

## IDC PERSPECTIVE

# A CIO Communication Framework for the Digital Era: The CIO's Direct Reports

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## EXECUTIVE SNAPSHOT

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### FIGURE 1

#### Executive Snapshot: A CIO Communication Framework for the Digital Era – The CIO's Direct Reports

The CIO's communications with his or her direct reports are a critical, yet sometimes overlooked, element of digital and organizational transformation. The CIO's staff are the evangelists and change agents of transformation and, as such, do much of the heavy lifting. To do so, they have to be informed, inspired, and engaged; they must also be effective communicators themselves.

#### Key Takeaways

- The CIO's direct reports are the engine of IT organizational and digital transformation but cannot be effective unless they understand and embrace the vision, mission, and goals and their roles in executing them.
- Communication is the CIO's primary tool to shape and develop behaviors, practices, and communications of direct reports while ensuring they are aligned in executing the IT mission and goals.
- CIOs need to have empathy for the challenges of each direct report's role and the changes to those roles wrought by organizational and digital transformation, but they also need to hold the team to high standards of performance and communication.

#### Recommended Actions

<b>Now</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Assess direct reports' readiness to design/execute IT digital/organizational transformation; assess IT vision/goals, identify gaps/disagreements, and find remedies.</li> </ul>
<b>Next 6 months</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Work with direct reports to create "change road maps" with goals/actions/milestones.</li> <li>• Hold one-on-one meetings to implement/refine road maps and communication plans.</li> </ul>
<b>Next 12 months</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Perform semiannual checkpoint analysis of the entire team to gauge progress and fine-tune communication strategies.</li> </ul>

Source: IDC, 2018

## SITUATION OVERVIEW

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CIOs garner many of the headlines in articles about digital transformation (DX), but their direct reports do much of the heavy lifting in digital and organizational transformation. The CIO's team must help formulate the transformation vision, mission, and goals; engage and motivate workers to embrace and execute the vision; and help create a "flywheel effect" that sustains continuous transformation. And they must do that while managing the day-to-day operations of their departments and teams. That makes CIO-direct report communication a critical linchpin in achieving organizational and digital transformation.

However, CIOs often do not pay enough attention to the nature and effectiveness of CIO-direct report communications. CIOs often struggle to get their direct reports to understand why and how IT needs to change to meet the digital era needs of the business. To get the IT performance that CIO's want and need from their direct reports, they need to think about how their direct reports need to change to help create and run the IT organization that they and the business want and need – and then shape their communication strategies accordingly.

This IDC document is the final in a series of three documents that focus on CIO communications in the digital era and examines communications with the board of directors, with LOB executive peers, and with the CIO's direct reports, the subject of this document. It describes what's different about communications in the digital era, provides examples of goals of CIO-direct report communications, describes the unique challenges and potential pitfalls in communicating with direct reports, and provides strategies for improving the effectiveness of communications.

### The CIO-Direct Report Communication Imperative

Digital transformation requires IT executives to change the way they think, act, work, and communicate. For many IT organizations, digital transformation-driven changes include:

- Creating a culture of experimentation, failing, and learning
- Moving from project focus to products and customers
- Shifting product development to Agile/DevOps
- Shifting from risk averse to educated risk takers
- Moving from order takers to "menu planners"

Those are all nontrivial changes. Enterprise-scale DX changes (almost) everything, and it all starts with the CIO and his or her direct reports finding new ways to communicate with each other and ultimately with their direct reports and staff. In planning CIO-direct report communications, consider these imperatives:

- **Reaching and influencing all IT staff:** While modern IT organizations make it easy for CIOs to communicate with staff at all levels, the CIO's team has the most direct relationships with IT managers and staff and as such are the natural vehicle for cascading communications from CIOs out to their organizations. The CIO's team can also "translate" what might otherwise be communications that are too abstract for some IT staff.
- **Gaining support and ownership of IT vision:** CIOs need support and input from their team in creating a vision, a mission, and goals for IT, not to mention budgets and other existing operational aspects of IT. CIOs are, or should be, the clear leader in creating the vision, but failing to work with direct reports may result in goals that aren't anchored to reality and likely

won't be embraced by those who have to execute. Moreover, executing complex DX initiatives and organizational change can require extraordinary effort that will only come from IT executives that are fully invested in the success of the IT vision and mission.

