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# How CIOs Can Effectively Use Influence Behaviors

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## Executive Summary

*To accomplish their objectives, Chief Information Officers (CIOs) must rely on their abilities to influence members of top management. Effective use of influence behaviors can make the difference between successful and less successful CIOs. But aspiring senior managers are rarely formally taught how to influence others. They learn informally on the job.*

*This article explores influence behaviors and their appropriate use by CIOs. It first describes 11 common influence behaviors—rational persuasion (logical arguments), apprising (emphasizing expected benefits), inspirational appeal, consultation, collaboration, personal appeal, ingratiation, exchange, legitimating (connected to precedent), coalition (asking others to persuade), and pressure. Then this article discusses which of the 11 are most effective in four scenarios that CIOs face: when the CIO is viewed either as a true peer of top management or as a supportive subordinate, and when the CIO is presenting either a high-stakes strategic initiative or a lower-stakes incremental one.<sup>2,3</sup>*

## CIOs AND INFLUENCE

The potential for Chief Information Officers (CIOs) to play a critical role in the strategy and change processes of their organizations is greater today than ever before.<sup>4</sup> Among other things, CIOs are often responsible for initiating and implementing information system initiatives that are vital to the success, if not survival, of their firms. To do so, they frequently must influence others to gain their support for these initiatives. CIOs spend much of their time working to convince other top managers to commit to strategic system projects, share in an information systems (IS) vision, or allocate resources to particular IS projects.

It is therefore important to understand why and how CIOs succeed or fail in influencing their peers to partner with them and share ownership of these initiatives.<sup>5,6</sup> For instance, what influence processes do CIOs typically use? Are certain CIO influence behaviors more successful than others? Does rising through technical ranks

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3 This article draws from and updates four previous works of the authors: (1) Enns, H. G., Huff, S.L. and Higgins, C.A. "CIO Lateral Influence Behaviors: Gaining Peers' Commitment to Strategic Information Systems," *MIS Quarterly* (27:1), March 2003, pp. 155-176; (2) Enns, H.G., Huff, S.L., and Golden, B.R. "CIO Influence Behaviors: The Impact of Technical Background," *Information & Management* (40:5), May 2003, pp. 467-485; (3) Enns, H.G., and McFarlin, D.B. "When Executives Influence Peers: Does Function Matter?," *Human Resource Management* (42:2), Summer 2003, pp. 125-142; and (4) Enns, H.G., and McFarlin, D.B. "When Executives Successfully Influence Peers: The Role of Target Assessment, Preparation, and Tactics," *Human Resource Management* (44:3), Fall 2005, pp. 257-278.

4 Broadbent, M., and Kitzis, E.S. *The New CIO Leader: Setting the Agenda and Delivering Results*, Harvard Business School Press, 2005.

5 McDougall, P., and McGee, M.K. "How to Survive as a CIO," *InformationWeek*, November 1, 1999, pp. 42-56.

6 The practical importance of influence behaviors for senior IS managers is reflected in the curriculum of the Society for Information Management (SIM) Regional Leadership Forums—see <http://www.simnet.org/>.

lead CIOs to rely on specific influence behaviors? To address these questions, we reference our own and others' research.

## INFLUENCE: WHAT IT IS AND HOW IT IS USED

Executives who rely mainly on formal authority to accomplish change are unlikely to be effective for long. In today's flatter and more dynamic organizations, the key to accomplishments is crafting cross-functional, peer-based relationships. In fact, many companies have transferred critical decisions from single executives to groups of executives, making those executives even more dependent on peer influence. But as larger, more diverse top management teams grapple with difficult decisions, the result is often on-going conflict. Heterogeneity in a top management team (e.g., in terms of backgrounds, functional specialties, etc.) can promote creativity, but the executives may also have more difficulty understanding their colleagues' perspectives. And that means more frequent disagreements about the viability of new initiatives. Recognizing these challenges, many executives spend a great deal of time and effort attempting to convince their peers to support new initiatives.<sup>7</sup> Yet these attempts often produce resistance.<sup>8</sup> So a relevant question is, "How can we better understand executive peer influence behavior?"

We begin by distinguishing authority from influence. *Authority* has been called the legitimate exercise of decision making that affects the behavior of individuals. In a pure authority setting, subordinates agree to the decisions of a superior, without question, and they willingly set aside judgments about the appropriateness of a superior's request. Authority most commonly occurs within a hierarchy.

