

CIO BRINGS LEADERSHIP SKILLS to Federal Election Commission's IT Organization

THE CHALLENGE: Managing a Complex IT Environment in the Public Eye

If you were asked to imagine an incredibly complicated IT scenario with unrelenting pressures and innumerable hurdles, you might imagine something very much like the Federal Election Commission.

Congress created the FEC in 1975 to administer and enforce the Federal Election Campaign Act, the statute that governs the financing of federal elections. The FEC is responsible for monitoring and enforcing the myriad issues surrounding campaign financing -- ranging from donations by political action committees to public funding of Presidential elections.

It is no exaggeration to say that the FEC has emerged as a crucial component of American democracy in the information age. It performs a uniquely complex and difficult mission under the unblinking gaze of the public eye.

Information technology management is more than a core competency at the FEC - it's absolutely critical. So when its IT director left in 2003, the FEC took a bold step.

"We looked for an individual with superior supervisory skills and wide-ranging technical abilities," said Jim Pehrkon, Staff Director at the FEC. "We needed someone who understood e-business and transaction-based systems. We also needed someone who would be comfortable dealing with sensitive customer service issues involving politics, privacy and security. Most of all, we needed someone who would understand and embrace the broader aspects of our mission."

THE SOLUTION: A Leadership Model Combining Strategic Vision and People Skills

After an extensive search, the FEC chose Alec Palmer, who had held key IT executive posts at large and small corporations operating in highly competitive, complex markets and industries such as health care, financial services, Internet publishing, pharmaceuticals, aerospace, media, retail, high-tech manufacturing, mining and oil and gas.

One of Palmer's first chores at the FEC was assembling a detailed map of the commission's existing business applications. "After interviewing everyone on the IT staff, I knew that we had a lot of bright people," said Palmer. "But no single person had a 'big picture' view of our IT resources. So I sat down in a room with my direct reports and we didn't leave until we had drawn an accurate map showing all of our business applications, the hardware they ran on and how they communicated with all the other applications. It was a lot of work, but it was worth the effort."

Palmer divided the applications into four broad categories and created Monopoly-type cards for each application. Symbols on the cards made it easy for everyone to find out everything they needed to know at a glance.

He also conducted an IT Environment Evaluation to determine baseline capabilities and to articulate the IT department's vision, mission and priorities. Following the evaluation process, Palmer's team identified the most pressing business issues and developed a list of solutions to address the challenges facing them. These challenges included data integrity, legacy offload, new disclosure requirements, help desk operations, financial systems, e-travel, advanced contextual search capabilities, in-house mail tracking and a new Web site.

Palmer's next big task was hiring an experienced enterprise architect to develop a fully-articulated master plan. "He used the applications map as a springboard for the master plan. The master plan enables us to align our IT processes with the overall goals of the organization. It also helps us identify technology that will serve our needs in the future and helps us avoid technology investments that aren't really necessary."

THE RESULTS: Higher Morale, Improved Performance and Greater Capability

With the master plan in place and a new sense of collaboration established in the IT department, Palmer was able to attract top talent to fill open positions. As word of Palmer's initiatives spread, the FEC became a magnet for talented people with advanced technology skills and a "can do" attitude.



In addition to hiring an enterprise architect, Palmer augmented the IT team by hiring new resources in business systems analysis, database administration, systems development, network engineering, systems administration, training, quality assurance, and a dedicated PC support staff.

Also highlighting its new strategy for serving internal and external customers, the department officially changed its name from Data Systems to the IT Division. "It might not seem like a big deal, but it tracks with our objective to provide world-class service," says Palmer.

Palmer and his team moved swiftly to meet the stringent requirements of the McCain-Feingold Act, which mandates significantly higher levels of transparency and greater access to information than ever before. Under Palmer's direction, the FEC has developed totally electronic filing and reporting capabilities. It has also placed an extensive library of election law case histories on the Web, complete with indexed, full-text searchable versions of the cases.

"Alec Palmer has really assumed the role of a leader," says Pehrkon. "He helped us restructure the IT organization so people could apply their talents and energies more effectively. He introduced best practices from the business world that made our IT organization more efficient and more capable. It was not an easy task, but he accomplished it magnificently."

Also important, says Pehrkon, is a new spirit of collegiality and cooperation that encourages innovation and problem-solving throughout the IT organization. "Under Alec's leadership, people feel freer to experiment and to try new approaches. This makes it easier to hit our deadlines and accomplish our mission. We're exceptionally pleased with the accomplishments of Alec and his team in the IT organization."

The Conclusion: Organizations Benefit From IT Executive Leadership

Perhaps the greatest professional accolade Palmer received came in the form of a new title: Chief Information Officer. In fact, the title is more than a compliment. It recognizes the expanded role and enhanced responsibilities of today's IT executive. In virtually every type of large organization, the IT executive's position in the corporate structure is rising steadily and inexorably from the tactical/operational level to the strategic/management level.

For Palmer, being a C-level officer translates into increased access to other decision makers across the organization. "As a result, I have a better understanding of the organization's heart and soul. I am more aware of the goals and business objectives of my peers. That sense of understanding and awareness makes it easier for the IT organization to support the mission of the Federal Election Commission."

To a far greater extent than ever before, IT executives are required to master the analytic and forecasting capabilities necessary to plan and successfully manage complex portfolios of IT investments. IT executives are also expected to possess the skills and means for tracking the business impact of technology investments throughout the organization with a far greater degree of precision than their predecessors.

Indeed, the CIO of a large organization today is expected to enhance the value of information at multiple points along the value chain. An IT executive's responsibilities extend far beyond the traditional boundaries of IT department. IT executives are required to exercise leadership across the width and breadth of the enterprise.

As Palmer's case clearly illustrates, IT executives are now responsible for developing, articulating and selling an enterprise-wide vision of technology at every level of the organization, from the boardroom to the mailroom. At many organizations, the CIO is increasingly responsible for communicating a clear technology vision that extends the supply chain to include outside contractors, vendors, distributors, value-added resellers, retailers and end-users.

Because of his nature and his previous business experience, Palmer is comfortable handling the expanded and elevated responsibilities of his role at the Federal Election Commission. Palmer represents a new generation of IT executives with the technical skills and personality traits required for success at the C-level in large organizations.

It's a safe bet that organizations willing to make the investment in executives such as Palmer will derive a host of lasting and significant benefits, including measurable improvements in IT operations, corporate governance and compliance, business intelligence, knowledge management, vendor management, customer service, and eBusiness.



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