there was an industry-leading package to do this type of work, but unlike everyone else in the industry they curiously decided to use the package as it was designed. After they had installed their un-customised software, they took over a small warehouse building where a simulation of the proposed system was built. Each process was developed and tested exhaustively. Many, many members of the real workforce were intimately involved throughout the whole exercise. When the team was satisfied that it would all work, they proceeded to the implementation phase. They then carried out three full dress rehearsals with real data before the system went live. The last of these involved complete and full parallel running of both the old and the new systems. This was done with production data from the full, burgeoning databases of dirty data that comprise "real life" usage. This approach meant that each transaction had to be carried out twice, once in each system. They had, of course, to roster two sets of shift teams (comprising hundreds of people in each) to adequately staff the expensive parallel operation.

When the system did go live, it was notable that performance metrics did not fall away as expected—in fact they improved. A few very minor glitches did appear in the days that followed (largely through data integrity issues), but the project team and the workforce swiftly dealt with each of them without undue impact. The parallel running regime meant that customers would not have been impacted anyway. In fact, the cunning inventory-building program that the Stalinist project manager had introduced in the preceding weeks to buffer the inevitable unexpected problems meant that he was well insulated from any transition glitches. The project team also stayed in place, watching as well as participating. After three weeks and one full business cycle of live use had passed, a number of improvements were identified together with one or two minor howlers that needed to be corrected. These were swiftly implemented, regression tested and released. The result was a happy workforce that was considerably more productive than they had previously been. Unlike most IT projects however, the celebrations only started once the new warehouse was stable and transacting at the higher volumes stated in the business

plan, rather than when the code was "delivered". The key point here is that it was the business outcome that was celebrated, not the IT project.

The outdated concept of projects being celebrated when they go live, rather than waiting until they have actually delivered benefit to the organisation is a nasty and dangerous practice. It should be consigned to a list of "bad things we promise we will not do any more". Imagine a situation where a surgeon and his team down tools, whoop with joy, crack open the champagne and start celebrating a few moments after they'd cut out your tumour? Mercifully for us, they do bother to sew us back up again. They also continue to monitor us with professional aftercare to make sure the problem really has gone away. We really could do with a great deal more of that sort of TLC in the IT world. Any IT project teams who toss a lemon of a project over the fence onto the heads of the defenceless user community and run away deserve everything that they get. Having a warehouse door slammed in their face would be a good start.

The Joys of Middle Management

Just who are the middle managers in an organisation? What do they do, where do they come from and why are there so many of them? Well, we could enjoyably argue about the definition until the end of time, especially if we let any middle managers join in the discussion. However, let's just for the purposes of this debate define them as people in the organisation who report to a manager, but also have managers working for them. In other words, they are not directly connected either to any real work that goes on, nor to the leadership who are making strategic decisions at the top. This insulation from reality means that these creatures can sometimes live in a strange and wondrous world of their own, where the skills of managing meaningless meetings and enduring endless emails have risen to the status of high art.

"Meetings are indispensable when you don't want to do anything."
John Kenneth Galbraith

Much fun is poked at middle managers, and they are often parodied as being faintly ridiculous. However, they are creatures of nascent danger to any IT leader. This is not because they are bad people, but because they are managers. As managers, they will feel that they are able to make things happen, not only on their patch but elsewhere in the organisation as well.

Middle managers who use computers often feel that they have a right to both demand and get a shiny new software application to help them do their job. This "right of entitlement" is an unusual concept in corporate life that

seems unique to IT. Managers certainly won't dare ask for new carpets or large office plants. The management grading system has taken care of that. Woe betide you if you are a grade 17 manager asking for some grade 19 foliage. But ask these people about computers and they will become deeply agitated about their urgent need for an expensive new departmental application that could cost millions. Managers will also fervently believe that their application must be grotesquely customised to meet their every whim. Whether you like it or not, most of the impetus for new IT investments in your company will come disproportionately from the middle management. My own personal record was to discover nearly 700 active IT projects in an organisation of only 40,000 people. With a project budget of a mere £20m, this meant that each project was spending £28,571.42 each year. It's hardly surprising that few were ever finished.

Q. "How can you tell the difference between a Middle Manager and a Senior Manager?"

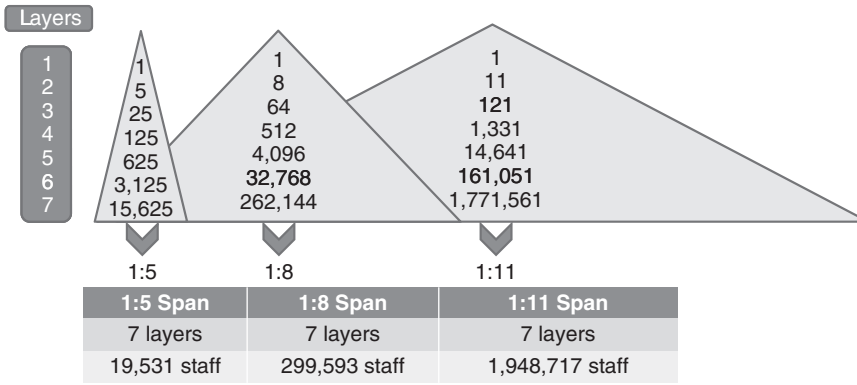
A. "The Middle Manager always thinks he needs more resources and more people to get things done. The Senior Manager is just the opposite—he thinks he is expending too much resource with too many people."
Anon.

Is this a bad thing? Well, it need not be so, but certain obstacles get in the way of having an effective middle management community living in a utopian harmony of peace and love with the IT organisation. Here are some of them.

Layers and Spans

As I've already suggested, there are often quite large numbers of middle managers in any large corporate organisation. This is because most companies base their operating models on pyramidal organisational structures. The structures are generated through work breakdown models, often based on function or geography. A company might break itself up into several divisions (such as R&D, Product Development, Sales and Marketing, Production & Distribution etc.). Each of these divisions can then be further broken down into smaller units. Sales and Marketing for example, could be divided geographically into regions (such as North America or Europe), and then subsequently decomposed further into country organisations and perhaps finally into sales territories. In this model, significant numbers of middle managers are created as the organisation unfolds layer by layer.