Yet, within any hierarchy, managers rely on advice or information from others. *Influence* is providing this advice or information. People exert influence by offering information, advising, persuading, arguing, and so on. Furthermore, unlike authority, which always flows downwards, influence is multidirectional. Managers possess authority over subordinates, but must rely on influence with superiors or peers. In effect, influence permits everyone at any level of an

organization to make their views and advice known to others. To affect the thinking of their peers ("C-level" executives), CIOs therefore must rely primarily on influence rather than authority.

### Eleven Influence Behaviors

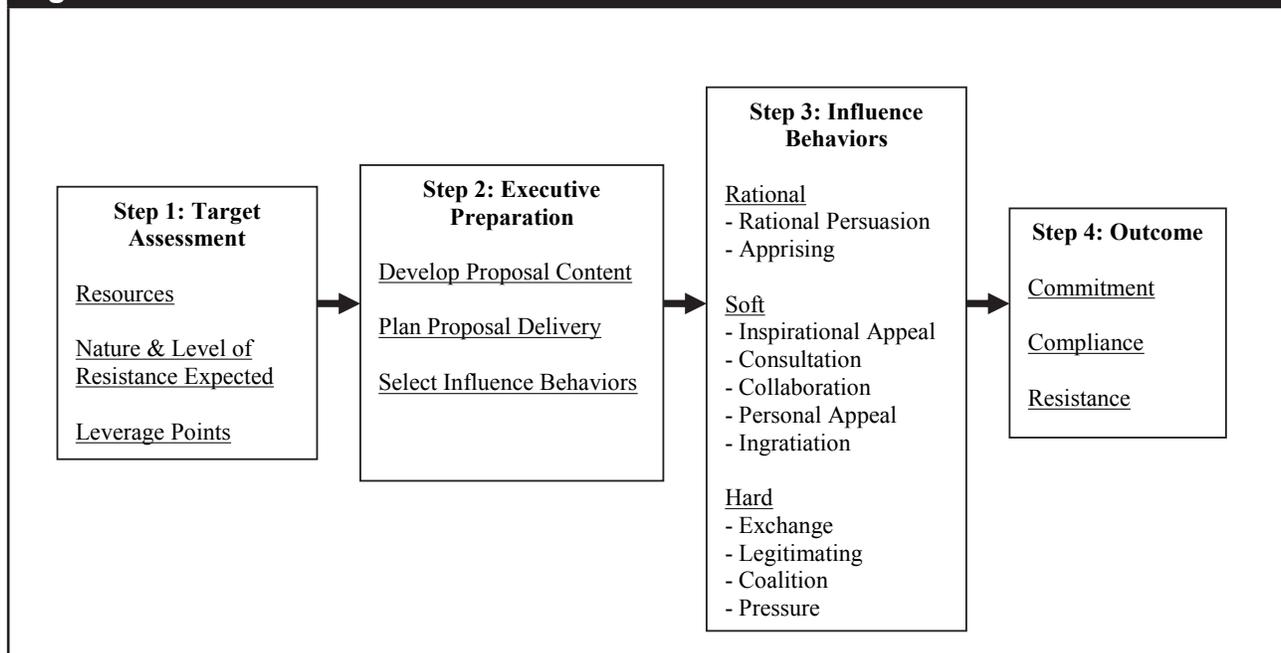
People exercise influence by using influence behaviors. Eleven influence behaviors are commonly cited and are part of an influence process.<sup>9</sup> These 11 are described here in the context of a CIO trying to influence a peer to support the CIO's proposal.

1. **Rational persuasion** is when a CIO uses logical arguments and factual evidence to persuade a peer that a proposal is viable and likely to yield significant benefits.
2. **Apprising** is when the CIO explains how the peer will benefit personally, such as advancing his or her career by supporting the proposal.
3. **Inspirational appeal** involves couching the initiative in emotional terms and linking it to ideological values, ideals, and a vision for the future.
4. **Consultation** occurs when the CIO seeks peer participation in planning a strategy, activity, or change. The CIO is willing to modify the planning to address any concerns or suggestions.
5. **Collaboration** takes place when the CIO offers relevant resources and assistance if the peer will carry out a request or support the CIO's proposal.
6. **Personal appeal** occurs when the CIO leverages the peer's feelings of loyalty and friendship.
7. **Ingratiation** involves using praise, flattery, friendliness, or helpful behavior to get the peer in a good mood or to be receptive when asked for something.
8. **Exchange** happens when the CIO offers to trade favors, indicates a willingness to reciprocate at

7 Conger, J.A. "The Necessary Art of Persuasion," *Harvard Business Review* (76:3), 1998 (May/June), pp. 84-95; and Zaccaro, S.J. *The Nature of Executive Leadership: A Conceptual and Empirical Analysis of Success*, American Psychological Association, Washington, DC, 2001.

