

Déjà Vu All Over Again



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Walt Mossberg's recent comments about the "regressive and poisonous" IT departments at large organizations had the familiar, bucolic-interruptus feel that Nicholas Carr's writing produced back in 2003. I felt once again as if the clock radio had snapped to 6:00 a.m. and "I've Got You Babe" was waking me to yet another day in which my very existence would be questioned. These days, about all I think I can really count on is that—regardless of what is said here in this collection of op-eds—sometime (hopefully not until 2011), some pundit will again question our existence. I believe that's as sure a thing as Richard Katz being jovial the next time I see him.

So I don't want to talk about why we exist, nor do I want to debate any point made by whichever Whatshisname has most recently questioned our existence. I want to talk about why it is we would even care and, more important, what we would have to do to *not* care about these occasional bits of intellectual jetsam that wash onto our CIO shores. To paraphrase a line from *The Right Stuff*: the issue here isn't about poisonous; the issue here is about relationships. And the first relationship in question is the one between CIOs and campus CEOs.

How important to a CIO is a good relationship with the campus CEO (chancellor, president, provost)? The answer: very important, especially if the CIO wants to be able to view these occasional Scuds from afar as having nothing more than entertainment value. I laud and am grateful to CIOs, EDUCAUSE, and others in our industry who provide eloquent responses and fact-documented counterpoints to the negative positions and opinions. But at the end of the day, how much we CIOs care about a publicly proclaimed negative opinion is likely related directly to what happens when the boss reads or hears about it: does the

CEO shake his or her head, or does he or she instead nod and have a "hmmm . . . that's very interesting" response?

If a CIO is positioned—organizationally—to have quality time with the campus leader, then the CIO will have ample opportunity to, through direct communication, work on building a relationship that is bulletproof. However, those CIOs who don't report to the CEO, who don't sit in the executive cabinets in some fashion, or who don't have a communicative relationship with their CEO are the ones who are more apt to get stung by the slings and arrows of those who seek to deliver outrageous fortunes upon us. I know that as CIOs, we don't control the reporting structure, or the quality of our relationship with the institution's top leader, or whether we even get to see the CEO at all. Still, whenever we can, we should seek to enable that communication, so that when CEOs read these things, they will discuss them with us or, perhaps, simply turn their attention to the next story in the paper.

But perhaps there is a better way, one not so dependent on the relationship the CIO might (or might not) have with the CEO. As a

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CIO, how do you make sure that your campus community understands your decisions with respect to the use of IT? The answer: by communicating with and building a rapport with the members of this community. In fact, the relationship we CIOs have with our campus community—our constituency—is even more critical than the one we have with our campus leaders. In a great many instances CIOs who do not communicate well with others on campus (deans, faculty, students, staff) end up in

trouble, more often than those CIOs who simply fall out of favor with the CEO. I won't deny that there are capricious CEOs—but they are few, and we shouldn't plan our lives around them.

So whereas having a good relationship with your CEO is one way to not care who says what about the profession and about IT on campus, perhaps the best way is to have a good relationship with the campus community and with those who report to the CEO. Because even though you may not report directly to the CEO, many other people most certainly do. And if they see value in the IT environment that you deliver and support, you can bet they'll be telling the CEO that ol' Whatshisname who just took a potshot at IT is—how shall I say this?—full of malarkey.