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# Nailing the Crucial Interview with Your Federal CIO Candidates

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On average, a federal CIO remains in office for just twenty-three months, compared to nearly five years in the private sector. Even more noteworthy is that it takes about a year to “permanently” replace an agency’s CIO. This means that a third or more of those legislatively mandated roles are performed at any point in time by people temporarily acting in the job.

Recruitment of the federal CIO continually remains a difficult issue across government, with no quick fix solution in sight. Many factors contribute to these recruitment and retention challenges. They range from basic perception issues—the CIO is too often viewed not as strategic business partner but as a technologist—to inadequate authority given to the CIO to enforce policies or standards. Still, a replacement must be recruited by federal agencies each time a CIO post is vacated, if only to comply with the law.

## **CIO Success Factors**

At The MITRE Corporation, a manager of Federally Funded Research and Development Centers (FFRDCs) that provides “trusted advice” to government leaders, several of my colleagues and I have helped federal CIOs work through some of their most difficult challenges. MITRE has provided advice and support to CIOs in the Departments of Defense, Homeland Security, Justice, Treasury, and Veterans Affairs, as well as the Intelligence Community. One lesson we have learned is that CIO performance is not directly linked to being an IT expert. Another lesson is that political connectedness does not contribute significantly to CIO success.

Essentially, CIOs achieve the best results in the federal space when the everyday work activities of their employees and contractors are outcome-oriented, and treated as contributions to a larger national purpose, the significance of which is memorialized in every agency's mission statement. Federal CIOs are also more successful when they refuse to surrender to obstacles in their path. Successful CIOs work tirelessly, usually behind the scenes, to build the organizational support they need to overcome the undercurrents of active and passive resistance that are typically encountered in large organizations.

This appreciation for the skills and experience needed by federal CIOs translates into some fundamental attributes to be sought, when a federal agency is recruiting a new CIO. A few probing questions, carefully posed during interviews with the short-listed applicants, will elicit responses that shed a lot of light on a candidate's personal approaches to problem-solving, passion for achieving results, and ability to convert obstacles into opportunities.

## **The Central Questions**

Assuming limited face time with each applicant, these questions will provide enough input to enable you to select the candidate most likely to succeed as your next CIO:

***Q1 – Where have you delivered significant results in a year, and what can you deliver for my organization within the next 12 months?***

Expect to hear evidence of real wins that were quickly realized in the past, the relative impact of each on business outcomes, and indications of pride in the accomplishments. Look

for signs of the candidate's familiarity with your agency, its mission, and its more complex challenges. Elicit alternative approaches to achieving some of your highest priority goals and objectives. Weigh both the potential and the practicality of each proposed alternative.

***Q2 – Where have you operated with limited authority before, and how will you get things done here?***

Expect to hear about constraints on span of control, the attendant handicaps, and the use of distinctive mitigation techniques, such as extensive networking and collaboration. Listen for signs of remarkable resourcefulness, pride in the ability to overcome most obstacles, and a real determination to stay the course.

***Q3 – Where have you led groups of moderate or uneven performers before? How did you get them to achieve extraordinary results, and how will you move my team to the next level of performance?***

Expect to hear about ordinary people attaining exceptional goals, some of the challenges that were successfully negotiated, and the impact of those accomplishments. Look for signs of sensitivity to the federal working environment, pride in the successful application of motivation techniques, and respect for contributions made by individual group members.

## **Final Thoughts**

How long will this take? Malcolm Gladwell (the author of *Blink*) would probably suggest a shorter time, but, in an hour-long interview, you should take no more than five minutes to

pose these questions. The rest of that time will allow you to determine whether a candidate understands your needs and has what it takes to do your job. Keep in mind that a successful track record is more compelling than a ton of lessons learned.