8 Williams, G. A., and Miller, R. B. "Change the Way You Persuade," *Harvard Business Review* (80:5), 2002, pp. 64-73.

9 The original work was done by Kipnis, D., Schmidt, S.M., and Wilkinson, I. "Intraorganizational Influence Tactics: Explorations in Getting One's Way," *Journal of Applied Psychology* (65:4), 1980, pp. 440-452. Gary Yukl expanded on this work, see: Yukl, G. *Leadership in Organizations* (5<sup>th</sup> ed.), Prentice-Hall, 2002, and Yukl, G., Chavez, D., and Seifert, C.F. "Assessing the Construct Validity and Utility of Two New Influence Tactics," *Journal of Organizational Behavior* (26:6), September 2005, pp. 705-725.

**Figure 1: Executive Influence Process and Possible Outcomes**

a later time, or promises a share of the benefits if the peer supports the proposal.

9. **Legitimizing** involves attempting to establish the legitimacy of the new initiative by connecting it to precedent, firm policies, or role expectations.
10. **Coalition** occurs when the CIO seeks the aid of others to persuade a peer to support the proposal, or the CIO uses the support of others as a reason for the peer to also agree.
11. **Pressure** involves the CIO using demands, threats, frequent checking, or persistent reminders to influence the peer to support the proposal.

### The Influence Process

Figure 1<sup>10</sup> presents a simplified model of the influence process. In this figure, an “agent” aims to gain something from a “target.” The influence behaviors are shown in Step 3. Those behaviors that are used lead to an outcome—in this case, the target’s response to the agent’s influence attempt.

Again using the CIO example, in Step 1, the CIO assesses (“sizes up”) potential targets for an influence attempt. In Step 2, the CIO prepares for the influence

attempt, which includes developing content (e.g., arguments) and selecting the appropriate influence behaviors. In Step 3, the CIO uses the chosen influence behavior(s). Step 4 is the outcome. The result may be target commitment (the target is enthusiastic and committed to the initiative), or compliance (the target is willing to go along with the initiative, but not enthusiastically), or resistance (the target opposes the initiative and is willing to take steps against it).

CIOs should be flexible in selecting an influence behavior because targets react differently depending on their needs, motives, preferences, perspectives, view of the CIO, and the nature of the initiative. Selecting the “right” influence behavior requires carefully assessing the target. For instance, the CIO may leverage a prior relationship by being friendly or ingratiating. Or, if the CIO knows the peer covets a potential promotion, then apprising might make sense—that is, explaining how the new initiative might lead to that outcome. In short, CIOs need to diagnose likely leverage points.

Lateral influence among executives can expose competing values. CIOs must identify these values and select influence tactics to blunt potential objections. Targeted peers may resist a CIO’s new initiatives if they see value to themselves or their organizational domain in the current systems or ways of working. For example, a peer might lose headcount from a new customer service system. In such cases, the CIO may have to convince peers to put aside such personal or unit concerns for “the greater good” of the firm.

10 Based on our 2005 work as well as research by Yukl, G. *Leadership in Organizations* (3<sup>rd</sup> ed.), Prentice-Hall, 1994 and Yukl, Chavez, and Seifert, op. cit., 2005.

## INFLUENCE BEHAVIORS AND THE CIO

Informal give-and-take among senior managers often determines which initiatives are implemented. As part of their strategic role, CIOs therefore need to provide thought leadership on the potential for information systems (IS) to support and enhance the strategy of the firm. One approach is to convince other managers to allocate attention and resources to strategic systems projects.<sup>11,12</sup> Indeed, it has been argued that CIOs have an inherent *responsibility* to do so.<sup>13</sup>

In years past, when senior IS executives were not part of top management, they had varying degrees of success using *upward* influence to convince the top executive team to view strategic initiatives favorably.<sup>14</sup> More recently, as CIOs have become part of top management, they have relied more on *lateral* influence. Yet, these attempts often fail.<sup>15</sup> In fact, CIOs may be less effective than other “C-level” executives in exerting peer-level influence,<sup>16</sup> perhaps because their peers still view CIOs as “the new kid on the block.” Or CIOs may not be viewed as equal members of top management, similar to human resources executives. Instead, they are seen as “merely” representing a support function rather than a core business activity.<sup>17</sup>

The reality is that CIOs are often less powerful than other members of the top management team (such as the Chief Financial Officer), creating another obstacle to their effective use of influence behaviors. On the other hand, some CIOs *do* effectively influence others.