The upshot of all this is that if you are not careful, then you can end up with an alarming number of levels in an organisation. There may also be quite



1:5 Span	1:8 Span	1:11 Span
7 layers	7 layers	7 layers
19,531 staff	299,593 staff	1,948,717 staff

Figure 1.3 The Relationship between Management Span and Organisational Size

impressive numbers of people who are "managing" things rather than "doing" things. The average number of people who report to each of these supervisors dictates both the number of middle managers and the number of hierarchical layers in the company. Many organisations do not pay attention to this important detail. As a result they can quickly become overwhelmed with barbarian hordes of middle managers swarming around the halls and offices.

Figure 1.3 shows what happens if an organisation unfolds with reporting lines of 1:5, 1:8 and 1:11. In effect, each layer of the organisation will have 5, 8 or 11 people reporting to each manager at each level of the company.

If you compare the three models, you will notice that the 1:5 model requires seven levels of management structure to accommodate a mere 19,531 managers and staff. However, the same number of levels would support 299,593 people in the 1:8 ratio. But if you structure your organisation at 1:11, then a staggering 1,948,717 can be accommodated. The number of managers in an organisation is often an unintended side-effect of the reporting spans you choose. For example, even in a medium-sized company of 20,000 people, the spans make a huge difference. In the 1:5 model above, 3,906 managers are required to man such a company, whereas the 1:11 model will only deploy 1,464 supervisors. If it costs $80,000 to employ a manager, then the extra 2,442 managers required in the 1:5 span organisation will add nearly $200m of operating cost to the company. So if you ever wondered why management consultants are always banging on about layers, spans and flatter structures then this is the reason why. One organisation where I worked operated with an average management to staff ratio of 1:5½. Under cover of the 2008 recession, we ran a program which consultants would call "delayering" the company. We tasked each part of the organisation to make structural alterations to their reporting lines so that the management/staff ratio moved towards

a target of 1:8. This had a startling impact. We found that we were able to remove nearly 2,500 managerial and clerical posts out of a white collar workforce of 19,800 without causing major disruption to the business. This saved more than £120m of annual operating costs. In comparison, to achieve £120m of profit, the company would have to sell nearly £1.5 billion of equipment and services (which was never going to be easy in the deepest recession in living memory).

"If sufficient number of management layers are superimposed on top of each other, it can be assured that disaster is not left to chance."
Norman Augustine

Short organisational spans of five or less reports per manager lead to towering management structures comprised of many layers, populated by very large numbers of managers. Furthermore each manager will also have rather less responsibility and rather more time on their hands compared to their counterparts in flatter structures. Should you belong to such a low-span company, then you can probably look forward to a great deal of middle management attention. There is also likely to be heavy demand for lots of new computer systems. Now might be a good time to undertake a quick analysis of the structure of the company to identify the low-span zones. There's a very good chance that these are the areas where most of the pent-up demand for new projects, systems and services are coming from. Conversely, a line manager with fifteen reports is likely to be far too busy to be thinking about trivial things like IT. He or she will be focussed on the important job of keeping their head above the ever rising waters. However, should a heavily loaded manager ever get very passionate about wanting some electronic assistance then there is likely to be a very good reason for it.

"An overburdened, over-stretched executive is the best executive, because he or she doesn't have the time to meddle, to deal in trivia, to bother people."
Jack Welch

Middle Managers and the Linkage between IT and the Business

Linkage is a major problem for any IT leader. This is often because many companies still fail to recognise that the most senior IT leader must be a fully paid up member of the top executive team to be effective. He or she is often buried in the management structure of other functions, such as Finance or heaven forbid, maybe even some kind of Shared Services function. This means that the linkage between the rest of the IT organisation and the business will also

occur at correspondingly lower levels in the hierarchy. The whole question of the management of IT, unlike other disciplines, seems to have a curious optionality about it. No CEO in their right mind would leave their Finance Director buried several layers down in another function. However, they seem to think it is quite acceptable for this to happen to their IT leader. Some even believe that IT can be led by someone with no experience whatsoever in the discipline. There is also a curious penchant for relatively junior managers with a hobby interest in IT to end up as main points of engagement between business units and the IT function. People seem to end up in these positions irrespective of their seniority, their role or more importantly, their degree of common sense.

Figure 1.4 shows a notional organisation by level. The CEO sits astride the top of the chart, with the real workers at the bottom. The main area of responsibility of each role is identified, together with the types of things that these individuals will be worrying about in normal day-to-day business. The main interactions are represented by the thickness of the arrows.

