

Too Many Chiefs and Not Enough Indians?

Once upon a time there was the CEO and the CFO. Then came along the COO and the CIO and, from what I can determine, these appeared at much the same time. While the CIO role has remained to this day ambiguous in definitive determination of function and place in the hierarchy, though, the COO role was pretty clear from the start. I chalk this up to the fact that technology has gone through a lot of changes and evolution over the last couple of decades or so where the COO's responsibilities lay firmly, and simply, with the operations of core business – whatever that may be as appropriate to the sector and market a particular company is in.

Technology did, indeed, used to just be essentially a facility that needed to be kept running so that core operations could continue. That's not the case today, though; technology is no longer just a grudgingly accepted cost centre. Technology has evolved to have the potential to boost all areas of business growth – increase the customer base, increase the profit margin, increase purchase frequency and increase customer retention (or decrease customer attrition).

Somewhere over the last decade or so, though, there has been a big move to flatter company structures. I see this going hand in hand with an ever increasing focus on equality and discrimination. One example is the emergence of the open plan office. Much like the issue of security vs practicality, are we now facing a dilemma of flatter structure vs focus and functionality?

In recent years there have been an abundance of C-level roles slowly seeping into organisations – CTO, CISO, CMO, CDO (is that Digital or Data now?) and the list goes on but there appears to be no consistency to when a C-level is actually a C-level. What does C-level mean now? Some report in to others and some report into the CEO, some are considered senior management or executives, some are not and some are on the board while others are vehemently kept as far away from the board as possible. Am I alone in being confused?

Sure, different companies have a focus on different areas as a result of their respective markets, sectors and industries but wouldn't it just be simpler – and perhaps more productive - to have a relatively small number of C-levels which all report to the CEO, all have the same level of authority in an organisation and, most importantly, all work in concert as a team to run the business? To throw in another cliché – are too many cooks spoiling the broth?

**** I feel the need to insert a disclaimer at this point – I am trying to provoke thought for the benefit of all and intend no offence to anyone in any particular position ****

Perhaps we should stick to the Trinity – CFO, COO & CIO reporting into the CEO. The CFO does the usual CFOy things ☺ and the COO runs company operations while the CIO works with both to address technology aspects. The CEO is the main public face of the company and ties the three together.

Do we need to muddy the waters with the other C-levels? Perhaps put in a better way, do the other functions need to be C-levels? Why can't CTO's, CISO's and CDO's have their titles changed and all report to the CIO and why do CMO's and CDO's (the Data analysis one) have to sit on the top perch, can't they report to either the COO or CFO? Wouldn't this make it easier for the CEO and board to deal with just three trusted advisors who they can liaise with on all company matters? Wouldn't this also help inter-company communications so that the Trinity can ensure that the right people are communicating with each other?

What do we lose by clearly defining and aligning a C-level's authority in a company? What do we gain by having a cast of C-levels? How does your organisation function? In your opinion is it effective or are there too many chiefs and not enough Indians?