## Effective CIO Influence Behaviors

What constitutes “effective” CIO influence behavior? Our recent research sheds some light on this question. In our 2003 work, CIOs and their executive peers were interviewed about CIO influence behavior. The executive peers were asked to remember the CIO’s recent attempt to influence others about a strategic IS initiative. We uncovered differences between effective and ineffective CIO influencers.

Not surprisingly, effective CIOs fostered good relationships. We found that gaining approval of strategic systems projects had much to do with trust and networks of relationships (“who knows whom”). A CIO with a good track record with IS projects and an established relationship of trust with a peer was more likely to receive a positive response from that peer. One of the executives in the study remarked, “... a lot of people do not understand much about technology; it costs a lot of money, and they want someone they can trust.”

Effective CIOs also “pre-sell” their ideas by informally discussing the ideas with individual members of the top management team. Once the CIOs gain support from the affected executives, they seek formal approval at a team meeting. However, when a key stakeholder opposes a proposal during the informal discussions, effective CIOs do not proceed. As one CIO indicated, “... if a critical stakeholder doesn’t agree with the proposal after we have talked it out, then the proposal is dead.”

Overall, our findings show that CIOs vary widely in their influence abilities, and that some influence behaviors are more effective than others. The most effective CIOs tailor their influence behaviors to individual executives on the top management team. In contrast, some CIOs use rational persuasion exclusively—even in the face of resistance. As one executive noted, “Our CIO could learn to be more sensitive in this area. He believes that the logic of his arguments should carry the day. But this is not always the case.”

## CIOs and Upward Influence

CIOs still need to effectively influence superiors—in particular, the Chief Executive Officer and the Board of Directors. A number of upward influence behaviors are available. A recent study<sup>18</sup> reported on CIOs who used upward influence. Rational persuasion,

11 Smith, H.A. “The Art of the IT Sell,” *CIO Canada* (6:9), September 1998, pp. 29-38.

12 By “strategic systems projects” we mean IS projects critical to the firm achieving its strategic goals.

13 Fiegenger, M.K., and Coakley, J.R. “CIO Problems and Practices: ‘Impression Management,’” *Journal of Systems Management* 46:6, November/December 1995, pp. 56-61. Fiegenger and Coakley state that “A CIO’s hesitance to exert influence may increase the risks that the agenda of IS will be shaped by other, less knowledgeable sources.” (p. 58).

14 Applegate, L.M., and Elam, J.J. “New Information Systems Leaders: A Changing Role in a Changing World,” *MIS Quarterly* (16:4), December 1992, pp. 469-490.

15 Williams and Miller, op. cit., 2002.

16 Earl, M.J., and Feeny, D.F. “Is Your CIO Adding Value,” *Sloan Management Review* (35), 1994, pp. 11-20. Earl and Feeny pointed out that CIOs often mistakenly attempt to use ‘hard’ tactics, such as edicts, which do not work as well as ‘softer’ tactics, like persuasion and participation.

17 Kaarst-Brown, M.L. “Understanding an Organization’s View of the CIO: The Role of Assumptions about IT,” *MIS Quarterly Executive* (4:2), June 2005, pp. 287-301.

18 Holmes, H. “The Art of Influence,” *CIO* (20:3), November 1, 2006, 48-58.

legitimizing, inspirational appeal, and coalition behaviors worked for these CIOs. For instance, John Glaser, CIO of Partners HealthCare System, was cited as convincing his CEO to invest in service-oriented architecture (SOA) from a well-thought-out presentation that equated the SOA investment to patient safety, at an affordable cost.

CEOs successfully use ingratiation and rational persuasion to influence their board of directors.<sup>19</sup> CIOs should consider doing the same with their CEO. In areas such as IS, where the CIO has more expertise than the CEO, rational persuasion can be a powerful influencer, especially if the CIO uses the appropriate business language and is not condescending. Rational persuasion has been used to identify new uses of information technology, create a positive view of IS,<sup>20</sup> and convince top executives of the need for greater central IT coordination.<sup>21</sup>

Finally, CIOs have used coalition and consultation to convince executives of the potential strategic impact of IS, to gain acceptance of other executives, and to create a positive impression of the IS department.

### CIOs and Lateral Influence

As mentioned earlier, effective influence with peers in lateral relationships can be the key to getting things done on top management teams. Our 2003 research looked at the components of successful CIO lateral influence. We found that CIOs' use of rational persuasion and personal appeal with peers correlated to these peers' commitment and support for new, strategic initiatives. The correlation between a CIO's personal appeal and a peer's commitment is consistent with the importance of establishing good relationships and trust with peers when soliciting support for new initiatives. On the other hand, we found that when CIOs used pressure, peer resistance occurred. That is not surprising. But in contrast to some other studies, we found that when CIOs used exchange, peer resistance also occurred.