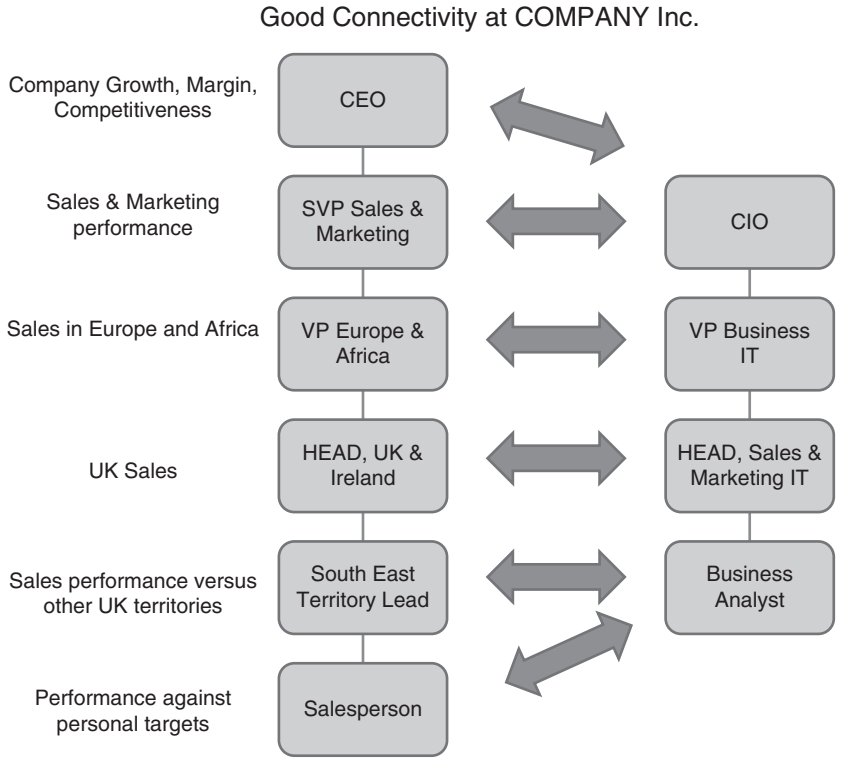


Figure 1.4 A Well-Connected IT Organisation

In this example, the linkage is established at the top level. In other words, the IT leader is a bona fide member of the executive team. They have a direct reporting relationship with the CEO and the status to match. When the IT leader is seen as a proper member of the management team, it is much easier to generate an agenda where IT is an important enabler for the strategic plans of the company. The thickness of the arrows in the diagram above is very similar, indicating consistent interactions between the IT function and all levels of the organisation. Discussions between the CIO and the SVP of Sales for example, will all be about meaningful topics, such as how they can work together to improve global Sales and Marketing performance.

The second case, shown in Figure 1.5, is unfortunately much more common in our industry. The major links between the business units and the IT function are established at much lower levels in the hierarchy. In this model, the IT leader can also become completely detached from the main business leadership. This is a much more dangerous operating model. It often results

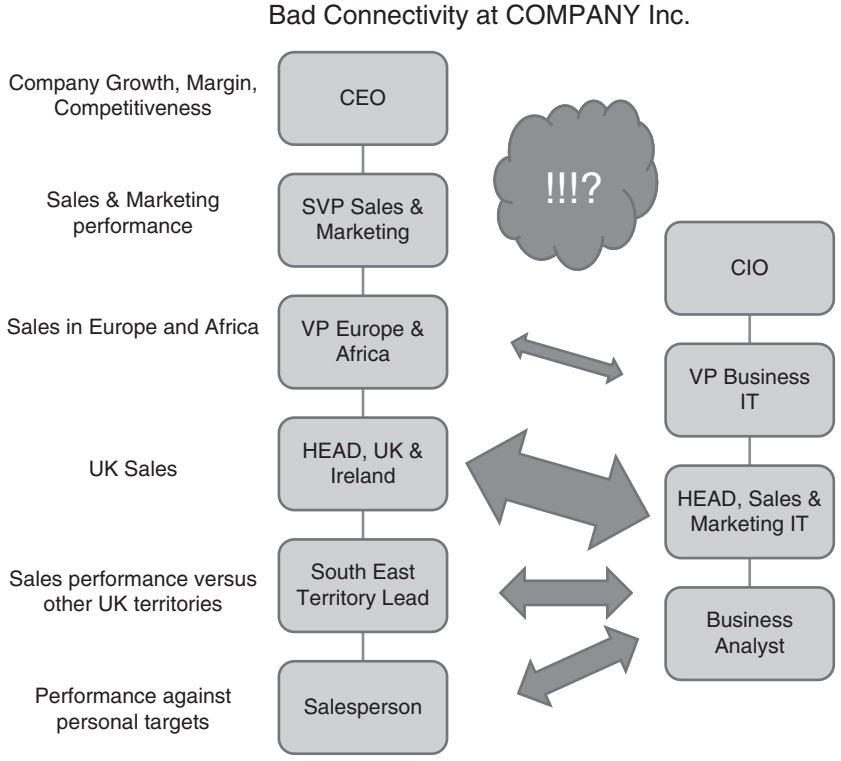


Figure 1.5 A Poorly Connected IT Organisation

in demands for large-scale tactical engagements which in turn spawn large numbers of small-scale projects. In this example, the leader of the Sales organisation does not interact with his IT counterpart, or anyone else in the IT function for that matter. Most of the exchanges are occurring between the UK Sales department and their own local IT support unit. It should come as no surprise, therefore, that any attempts to implement a sales automation system will almost certainly end up as a tactical, UK-centric system focused on capturing and analysing data at a country level. Nobody is talking about improving overall Sales and Marketing performance across the enterprise.

The relative lack of interaction between the IT leader and his business counterpart is also very dangerous in other ways. It may for example, encourage the IT organisation to take on a more inward-looking emphasis. This might lead to a progressive lack of alignment and an increasing risk of dislocation from the leadership of the organisation.

To avoid such problems, it is essential that any IT leader achieves good quality interactions with the leaders in the business. He or she should operate an IT division that is well integrated at all levels. Without this, it will not be possible (or at least intensely difficult) to develop any kind of strategic agenda—at least one that will make any large and positive impact on the company. This is bad for IT but even worse for the company. Thoughtfully conceived, well-designed and skilfully executed IT projects enabling process change can automate and change the core business processes themselves to create enormous advantage to the corporation. But you do have to be the right person who is—critically—in the right place in the organisation.

The View from the Top of the Tree

IT leaders often fret about how they should support the company's leaders. Many believe these lofty folk are the most vexatious group to satisfy. Clearly, such interactions will be easier if the IT leader is a full and active member of the management team. Nonetheless the needs of the leadership are often very different to the rest of the user community and the wise IT leader should tread very carefully.

In terms of company leadership candidates, organisations are usually only interested in promoting those with experience, ability and a track record. It therefore takes quite a while for the ambitious Young Turks to climb to the top of the tree. This means that many company leaders today are Old Turks and have a degree of computer literacy that would probably cause a bunch of 16-year-olds to guffaw in disbelief into their social media networks. This is not the time to make ageist comments about baby boomers, but many of your leaders will be handicapped as far as modern technology is concerned. Most

grew their careers in times when Information Technology played a much more peripheral role in industry than it does today. Many will favour traditional paper-based methods of communication control, often leaving email and other electronic wonders to their much younger assistants. I recall the first email I received from a CEO I worked for some years back. It simply said (in capital letters):

"PLEASE COME AND SEE ME NOW"

I scrambled straight up to his office expecting to get fired. Instead, the meeting was convivial. Our leader wanted to follow up on a piece of strategy work we had been discussing the previous week. When I asked the Boss why he shouted at me with his email, he just looked at me blankly. He thought I'd be pleased that I was chosen to be the recipient of his very first email.

