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The Art of Speaking with the C–Team

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If you want to make your enterprise architecture vision a reality, communicating effectively with top–level executives is key.

By Karen D. Schwartz

Brian Turner spent his entire career working to become an enterprise architect. In 2003, he reached his goal at a global technology company. For the most part, he loved the work. Yet, a few years later. when the opportunity arose to become a Senior Systems Engineer at General Dynamics, he took it and currently holds that job today.

Why leave a rewarding profession and work that he still misses? It largely came down to the struggles of trying to get top business executives to understand the need for an enterprise architecture mandate. "We would define processes, and then management would reject them, saying that's not what they meant," Turner says. "A lot of people believe anything associated with enterprise architecture is [only] a technical solution, but they are wrong, and it's sometimes difficult to convey that."

As most enterprise architects have discovered, their job is as much about crafting models that align business processes with technology and information infrastructures as it is about communicating with top executives. In that respect, their situation is not unlike the one many CIOs face — finding common ground with their business peers, which usually translates into talking less about technology itself and more about the business value of IT architecture.

For enterprise architects, however, common ground has to be reached with both the business and IT side to get the buy–in that ensures their hard work will translate into action by the enterprise. You can't guide the build–out of technology infrastructures "until you fully understand what's needed and can communicate that vision effectively to your customers-- and that's what a good enterprise architect should do," says Mark Griffith, Principal Architect with multinational IT consulting firm CSC, and former Director of Enterprise Architecture for BlueCross/Blue Shield of North Carolina.

At the gas and electric utility, NiSource, the main reason the enterprise architecture team has gotten as far as it has executing on a technology road map is because ideas are backed up with results and genuine concern for customer service, says Sergey Chernov, Manager of Enterprise Architecture at the Merrillville, Ind. company. "Our goal is to demonstrate IT adaptability to help our enterprise capitalize on opportunities and solidly fend off challenges," he says.

Communication Begins with the Letter--and Level-- C

So, in addition to expertise in technology and business process engineering, business and political astuteness, resourcefulness and patience are necessary qualifications if you hope to achieve goals with internal customers. It takes all of those attributes — plus great listening, interpretation and communication skills — for enterprise architects to land on common ground with each constituency.

Of course, each C– or VP–level customer that an enterprise architect communicates with has his or her own goals, culture and language, adding to the business communications challenge. "You have to understand what their motivators are and tailor your discussion to those motivators," says Ruth Burgess, a Senior Manager at business advisory, consulting, engineering and integration services firm, MorganFranklin. She has spent 14 years working with companies on communications issues. "Tie their goals and what drives them to what you are presenting. If you don't, they will dismiss you."

What are those goals and how are they expressesd? And more importantly, how should you craft your enterprise architecture communications strategy to address them? Following are some tips for negotiating communications:

The CIO

It might seem as if it would be easiest for enterprise architects to have clear communications with the CIO. After all, the role often reports within the IT organization. But that's no guarantee of a frictionless relationship, as it turns out. Even CIOs who have put enterprise architecture teams in place and clearly value long–term strategic vision,must focus on the business's shorter–term issues. That's a difficult balance: The CIO is struggling with the competing agendas of managing the grand plan to optimize IT for the enterprise and delivering on a series of tactical business goals.

It's smooth sailing when discussions between these parties focus on the CIO's big–picture agenda and the enterprise architect's daily mission of building today with an eye on tomorrow and the organization's future state. Chernov, for example, has seen success in such instances, working with the CIO to drive a new Personal Computing Experience initiative to move the business to new technology platforms.

But when the CIO is under pressure to meet a demand by the business for a quick win that might require, say, integrating a new and out-of-spec application into the environment, there can be

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communication disconnects between the CIO and the enterprise architect team, says Jeff Scott, a Principal Analyst at Forrester Research.

"Enterprise architects need to be more innovative in the way they approach architecture by first clarifying the goals of the CIO and then finding a way to deal with both the CIO's tactical requests and the longer–term future state of the organization," he says. They need to keep on track with their strategic enterprise architecture goals while providing project–friendly, short–term solutions, "and present them to the CIO in a way that actually saves IT money or time today or somehow meets other, short–term goals."

Easy? Not necessarily. It helps if one of your own tactical efforts as an enterprise architect is to build some flexibility into the operating model from the get–go. And some compromise — the effects of which may well result in more incremental than revolutionary improvements in architecture — may at times be a part of the course of action to foster the enterprise architect–CIO relationship and together build trust with the business.