A recent study<sup>22</sup> reported on a number of CIO attempts at lateral influence. In these situations, rational persuasion and apprising proved most effective. For example, Scott Heintzeman, the CIO of Carlson

Marketing, was cited as convincing a colleague to head a new business unit by informing her that she could use the technology that was being developed for the new business unit for the clients currently under her control. In other research, CIOs used bargaining with IS resources (i.e., exchange) and consultation to overcome resistance.

Experts have long recommended that CIOs only use consultation and exchange in certain situations (largely as backup choices to other options). But more research is needed to clarify the relationship between CIOs' actual use of these influence behaviors and the reaction of targets. On the one hand, IS management literature in the 1990s clearly indicated the general importance of consultation (e.g., in the form of "user involvement").<sup>23</sup> Moreover, research shows that effective CIO influence behaviors may include personal consultation with the targets of influence. Our 2005 work involving executives from a variety of functional areas found that consultation is one of their most effective influence behaviors. Yet, we still do not understand exactly what "consultation" means in various environments, much less how to distinguish between effective and ineffective forms.

The picture regarding the use of exchange is also mixed. Some research suggests that the use of exchange between CIOs and their senior management peers is unlikely to work. Yet, exchange can be used to secure business executives' funding of IT infrastructure.<sup>24</sup> In short, exchange may work in some situations (e.g., IT infrastructure funding) but not in others (e.g., strategic systems initiatives).

Likewise, while collaboration has been included in other studies of middle management influence, its effectiveness with CIOs is unknown. That said, some findings may generalize to CIOs. For instance, our 2005 study examined whether target characteristics affected the influence behavior used, particularly in executive peer-to-peer contexts. We found that when an executive felt an initiative would have an adverse impact on a targeted peer, or when the executive and targeted peers had different perspectives, the executive was less likely to engage in collaboration. These and other intriguing findings may well apply to CIOs.

19 Westphal, J.D. "Board Games: How CEOs Adapt to Increases in Structural Board Independence from Management," *Administrative Sciences Quarterly* (43:3), 1998.

20 Fiegenger and Coakley, op. cit., 1995.

21 Ross, J.W., and Feeny, D.F. "The Evolving Role of the CIO," in *Framing the Domains of IT Management: Projecting the Future Through the Past*, Pinnaflex Educational Resources Inc., Cincinnati, OH, 2000, pp. 385-402.

22 Holmes, op. cit., 2006.

23 Reich, B.H., and Benbasat, I. "Measuring the Linkage between Business and Information Technology Objectives," *MIS Quarterly* (20:1), March 1996. Earl and Feeny, 1994, have argued that effective CIOs exhibit consultative behavior to communicate key IT issues to others. Falbe and Yukl, 1992, and Yukl and Tracey, 1992, suggest that consultation leads to commitment.

24 Ross, J.W., and Beath, C.M. "Beyond the Business Case: New Approaches to IT Investment," *Sloan Management Review* (43:2), 2002.

## **Is a CIO's Technical Background a Help or a Hindrance?**

CIOs are likely to have risen to senior management within IT. This technical background may underlie their choice of influence tactics. Some research has suggested that a highly technical background hinders CIOs' ability to effectively influence their business colleagues.<sup>25</sup> This belief is consistent with the common perception that "computer people" are socially and interpersonally inept. However, our research suggests otherwise. Our 2003 work found no relationship between CIOs' technical background and their patterns of influence behaviors. They were consistent in their use of influence behaviors regardless of their technical backgrounds.

One simple explanation for our finding is that CIOs must become effective influencers to reach their position. As one CIO put it, "Top executives do not rise to the top without having an ability to influence others." CIOs who may be poor influencers early in their careers develop their interpersonal skills and influence behaviors as they rise. They may have a longer road to travel to become skilled influencers, but travel it they do. Developing these skills is commonly believed to be a requirement for CIOs to advance.

## **APPROPRIATE CIO INFLUENCE BEHAVIORS IN FOUR SCENARIOS**

To distill the results of our research on CIO influence behaviors into practical uses, we look at two broad types of initiatives that CIOs propose (strategic and incremental), and two "types" of CIOs ("true peer" of executive colleagues and "supportive subordinate" of executive colleagues). The result is four scenarios, summarized in Figure 2. These four represent common scenarios for CIOs seeking support for new initiatives.<sup>26</sup>

### **Scenario 1: "Strategic" Initiative When the CIO is a "True Peer"**

When a CIO wants to advance a strategic initiative, the stakes for top management and the enterprise are, of course, high. When seen as a true peer by the top management team, the CIO is in a unique position to shape the future of the company—if the influence process is used effectively.