For every electronic dinosaur, there are of course plenty of fast trackers who are interested in IT. They may also be great exponents of that wonderful concept—"a little knowledge is dangerous". The cleverest IT leaders have developed clever ways to please these folk. The steady provision of coloured glass beads, trinkets and other worthless bits of shiny technological metal works well. Trinkets, in this sense, cover all the latest and greatest pieces of new technology, many of which will be named after inappropriate fruits. Many companies are still unfortunately under-represented by female leaders. This means that when great executives from different companies get together at meetings, conferences or symposia, a "boys with their toys" situation can often develop in the breaks between the punch-ups. Everyone will be comparing their "tech" with the innocent yet passionate enthusiasm of primary school kids swapping Pokémon cards in the school playground. You may have put in the best ERP solution in the world, but if one of your Senior VPs hasn't received his 64 gigabyte diamond geezer super-smartphone running the strawberry cheesecake muffin operating system on the very first day it is released, then you could find yourself being very unjustly turned into jam very quickly indeed.

"Leaders are visionaries with a poorly developed sense of fear and no concept of the odds against them."
Robert Jarvik

So, it's likely that you will find an astonishing variation in computer literacy amongst your leadership. This might also be tricky to spot at least initially, because the illiterates will almost certainly be experts at concealing this from you. Hiding ignorance is a skill that will have been essential for one who has ascended quite so far in the organisation. One of the ways that concerned IT leaders deal with this issue is to build an Executive Support team. These are composed of people who can pander to every wit and whim of the company's leaders. If you carefully hand-pick your staff, then you can match up your

support staff's temperament and skill to each leader. Those leaders that are particularly illiterate can be sympathetically assisted. Assigning a trusted, patient and discreet member of staff who speaks beautiful English rather than dot-net-talk works well. Those bosses that are techno-geeks can of course be regularly fed the latest techno-babble and 4th generation shiny things by your resident geeks. I learned the value of Executive support very early on in my IT career. One leader in a company where I worked had a penchant for smashing his fist onto his mouse when he became particularly upset about things. At one stage he was crunching his way through mice at a rate of more than one per week. However, an unusually empathic member of the support team, armed with a liberal supply of spare electronic rodents, transformed the whole relationship between this business unit and the IT function. A couple of hundred dollars' worth of mice helped build trust. From this platform we found we could implement quite dramatic change through technological innovation in medicine discovery. This isn't the kind of example that you find in any textbook, but it worked a treat for us. I for one would never have thought that meek and gentle people could achieve such a powerful outcome with just a few plastic animals. Executive support isn't a particularly egalitarian concept, but let's not be too pure about this—after all you want to extend your shelf life, rather than ascend to an ethereal spiritual plane of IT enlightenment. All that stuff can come later when you get into the thorny subject of delivering projects.

Assuming you are able to get some kind of engagement with your leadership, then it's never a bad idea to play your strategic cards early on. The implementation of a highly aligned IT strategy shortly after you work out which way is up is crucially important to long-term success. Just doing it is probably even more important than getting the strategy right. Any alternatives involve laps and Gods. Strategy Schizophrenia is something you do not want to catch (which is why we talk about it in another chapter). If you are not successful in engaging the leadership, then life will initially be difficult, then intolerable, before finally becoming impossible. Each horror-story anecdote about a project screw-up or a lengthy service outage will steadily chip away at the sandy foundations of your support. Eventually, you will look down and discover, like any good cartoon character, that there is no longer any corporate ground underneath you. After a couple of futile seconds while you thrash your legs and try to defy gravity, the audience laughs and then down you go.

Bored Boards

Company Boards in most countries, are highly populated by non-executive directors. These folk do not directly intervene in the detailed day-to-day decision making that goes on. However, the non-execs are the nominated

representatives of the shareholders (who after all, own your company). They have a responsibility to hold the executive management accountable for their actions. The detailed function of company boards differs slightly between countries and different companies sometimes have different bylaws. The smallest Boards can contain only three or four people, but some companies have extended the representation to over thirty individuals. In my experience, Boards in the US tend to be smaller affairs than their European counterparts. Often, only the CEO and CFO attend the meeting as executive representatives, while the rest of the places are occupied by non-executive members. It is generally considered good practice in corporate governance for the non-executives to outnumber executive members of the Board. In the UK, Boards are often larger with key business representatives joining the executive representation. In Europe, members of the workers' councils also attend Board meetings.

In the normal business of a Board meeting, the non-executives will generally be concerned about the application of company strategy. They also worry about the risks the executives are taking together with the general performance of the company. In the US, the Board also needs to conform to the requirements of the Sarbanes-Oxley Act of 2002 (Soxlaw, 2002). The eleven sections of the Act cover a range of additional corporate Board responsibilities. Most of these are directed towards higher levels of oversight and corporate control so that the accuracy and reliability of corporate disclosures is improved.

IT leaders occasionally are called in to explain themselves to Boards, particularly when major strategies have been developed. My own presentations to main Boards have largely centred on strategy, controls, risks, business outcomes and the money we are planning to spend. I was also aware that my personal credibility was being assessed. Talking a good game is one thing, but Boards will be looking hard to satisfy themselves that the person in front of them can deliver.

All of these questions are entirely reasonable. Good Boards always provide good support to the executive team. However, the micro-level needs of computer users and middle managers will conflict drastically with the macro-level objectives your Board members will expect you to be pursuing. We will examine the mechanics of the Board relationship later, when we discuss strategies and budgets.

The Relationship Conundrum

Having examined some of the conflicting attributes of your major stakeholders, we now come to the tricky problem of choosing what sort of relationship you are going to have with each of them. There are a surprising range of options, varying from what could be considered to be fairly autocratic approaches on

the one hand, to simpering, subservient whipping-dog wimps on the other. There are any number of variations in between these two extremes. Here are three of the most common that I've seen in operation.

The Henry VIII Method

This approach towards dealing with your user community fits fairly and squarely into what Good King Henry would have suggested to his son. It comes about when you have a powerful central organisation that believes it has the best interests of the community at heart. As with all good dictatorships it doesn't take long before the corrupting effect of absolute power takes its inevitable grip. What started out as firm, but essentially well-meaning leadership rarely stays that way. In short, this ends up as a full-blown cold-war Soviet operating model (only without any vodka). You might not be shooting people who try to make a break for it over the Berlin Wall, but the best exponents of this method can certainly create Soviet Gulag-level unpleasantness for their intransigent users.