EA – CIO

Common ground:		Communications can benefit from:		
Long–term strategic vision to optimize IT for enterprise mission		Both parties' investment in building with the organization's future state in mind		

Diverging path:		Communications potentially disrupted by:		Steps to facilitation:
CIO needs to accommodate short–term business requirement		Pressure to meet quick–win demands potentially with out–of–spec solution		EA looks for project–friendly alternatives; builds flexibility into operating model; supports compromise as necessary.

The CEO

Few enterprise architects actually report to the CEO (though a few experts have argued that they should). So, as a practical matter, a strong relationship with the CIO may well be a prerequisite to an enterprise architect even having CEO access. When the enterprise architecture function encompasses not just the technical but the business architecture, the enterprise architect is more likely to enjoy opportunities for such interaction.

However, an enterprise architect works his or her way onto the CEO's agenda, it's important to make the most of that face time. That means understanding the issues CEOs are focused on, such as how economic, legislative and regulatory changes will affect the business. So, enterprise architectsshould clarify how architecture and business processes can deal support corporate goals. For instance, if the CEO demands growth even as the tough economy means holding a line on internal spending, make the connection between how the reuse of foundational EA frameworks is making it possible for IT to put more of its budget on growth initiatives vs. maintenance.

"You haven't gotten the CEO's attention until you explain the impact to the CEO in his terms — lack of consistency, customer attrition, errors that occur because of inconsistencies in reports, failure to meet auditing requirements — says Michael Rosen, Director of the Enterprise Architecture Practice at IT advisory firm Cutter Consortium. "That's language the CEO will understand."

Using metrics to put the conversation into a tangible context is a good idea. "Understand what measurements the executive uses and collect some of your own data that relates to what they are concerned with," Rosen advises. "Without metrics, you're just a guy with an opinion."

EA – CEO

Common ground:		Communications can benefit from:		
Realization of overall corporate goals and initiatives		Drawing on idea that well–governed business processes deliver to those ends		

Diverging path:		Communications potentially disrupted by:		Steps to facilitation:
CEO thinks in terms of economic, legislative and regulatory impact on business		Inability to translate impact of corporate workflows in these specific contexts		EA maps discussion to lack of consistency, customer attrition, errors that occur because of inconsistencies in reports, failure to meet auditing requirements

The CFO

As with the enterprise architect–CEO relationship, regular interaction between the enterprise architect and the CFO isn't often a naturally occurring phenomenon. Being situated in a business discipline such as strategic planning helps. But even if the architect's role isn't located there, they should try to find a way onto the CFO's schedule, considering how this function can align with the accomplishments the CEO and board expect from finance in order to execute to the corporate agenda.

"The CFO role is to allocate assets to accomplish the goals, so therefore, the focus of EA conversations with this C–level executive should be 100–percent business case focused and project–sequence oriented to maximize value of spent capital," advises Douglas Rousso, SVP and CTO for Global Information Services at CA Technologies.

Take the basic example of technology standardization, which is about standardizing on a smaller number of technologies and reducing complexity in the infrastructure. "The question is how you

present it to the CFO in a way that is aligned with business priorities—in this case, cost reduction," says Keith Binder, a Senior Practice Director at Troux, which makes software to help companies with enterprise architecture and business technology management issues. That could include picking metrics like reducing the number of vendor contracts you have or reducing spending on ongoing technology maintenance. "It's a question of using the most relevant metrics to build your business case," he continues. So, if it's cost reduction, talk shouldn't focus on modernizing the technology infrastructure, "but about how you are going to drive down the number of vendors the company deals with and reduce the amount of money spent year over year on maintaining software and hardware."

Those are the kinds of metrics CFOs like to hear. For example, The Cutter Consortium's Rosen relates how one of his company's clients culled its database of about 5,000 projects to analyze how many bad projects had been canceled as a result of architectural review. By the end of the process, they had come up with $300 million worth of cost avoidance over five years.