25 Mitchell, M. "The Sixth Man," *CIO* (13:15), 2000; Willcocks, L.P., and Sykes, R. "The Role of the CIO and IT Function in ERP," *Communications of the ACM* (43:4), 2000, pp. 32-38.

26 Broadbent and Kitzis, op. cit., 2005.

**Step 1—Recommendations for Target Assessment.** The CIO's goal should be to accurately predict how peers will react to the initiative as well as uncover sources of leverage, to present the initiative in an acceptable manner and overcome possible objections. In this scenario, a CIO should base target selection primarily on a target's *value* in supporting the initiative. Being viewed as a peer should provide a major leverage point, one that will help project a positive reputation and create credibility for the CIO's ideas. In this scenario, the CIO should leverage his or her peer status to lower resistance and overcome concerns. Thus, the CIO needs to accurately assess all the top management team colleagues and select as targets those with the highest *value* in supporting the initiative.

**Step 2—Recommendations for Preparation.** Given the high stakes of the initiative, the CIO needs to prepare thoroughly—organize key arguments, assemble supporting data, carefully think through the context of the delivery, and plan how to behave when presenting the initiative. The context is important. It includes the venue, the timing, and the mood of the target. The goal is to construct or select a context that will maximize the peer's receptivity to the initiative—perhaps an informal meeting at the beginning of a "slow week."

**Step 3—Suggested Influence Behaviors.** As a peer, the CIO already has credibility as a trusted partner. Consequently, an appropriate influence behavior is **inspirational appeal** combined with **rational persuasion**—which leverages one's credibility to make the business case while also connecting it emotionally to the achievement of key values, aspirations, or a vision for the future. Another effective influence behavior is **collaboration**—especially if the strategic initiative is complex or multi-faceted. It may behoove the CIO to treat peers as partners and solicit their suggestions for fleshing out the initiative or its implementation details. Finally, if the CIO's relationship with management colleagues is long-standing and personal, then a **personal appeal** may also be effective, particularly if the other options are less successful.

### **Scenario 2: "Strategic" Initiative When the CIO is a "Supportive Subordinate"**

**Step 1—Recommendations for Target Assessment.** In this high-stakes scenario, the CIO is viewed *not* as a peer but as someone representing a support function—that is, someone not important enough to be on the top

Figure 2: Influence Process Recommendations for CIOs Based on Initiative Type and Role Status

Type of CIO	CIO as “True Peer”	CIO as “Supportive Subordinate”
<p><b>Type of Initiative</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• CIO full member of top management team</li> <li>• CIO seen as an equal partner in development and implementation of organizational strategy</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• CIO not on top management team</li> <li>• IS viewed as a support function</li> <li>• CIO viewed as “IT manager”</li> <li>• CIO reacts to strategy developed by top management team but does not contribute significantly to its development</li> </ul>
<p><b>Strategic Initiative</b></p> <p>Involves at least two of the following:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. high stakes for the firm (high risk/reward);</li> <li>2. large scope (e.g., impacts many areas of the firm);</li> <li>3. major changes in operating processes related to IS or novel use of IS for competitive purposes.</li> </ol>	<p>Step 1 - <b><u>Target Assessment Recommendations</u></b>: Engage in intensive efforts to assess those on the top management team who might support the initiative.</p> <p>Step 2 - <b><u>Preparation Recommendations</u></b>: Engage in thorough preparation and think through delivery issues.</p> <p>Step 3 - <b><u>Suggested Influence Behaviors</u></b>: Inspirational appeal combined with rational persuasion, collaboration, and/or personal appeal.</p>	<p>Step 1 - <b><u>Target Assessment Recommendations</u></b>: Engage in intensive efforts to assess lower risk targets on the top management team who might support the initiative.</p> <p>Step 2 - <b><u>Preparation Recommendations</u></b>: Prepare supporting information, deliver in an informal context.</p> <p>Step 3 - <b><u>Suggested Influence Behaviors</u></b>: Apprising combined with rational persuasion, consultation, and/or legitimating.</p>
<p><b>Incremental Initiative</b></p> <p>Involves at least two of the following:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. modest stakes for the firm (some risk/reward);</li> <li>2. small scope (e.g., impacting limited number of areas within the firm);</li> <li>3. changes aimed at improving existing operations or IS infrastructure.</li> </ol>	<p>Step 1 - <b><u>Target Assessment Recommendations</u></b>: Focus on targets that must support such an incremental initiative.</p> <p>Step 2 - <b><u>Preparation Recommendations</u></b>: While organizing supporting points is important, a quick, informal presentation may be best.</p> <p>Step 3 - <b><u>Suggested Influence Behaviors</u></b>: Rational persuasion, consultation, and/or personal appeal.</p>	<p>Step 1 - <b><u>Target Assessment Recommendations</u></b>: Carefully assess leverage points with key target executives.</p> <p>Step 2 - <b><u>Preparation Recommendations</u></b>: Organize key arguments around benefits to the target, emphasize limited stakes to the firm.</p> <p>Step 3 - <b><u>Suggested Influence Behaviors</u></b>: Rational persuasion, apprising, exchange, and/or consultation.</p>