"Smith & Wesson—the original point and click interface."
Anon.

This "one size fits none" approach generally hasn't got very much going for it in the good times. However, it can work well in the bad times if your company is in dire straits and needs firm and decisive action. Here, autocratic authority, which disregards the snivelling and whining from the unbelievers, can accomplish quite large strides. It's possible that these strides might even be in the right direction. However, the absence of any burning platforms, damsels in distress and towering infernos in most organisations generally makes this approach a non-starter for most. There are some geographies where a higher level of "higher-level" control is accepted as a cultural norm. Here the successful implementation of Henry's centrally planned "I will do what I want" model is easier and it allows much ground to be covered. If you want to build a new motorway for example, it is much easier and cheaper to put any protesters in jail than let them star in a public enquiry at your expense for the next ten years.

The Customer/Supplier Model

The use of the customer/supplier model in the IT world is widespread and would probably be considered by many to be the "de facto" operating model for all good IT organisations. This is a great shame because it is probably the dumbest, stupidest and least effective of any of the engagement models you could ever hope to find. Many people who consider themselves to be "customer orientated" will disagree, but this is not about ideology. There are

sound, structural reasons why customer/supplier does not work inside large corporate companies.

Figure 1.6 shows how the customer/supplier model is constructed inside large companies. In essence, your IT department becomes a sole supplier and your user becomes the customer. This is very attractive to the user community because they can have great fun being customers. It's a good life. They get to order you around a lot and spend a lot of time moaning about how their "needs" are not being satisfied.

There are two problems with this.

First, once the more vociferous users see themselves cast in the role of customers, it's not very long before they start to live the adage that "the customer is always right". This potentially creates huge problems for any IT leader. It is possible that each and every self-styled "customer" might be completely aligned with the company strategy *and* they have the best interests of the organisation at heart. However, if this is not the case (which occurs 100% of the time), then the "customers" will, consciously or unconsciously, push their own parochial interests. In some cases, they will even get that rare and wonderful chance to further their own personal agendas. When large budgets are involved, you can be sure that you are sowing the seeds that may lead to a disaster of biblical proportions. We're talking real plague of frogs stuff here. Any chance of delivering a coherent strategy will evaporate. Instead you will be subjected to a World War I-scale artillery barrage of small-scale demands, each entirely independent of one another. You may even find that two projects in your portfolio are pursuing two mutually conflicting objectives.

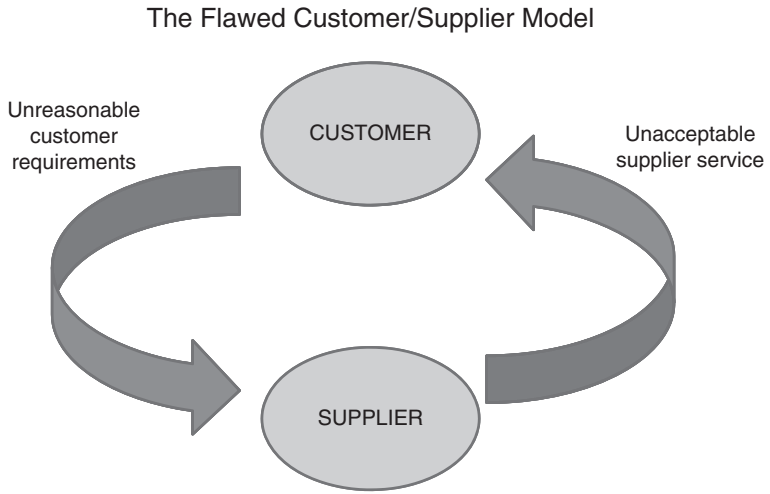


Figure 1.6 The Much-used but Fundamentally Flawed IT Operating Model

In such a scenario, development costs will escalate. But this will be nothing compared to the monstrous increases in operational costs you will suffer once this menagerie of systems "go live" and start to wreak their havoc. Dr Frankenstein only created one monster; your team might just be turning out hundreds each year. Just to put icing on this particularly gruesome cake, when your rampaging monsters crawl out of the lab and do all the usual things that rampaging monsters do, your customers will swiftly and effortlessly metamorphose into the role of an innocent and badly wronged victim. Many of them will love this. You know what's coming next. Someone is to blame for the mayhem. It can't be the customer of course, because the customer is always right.

The second problem with the internal customer/supplier model is more fundamental and deeply structural in nature. To be effective, the customer and his supplier cannot and must not exist together in a vacuum. There is a crucial and necessary third component that most people conveniently forget when they are implementing such models in large organisations. For the customer/supplier model to work you *must* have a *working market* in the picture as well. The whole concept of being a customer is that you can choose the product you want. If you are locked into buying from a sole-source, in-house supplier, then your freedom to choose from the market is denied you. This can lead to the "hostile buyer–captive supplier" end-game. All it takes is a few project failures and even the meekest people are transformed into red-faced, ranting monsters. They will think that the IT function is comprised of a bunch of really stupid people whose sole goal in life is to spread untold misery over them and their kin. The customer's prerogative to take their business elsewhere is denied them so there isn't much they can do about it. So they vent (or sometimes even resort to physical violence towards people or nearby peripheral devices). On the "supplier" side, the situation is even worse. Without the benefit of a market, the supplier cannot easily refuse to supply his customer because there are no alternative customers available to him or her. There are no safeguards to protect the supplier from the bad behaviour of the customer. The IT bar-owner cannot throw the drunks out of his or her establishment in this model.

When the market is working properly from the supplier's perspective, the supplier will see an ocean of customers, or what is often referred to as the "addressable market" (see Figure 1.7). He or she will not be able to service every single customer in his addressable market, but he will wish to develop relationships with as many customers as possible in order to secure as many orders as possible.