EA – CFO

Common ground:		Communications can benefit from:	
Supporting CEO/board cost-savings agenda	🚦	Maximizing spent capital on asset allocations to realize goals	

Diverging path:		Communications potentially disrupted by:		Steps to facilitation:
CFO requires metrics that match business priorities around cost-cutting	🚦	No alignment drawn between technology standardization and complexity reduction that drives down costs	🚦	EA draws attention to metrics like reducing the number of vendor contracts or spend on ongoing technology maintenance, as well as to architectural reviews that eliminate duplicative/ wasteful efforts

Change Your Approach

Sometimes, despite your best efforts, your C-level communications strategy stalls. That's when it might be time to color outside the lines.
"If you're working with a C-level executive to come up with a common vision and can't seem to communicate, take it down a few levels," Griffith says.

First-hand experience has shown Griffith that it sometimes pays to take lunch with individuals a level or two down in the executive reporting structure. Such relationship-building can help open doors that otherwise appear closed to more obvious pitch sessions. Those informal talks with workers in the trenches can give you some insight and knowledge into the business requirements that may lead you to rethink your approach with corporate leaders — which may foster eventual success, he says.

Will embracing these ideas mean that every encounter with the C-team will be a success? Of course not. But some say that the opportunity to have more effective communications with these high-level execs is more promising than ever.

Brian Turner is even considering re-entering the enterprise architecture field, noting that more C-level executives now understand the need for enterprise architecture and are more willing to work together to achieve a common vision. "In the past, teams within the same organizations were allowed to venture toward their own goals, independent of the other teams," Turner says. But in 2011, with a lot of scrutiny being placed on how company funds are used, executives and project managers are more willing to work on the same page en route to maximizing every dime they spend, he believes.

"When executives use an enterprise architecture as the cohesive [factor] between strategy and execution," Turner says, "the stakeholders can rest assured about the chosen allocation of funds."

Karen D. Schwartz is a Potomac, Maryland-based technology and business writer.

ASK THE EXPERTS

Keith Binder, Senior Practice Director, Troux
Keith is responsible for management consulting efforts in the Eastern US. He specializes in business technology management practices including enterprise architecture, IT strategic planning, IT simplification and application portfolio management. Keith works with Fortune 1000 companies across diverse sectors. He is a TOGAF certified architect with over 10 years of experience. Prior to joining Troux, Keith lead federal EA consulting efforts for Telelogic AB (now part of IBM) within civilian and defense agencies.

Ruth Burgess, Program Manager/Subject Matter Expert for IT Strategic Planning projects, MorganFranklin.
Ruth possesses more than 15 years of experience specializing in systems engineering and integration, with specific experience leading teams developing comprehensive and practical architectures for several critical and highly complex government enterprises.

Sergey Chernov, Manager, Enterprise Architecture at NiSource
In his current role, Sergey is part of a company transformation team at NiSource. Previously, he was Assistant Director of IT Strategic Planning at Northeastern Illinois University in Chicago, where he led strategic planning, architecture and project management for a central IT group. Prior to joining NEIU, he led several large-scale internal IT projects for Deloitte Touche Tohmatsu. Sergey started his career at Emerson Electric where he was responsible for project management and implementation of B-2-B e-commerce systems. Sergey is a certified project manager (PMP) and has earned a Masters of Science in Information Systems Management degree from Loyola University, Chicago, and an undergradualte degree from Indiana University.

Mark Griffith, Technology Architect, Computer Sciences Corp.

Mark has spent his career in enterprise architecture and is currently a technology architect at Computer Sciences Corp. He spent the previous five years as Diretor of Enterprise Architecture at BlueCross and Blue Shield of North Carolina. Mark also worked as an enterprise architect for the State of North Carolina for 12 years. He is active among his peers, writing articles and giving speeches at conferences around the U.S.

Douglas Rousso

Doug is Senior VP, global information services, at CA Technologies.He has comprehensive experience in strategy, architecture, engineering, application development and operations. Doug is formally trained in Six Sigma methodologies and is a Black Belt sigma leader. He is a member of *Smart Enterprise Exchange* and can be reached on the site.

Jeff Scott

Jeff is a senior analyst at Forrester Research, primarily contributing to the Enterprise Architecture program where he advises on program development, EA governance, and delivering EA value.

Brian Turner, Systems Engineer, General Dynamics

Brian is located in the company's Herndon, VA. office. He has performed a variety of system enginering duties including enterprise architecture, requirements management, documentation production, and testing. Brian holds a degree in Management Information Systems and a master's degree in Engineering Management, with a concentration in Enterprise Architecture. He is a certified Enterprise Architect (FEAC Institute), a certified Enterprise Seucrity Architect (Foundation Level–ALC Training) and a certified ScrumMaster (ScrumAlliance).

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