management team. The CIO should fully assess all members of top management who might support the initiative—to predict how they will react, as well as uncover potential sources of concern. For example, the initiative might raise political issues or adversely affect certain targets, their business units, or their resources. Uncovering obstacles and sources of resistance is paramount because the CIO lacks credibility and

reputation. When selecting targets to influence, the CIO may be well-advised to first select lower-risk targets, even if higher-risk targets potentially have more of a vested interest in supporting the initiative.

**Step 2—Recommendations for Preparation.** Not surprisingly, this scenario requires the most extensive and thorough preparation. Lacking the credibility of a

peer, the CIO especially needs to marshal arguments to respond to potential objections. Supporting information from trusted sources is valuable. Delivery is crucial. Ideally, the CIO should approach targets when they are in a receptive mood and in an informal, non-threatening context. Using an informal context can reduce any status differentials during an influence attempt.

**Step 3—Suggested Influence Behaviors.** In this scenario, the CIO should focus on showing targets “what’s in it for them.” **Apprising** combined with **rational persuasion** might be especially effective. Make the business case for the initiative while explaining how each target will benefit. Another good option may be **consultation** because it emphasizes targets’ control over the decision process, as well as the CIO’s need for their input and support. However, if the CIO encounters resistance or is held in particularly poor esteem (e.g., “How someone from IS can even think broadly about our business is beyond me.”), then the viable option may be **legitimizing**—frame the arguments using statements, contentions, and testimonies of recognized and respected experts. In effect, these experts substitute for the CIO’s lack of clout.

### **Scenario 3: “Incremental” Initiative When the CIO is a “True Peer”**

When an IT initiative is limited and narrow in scope (such as a non-strategic technology upgrade that will only incrementally improve IS operations), the stakes are lower for both the firm and top management. Even so, a peer-level CIO can leverage this relationship to good effect, especially by understanding the influence process.

**Step 1—Recommendations for Target Assessment.** In this scenario, the CIO may only need support from a few key executives to proceed. For instance, the capital outlay might only really require the support of the CFO and CEO. Consequently, the CIO only needs to assess executives whose support or permission is required. That said, the CIO should find out whether these executives have any concerns or objections to the initiative. Potential resistance should be lower because the stakes are lower and because the CIO’s peer status lends credibility to the proposal.

**Step 2—Recommendations for Preparation.** Clearly, CIOs should not underestimate the importance of preparation even with an incremental initiative that has lower stakes. Organizing key arguments and assembling supporting data will still pay dividends.

Yet tonal and contextual considerations may, in this case, actually be more important. For example, the CIO may want to present the incremental initiative in a “matter of fact” fashion to help convey that the initiative, while important, is not “earth shattering.” Overall, the best approach may be to execute the influence attempt in an informal manner in a relaxed setting—a context that would help the CIO present the initiative as something that does not require a great deal of analysis or intellectual heavy lifting. Indeed, if the CIO is viewed as a trusted peer, an elaborate, time-consuming presentation and justification may actually prove counterproductive. Put another way, the top management team’s trust in the CIO substitutes for extensive influence behaviors and elaborate preparation when incremental initiatives are involved.

**Step 3—Suggested Influence Behaviors.** With this lower-stakes initiative and the CIO viewed as a true peer, **rational persuasion** should prove quite effective. Again, being brief and to the point may be the best way to proceed. After all, time is money with senior executives, and for a trusted peer, a brief explanation of the case and rationale should be all that is required. For example, it might be advisable to spend just a few minutes explaining the costs and benefits of the initiative while handing the target a short document laying out the case for the initiative in more detail. Indeed, rational arguments presented briefly in a “matter of fact” tone and focused on “Here’s why I’d like to do this.” would be best. Another alternative with incremental initiatives may be **consultation**. The idea would be to solicit potentially valuable input to tweak the initiative or refine it rather than solicit a collaboration that would require more work from the target than the initiative may be worth. Finally, if unexpected objections or resistance arises from the target, **personal appeal** may be a good fallback given that the CIO is viewed as a true peer.

