

THORNTON MAY

## Human beings: A CIO's most important network

(August 14, 2000) A faculty colleague at Carnegie Mellon University and I recently discussed the "other" network. During this chat, three other educators walked by and, hearing the conversation, thought we were talking about three different technological networks.

But they were mistaken. While this debate indicated that there are many networks for information technology leaders to worry about, the network my colleague and I were focusing on was the "human network" that lies at the base of all IT leaders' success.

I've long been convinced that the CIO's job is too big. This proliferation of "other" networks is just another example. Hillary Clinton says, "It takes a village to raise a child." In that same vein, it takes a transorganizational human network to manage IT. The days of the solitary, heroic man-at-the-helm kind of CIO are dead, gone and buried. If you manage your network of human contacts, the "other" networks will fall into place.

The leading expert on human networks is a wonderful woman who used to be on the University of California at Los Angeles faculty, Karen Stephenson ([karen.stephenson@netform.com](mailto:karen.stephenson@netform.com)). In addition to being an archeologist, she has devoted massive effort to researching the behaviors of the modern tribes inhabiting our corporate jungles.

Stephenson has mapped out the human network, creating what some refer to as a Cliffs Notes for culture. Want to keep your job, be smart and fast and drive your costs down? Focus on building and strengthening your human network, she says.

Before we discuss the types of people to include in your network, let's examine the personality traits they must bring to the party:

1. They gotta be smart.
2. They gotta be - and stay - current.
3. They gotta be honest - their job is to stimulate your thinking in new perspectives.
4. They gotta be funny - nothing is less helpful than a bunch of blowhards who take themselves way too seriously.
5. They gotta be objective - they can't use this platform of trust to try to sell you something. No conflicts of interest.

Blanche DuBois, the heroine in Tennessee Williams' *A Streetcar Named Desire*, couldn't have been more wrong when she cooed, "I have always relied on the kindness of strangers." CIOs do this too often and find themselves not bumping into digital Samaritans, but rather falling into the hands of unscrupulous vendors.

Vendors tend to be blind to the realities of human networks. They're seduced by the visibility of organizational hierarchies. At the top of the hierarchy sits the budget brass ring. Or does it? Things actually get done through mechanisms not seen on the organizational chart - in human networks that extend outside the organization. Case in point: The supply-chain executives at a major clothing retailer had become seduced by an enterprise resource planning vendor. Seeking to reinject rationality into the decision-making process, the CIO flew in one of his network members, the CIO at a major computer retailer, to debunk the vendor's claims and document just how tough things could get.

If you were to run a diagnostic test on your human network, what would you find? Similar to managing a physical telecommunications network, the first step on the road to effective human network management is to create a map. Who do you know and more important, who knows you?

You're in trouble if:

1. You don't have an advisory board populated by brand-name CIOs and representatives from academia and the trade and business media, plus analysts from an investment house that covers your industry and research firms like Gartner or Meta.
2. You're not actively involved in IT-related executive education programs at major business schools. Start as a student with the intention of joining the faculty.
3. You're not on the advisory boards of your top vendors and of the trade publication you most respect.

Build your human network so you can sleep better at night.

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