"Nothing is perfect. Life is messy. Relationships are complex. Outcomes are uncertain. People are irrational."
Hugh Mackay

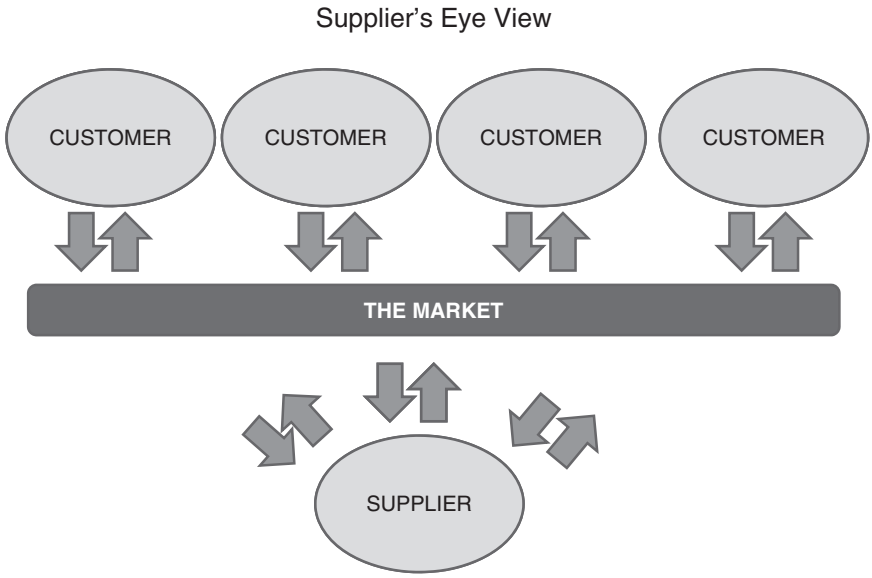


Figure 1.7 How a Supplier Should See Things

When the market is working from the customer's perspective (Figure 1.8), the customer similarly will see many suppliers who could possibly provide goods or services for him. He or she may be less concerned about the addressable supplier base. Although in some specialist areas, they may well choose to develop relationships with a number of key suppliers, particularly where expertise is rare. The customer may help them by investing time, money or expertise in order to provide security of supply (and keep the supplier interested). Alternatively, he or she may choose to enter into long-term contracts. Few sensible customers however, enter into "exclusive" arrangements with suppliers, except for short periods of time. They prefer to exert the customer prerogative through either active means (changing suppliers) or implied means (threat to change when there are alternatives available). It would be very unwise to enter into an exclusive arrangement with a captive supplier because none of these market forces would then be able to operate.

Teamwork!

The team model is quite different to the previous two approaches. For those using the team approach, the only customers in their world are those people in the market place who buy the company's products and services. In this model, every individual in the company is simply seen as a member of your team. It

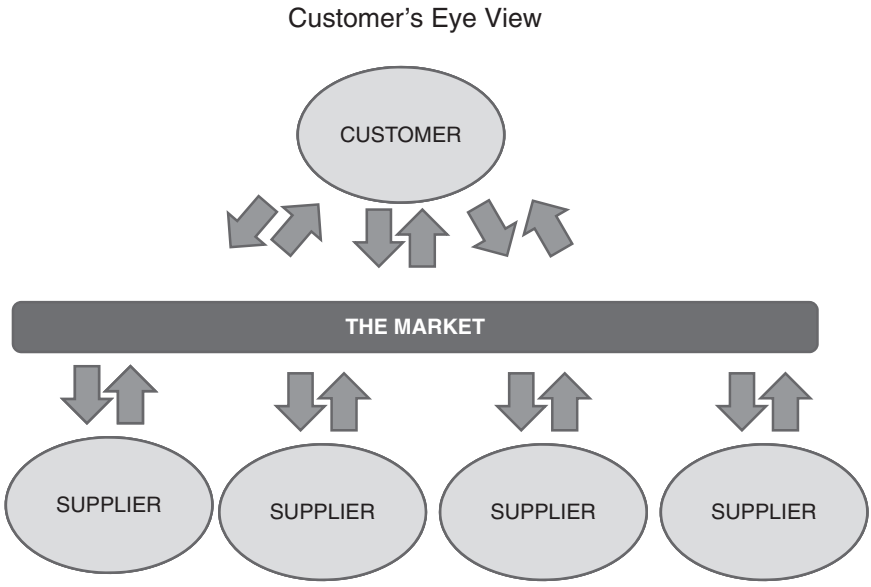


Figure 1.8 How a Customer Should See Things

is practised by at least one employee-owned retail chain I know and it works very well. The philosophy of the approach is based on the premise that human beings naturally and unavoidably group themselves into tribes. This means that they can get on with the essential job of throwing rocks at another nearby tribe. The team approach attempts to recalibrate everyone's tribal orientation away from small groups or departments within the company (who are notoriously prone to internecine warfare) towards the concept of the whole company as the single tribe. The intention is to reduce the level of internal game-playing and promote an outward-looking focus. It has a lot going for it, but on the downside it is extremely difficult to make it work. It requires a large number of people to behave in a very mature fashion. This is tricky for corporate creatures. Shameless empire building, testosterone-fuelled concepts of "winning" and the pursuance of personal agendas are formidable obstacles that need to be overcome.

"It is not the employer who pays the wages. Employers only handle the money. It is the customer who pays the wages."
Henry Ford

The team model is perhaps unsurprisingly best seen in organisations that cannot operate unless they play as a team. The game of soccer (football) is a good example. Soccer is a game where you try to kick a round ball into the goal of the opposition. The team that scores the most goals wins the game.

In soccer, teams generally organise themselves into two units—attack and defence. The attacking players try to keep the game in the opposition's half of the field and they are therefore the people that score most of the goals. The defending players protect the team's goal and they also try to dominate the middle area of the field. The pundits will tell you that midfield domination provides a platform from which the team can launch attacking moves. This general formula works well, but it has to have a level of fluidity because threatening situations can develop in a matter of a seconds. When the team are attacking their opposition's goal for example, a large number of players (including defenders) may be committed into the forward area of the field. Should possession be lost, the opposition may quickly counter-attack in order to exploit your team's weakened defensive position. When this happens, any team member that is able to get into a defensive position does so, irrespective of whether they are an attacker or a defender. If your team is subject to a particularly heavy onslaught from the opposition, large numbers of attacking players may take up defensive positions for protracted periods.