### **Scenario 4: “Incremental” Initiative When the CIO is a “Supportive Subordinate”**

**Step 1—Recommendations for Target Assessment.** The CIO may only need support from a few key executives for this low-stakes initiative. But without a peer-based relationship with these executives, the CIO must carefully assess leverage points—to both overcome resistance and “motivate” targets. The targets are likely to want to know “What’s in this for me or my unit?”—especially because broad or company-wide benefits may not exist. In addition, they may not value the CIO’s opinion. Being outside of top management and representing a support function,

the CIO may have little reputation or credibility. Consequently, the CIO should expect a fair measure of scrutiny, if not skepticism, even for incremental initiatives with modest stakes.

**Step 2—Recommendations for Preparation.** A CIO in this scenario should deliver the initiative in a formal setting, with an explicit agenda set in advance. Develop a relatively elaborate presentation, organized around key arguments and supporting data. Highlight the benefits to the target while pointing out the minimal risks and limited stakes to the firm. Indeed, look for ways to benefit the target, such as “Here’s what IS can do better for you” or “Is there something you would like to see from IS if we can improve our infrastructure?” Such benefits may prove critical for securing support.

**Step 3—Suggested Influence Behaviors.** This situation clearly calls for rational persuasion—with complete and detailed arguments—not “short and sweet.” Make the business case and document the potential benefits to the target. In other words, combine rational persuasion with apprising.

Two other options are **exchange**—where necessary, offering explicit benefits to the target in return for support—or **consultation**—emphasizing the targets’ control over the decision process while also expressing a need for their input and support.

## TWO FURTHER IMPLICATIONS OF THIS RESEARCH

Our research on influence behaviors has other implications that CIOs (or prospective CIOs) should be aware of: how CIOs are selected and how they are trained.

### ***CIO Selection: The Role of Influence Skills***

As noted earlier, the technical background of CIOs appears to have little or no effect on their influence behaviors with top management peers. This finding undercuts the stereotypical view that CIOs with strong technical backgrounds are interpersonally unsophisticated or unskilled in the subtle art of wielding influence. Indeed, IS managers will not become CIOs if they are unable to influence others.

This finding has clear implications for selecting a CIO. Some organizations purposely choose a CIO from outside the IS function, perhaps believing that technically adept candidates may have difficulty

operating in the influence-heavy realm of senior management. However, at least as far as influence skills go, IS managers with strong technical backgrounds should not be discounted for senior management CIO positions. Indeed, given effective influence skills *and* a strong understanding of technology, such candidates should, in fact, command a premium.

### ***CIO Education: Dealing with Blind Spots***

Overall, our research suggests that organizations should do more to educate their executives on the different influence behaviors and how to lay the groundwork for their successful use. The first step in improving CIO influence skills is to enhance their awareness. CIOs may become more effective senior leaders if they learn to tailor their influence behaviors to their audience. Granted, some CIOs reach such conclusions intuitively. But others may need management development courses that explore influence behaviors and context choices.

This training might teach CIOs how to use influence behaviors in peer settings and how to match the goal with the influence context (e.g., the formal or informal setting). Such training may be particularly important for CIOs who feel that functional power gaps weaken their credibility with certain peers.

## CONCLUSION

Over the past two decades, the role of CIOs has progressed from “new kid on the block” to member of the top management team. Today, many CIOs play a key role in managing issues of strategic importance to their organizations. Indeed, CIOs may promote broad strategic initiatives that include functional areas outside of their direct control. Consequently, having skill at influencing—particularly lateral influencing—can be a major contributor to their success. Moreover, influence skill can help CIOs demonstrate that they are competent executives and deserve “a place at the table.”

CIOs who want to be more effective influencers must spend substantial amounts of time developing relationships with their peers because influence behaviors vary in their effectiveness. Recognizing this, CIOs must vary their influence approaches to match the needs, perspectives, and preferences of each peer they want to influence. Getting an accurate “read” on these executives is critical for success.

That said, research shows that **rational persuasion** is more likely to lead to commitment in many contexts than the other 10 influence behaviors. Consequently, CIOs often may need to argue a compelling and rational case for how their proposal will benefit the organization. Nevertheless, our assessment is that circumstances matter. Depending on the nature of the initiative (strategic vs. incremental) and how the CIO is viewed by the top management team (true peer vs. subordinate), other influence behaviors may also prove effective—sometimes in combination with rational persuasion.

Above all else, the message emerging from our work is that a CIO's influence attempts should be tailored to the individual case. CIOs will be most successful when they consciously *think about* and *plan* their influence attempts before they execute influence behaviors.

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