In an industrial landscape, the attacking players could be represented as the sales team. Winning sales is like scoring goals. Support staff such as those in Information Technology usually form part of the defence. In this model, the job of the IT team is to create a supportive environment from which attacks (or sales campaigns) can be launched. This will provide a platform for the business to achieve its goals.

The team model is attractive as a concept, but it is difficult to execute well. Tribal influences are extremely hard to break down. Many people feel an overwhelming desire to propagate the concept of pecking order, particularly when they think they are near the top of it. Those working at the front of the organisation often see themselves as "more important" than those in "back office" functions. The reality of course, is that everyone in the team is important, even if the glamour of goal-scoring is asymmetrically distributed. The IT may be "back-office", but its problems can cause untold damage to a company. In the UK for example, recent major industrial catastrophes in sectors as diverse as confectionary, supermarkets and stationery retailers have been traced back to computer problems. At least one major corporate I know of lost its independence and recently succumbed to a hostile take-over. This was due at least in part to some major IT failings, though as always there were other issues as well. In such situations, the attacking players can score as many goals as they like, but when millions of goals are going in at the other end it renders all efforts utterly futile.

So in summary, some of the main models for user relationships are the Henry VIII, customer/supplier or the team approaches. All have their advocates. On balance, I have generally found that the team approach has worked best for me, unless the company's very existence is in question. Only in dire circumstances would I recommend that you don the Royal robes of office and

let your executioner know that he can expect to see a spouse or two on his "to-do" list. If for some reason, you decide to play the market-free, customer/supplier game, then you will need lots of patience and a good relationship with a head-hunter. From the starting gun, my guess is that you will do well to last more than two years in the job. Which leads us neatly on to dead-heroes.

Could I Have Something Impossible Please?

Human beings, in general, are creatures whose glasses are half-full. We are usually cheerful, sociable, optimistic folk and we have a natural tendency to expect things to get better in the future. The key word here is "expect". Should our expectations be allowed to run ahead of what it is possible for us to obtain, then grave dissatisfaction quickly sets in and we cease to be happy bunnies.

There is also another important human characteristic that IT leaders need to be aware of. This is best described by the term "taking things for granted". For example, most of us would happily accept that someone has managed to achieve the spectacular micro-molecular achievement of placing a zillion transistors on a chip and making it do useful things. "That's cool" would be most people's response, oblivious of the Herculean efforts required to reach this goal. If this technological advance allows us to watch television on our wristwatches, then we will be happy—at least for a while. However, it won't take long before the "taking things for granted" ratchet will wind on. Questions such as, "When are we going to have high-definition television on our watches?" or "Can you project the images directly onto our retinas or into our brains?" are likely to be our next utterances. As our needs are satisfied, then our expectations inevitably ratchet onwards and upwards, oblivious to the effect this might have on those who are trying to satisfy us or indeed to the laws of physics, chemistry, biology or common sense. These two effects—where people want to be satisfied but where the satisfaction criteria become progressively more challenging—are a real headache for any IT leader or indeed anyone else who is in the business of making things or selling services.

The Dead-Hero Zone

To address the conundrum, we have to look to the field of "expectation management". In this exciting area of people management, there are two important markers we need to understand:

- The first of these is a bar which defines the expectation level of the audience. The higher the bar is set, the higher the achievement that is required to meet that expectation.

- The second marker represents the maximum capability level of the individual or organisation that is trying to meet that expectation. The higher your capability level, the better you are at what you are doing and therefore the better chance you have of meeting any expectation placed upon you.

Expectation management is all about how the expectation bar and the capability level relate to one another within the context of an axis of achievement. A scenario where high expectations are matched by low capability is not a good place to start from.

If the bar is set high and the capability level of an individual, a product or a service ever falls below the expectation level of the audience, then we know that failure is assured. The bigger the gap between the capability level and the expectation bar, the bigger the sense of frustration felt by the recipient. Figure 1.9 shows such a circumstance. In this example, every outcome will still be regarded as abject failure even if the provider delivers a new personal best for the task at hand. This is because the expectation level of the audience can never be reached, at least by this person or by their organisation. I have to thank a former boss of mine for a wonderful term that explains the gulf between the high expectation bar and the low capability line. He coined the term "dead-hero zone" or DHZ for short. It really is quite pointless trying to participate in this scenario if things have been set up in this way. It is a maze with no exit. Even if

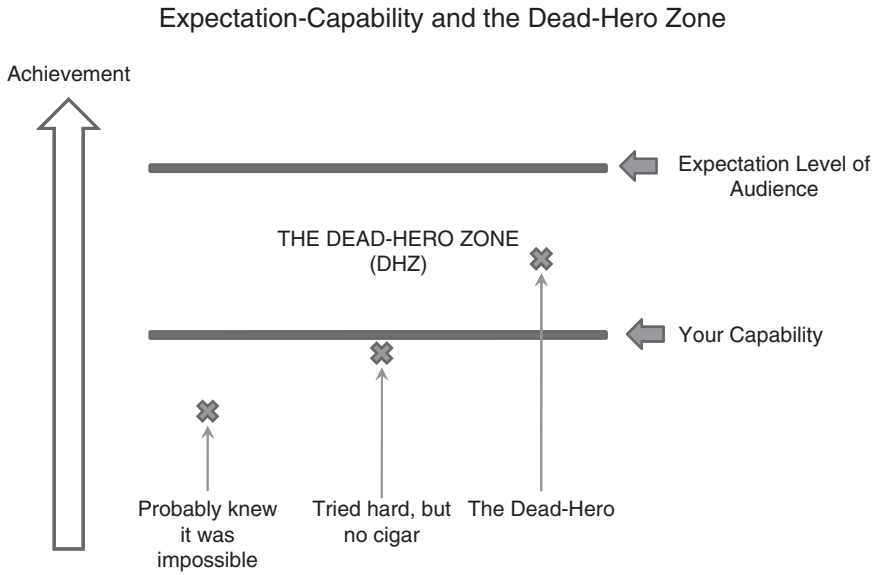


Figure 1.9 Heroic Failure and How to Accomplish it

you bust a gut you will still fail. The only outcome that you can expect is to end the day as a dead-hero with a busted gut. Sadly, many IT organisations fall foul of this scenario and their world is littered with the corpses of innocent but very dead-heroes. Each did their very best work only to find that their reward was a bullet with their name on it and some unpleasant intestinal rupturing.

Magicians, Circuses, and Keeping Something in the Tank

However, it does not follow that every interaction where you attempt to service the ever-increasing demands of your adoring public needs to end up a full blown dead-hero experience. There are people out there who have been incredibly successful at delighting their audiences for centuries. We can learn a lot from them. Take the role of a successful illusionist or a magician for example. As we take our seats, we know that he or she is going to try to perform some tricks that are intended to confound us. Our expectations are set very high. However, the cunning magician, through great skill, coupled with some snazzy sleight of hand and possibly the odd diversionary tactic, will effortlessly lead us up the garden path and delight us with the "magical" outcome. The magician's capability is even higher than our elevated expectations, which is probably why he or she is called a magician. To achieve this feat the magician will have to know a great deal about people, specifically about how we think and react to situations, not to mention the mental assumptions we make when we watch things happening. These attributes are what our HR colleagues would doubtless call "soft skills". He or she will also be prepared to spend hours and hours honing some fine and unusual dextrous prestidigitation which will be outside the experience of a normal audience. The circus profession uses very similar methods to delight their punters. Performers in the Ring carry out acts which most people would think are nearly impossible to achieve. I derived some insight into their methods some years ago, when I enrolled on a circus skills course at a local night school. Surely everyone wants to run away to the circus at some point in their lives, especially if like me, they were a beleaguered project manager struggling to deliver yet another flaky database system?

I learned a great deal from my disturbingly quirky, but nonetheless sympathetic, tutor. After ten weeks of study and probably about twenty hours of practice, I became a passable juggler. I even managed to impress the owner of one Central London juggling shop. Having slipped out of my corporate office one lunch-time to buy some clubs, he looked me up and down and said "Great costume mate! Not seen anyone perform in the Ring in a grey suit and designer specs before. Is that a silk tie?"

Some weeks later I was offered some weekend work as an apprentice juggling clown. I was set to become Alberto Grissini, the younger member of the

[1]Giocolieri mediocri is the Italian for "mediocre jugglers". It sounds a lot better in Italian.

famous Grissini Brothers—the notorious "giocolieri mediocri"[1] of Harlow, Essex. Alas it was not to be. Both my juggling partner and I "bottled out" of this not-so-lucrative opportunity and sadly no further offers were ever forthcoming. Alberto and Enrico Grissini would never tread the boards. The only time the breadsticks[2] would appear again would be when we next visited our local Italian restaurant. Still, the skills we learned stood us in good stead for life ahead. My juggling partner went on to become a highly successful CIO in both the oil and telecoms industries as well as a rather nifty plate-spinner. Even today, when too much red wine is flowing at dinner parties, I can still fling the old clubs around to "delight and impress" my house guests. There are however, different levels to this game of capability acquisition. My attempts to master the unicycle in the night-school gym were not quite so successful. I have the dental bills to prove it.

The simple lesson that I learned at the circus night school was that the whole premise in the industry is to keep your capability level above the expectation levels of the audience, by fair means of skill, the occasional sleight of hand and above all lots and lots of practice. It should be no different in the IT world. Vulgar sleight of hand of course is frowned on in polite corporate society, but there is no reason why we cannot build a rare skill with which we can delight our audiences.

Figure 1.10 shows what happens when the expectation bar is kept below the capability line. A new area is opened up that has none of the unpleasantness

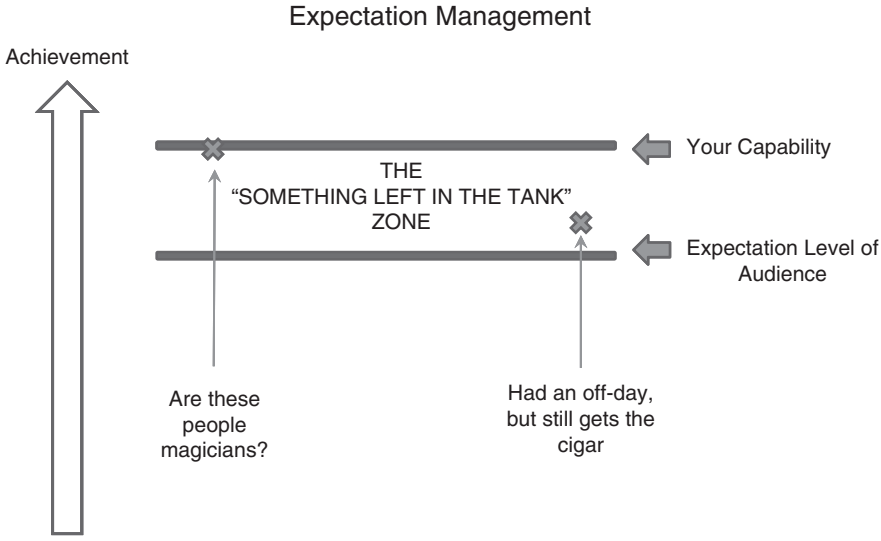


Figure 1.10 Expectation Management—Keeping a Little Bit in the Tank

[2]"Grissini" is the Italian name for "breadstick". These tasty snacks are believed to have originated in Turin.

of the dead-hero zone. It is something that is a lot more positive. It is a contingency zone, or to give it a better name "the something left in the tank" zone.

All this leads to the obvious question as to how you can keep your capability levels above the expectation levels of your much-loved user community and any other stakeholders. The following box gives some clues, but to get the full low-down, we must move on to the succeeding chapters. Here we will examine methods for dealing with trials and challenges which might inhibit your ability to demonstrate high capability. We might also find areas where some potential capability shortfalls can be shored up. I can't promise that you'll be able to spin plates on your chin whilst juggling clubs on a unicycle—you'll need to go to night school for that—but we'll nevertheless do our best to keep you alive in planet corporate.

EXPECTATION MANAGEMENT PRIMER

1. Never promise anything unless you are at least 100% certain you can deliver it.
2. Make sure that you've left something "in the tank" so that your promise can still be delivered even if you run into difficulties.
3. If you can't promise the earth, then promise a few pieces of dirt. Break the task up into smaller pieces until you are certain that you can deliver on one or more of the bits.