- **Creating change agents that drive culture change:** While CIOs can envision and communicate the need for and parameters of change for their organizations, their teams will bear a significant part of the actual heavy lifting that makes change happen. Organizational and digital transformation are, above all, about culture change. Such change is a massive undertaking that requires leaders to orchestrate initiatives, and cooperate among themselves, and lead transformation of their workers and functions. Focused CIO-direct report communications must motivate and align the CIO's team to drive transformation.
- **Tapping knowledge and innovation sources:** While CIOs are often in the limelight of digital transformation, they can't survive, or thrive, without their team's ideas and expertise. Direct reports are the front line to the rest of the IT organization and, often, IT customers, both of which are critical sources of innovation. IDC's 2017 *CIO Sentiment Survey* found that CIOs rate innovation second to last out of 10 parameters of IT performance – which points to the importance of improving communication. Close and continuous communications are key to accessing the knowledge and innovations that direct reports can provide.
- **Achieving "full-stack performance":** While the customer-facing elements of DX get the most visibility and attention, the CIO's team must ensure that the full stack of IT products and services is extensible and operating well. Along with their focus on DX, CIOs can't lose sight of the necessity for those full-stack services to be available, reliable, and extensible to support the more visible products and services. And CIOs are the singular connection among all parts of the IT stack.

## What's Different About Communicating with Direct Reports in the Digital Era?

Some of the most visible impacts of digital technologies and transformation include the increased velocity of business, the growing volatility and unpredictability of business environments, hypercompetitive start-ups from around the globe, and the growing mix of skills needed to create digital products and services. These and other factors all directly impact IT organizations and specifically how CIOs and their direct reports communicate.

### *Increased Velocity of Change*

Achieving velocity in adapting to changing business and technology environments requires that decision making be pushed to the edges of the organizations where workers have direct visibility into the changes that are taking place. That requires CIOs and their direct reports to clearly communicate shared IT goals to guide and anchor decision making throughout the organization.

### *Communications as Driver of Change*

Traditional CIO-direct report communications comprise a mix of requests, status updates, problem reporting, and personal chat via email, conversations, or meetings. In contrast, digital era communications include a broader multimodal mix of idea sharing, customer knowledge and insight, market and ecosystem intelligence, and data-driven insights – all aimed at focusing and driving change in the IT organization including what it does and how it works.

## Different Success Measures

IT executives have a long history of measuring their organization's performance based on traditional IT metrics that focus on operational and project-oriented measurements. As digital transformation gains in importance to the business, those metrics need to be augmented by new business-focused metrics that are ultimately more important than the traditional ones, at least to business leaders. CIOs and direct reports need to discuss new metrics and why they are important to IT and the business.

## Cross-Functional Everything

Until now, IT executives have managed and worked with a relatively focused set of talent and skill sets. As IT becomes more critical to customer-facing business activities with the varied needs of digital transformation, teams must be cross-functional, with a mix of business, technology, and design workers. CIOs and their staff must learn the "new languages" of cross-functional disciplines.

## Agile/DevOps and Customer Centricity and Products

Moving from the old world of waterfall development, bucket brigade-style workflows, and project focus to the new world of customers, products, design thinking, and agile product development is a large shift. IT executives that are steeped in serial sequential methods may struggle to cross the chasm. CIOs will need to champion agile transformation until it is achieved and sustained at enterprise scale. Moreover, since new customer experiences and new digital product revenue are the top 2 organizational objectives, as demonstrated in IDC's 2017 *CIO Sentiment Survey*, the CIO will have to communicate to his or her team the need to build customer centricity and product focus into the organization's cultures.

## Identify Primary Goals of Direct Report Communications

One of the challenges in communicating with direct reports is the number and variety of reasons for and goals of those communications. What are the reasons and goals for organizational and digital transformation? What must CIOs do to stay in sync with direct reports?

- **Achieve clarity and agreement on IT vision:** Recent research has shown significant disconnects between CEOs and their leadership teams in their understanding of and agreement on top goals, and the same occurs with CIOs and their teams (see [sloanreview.mit.edu/article/no-one-knows-your-strategy-not-even-your-top-leaders/](https://sloanreview.mit.edu/article/no-one-knows-your-strategy-not-even-your-top-leaders/)). By achieving shared understanding and consensus on IT vision and goals, CIOs further two critical goals:
  - Enable decision making at the edges of the organization
  - Extend the reach of the CIO

The first goal frees up CIO and team bandwidth to focus on more strategic pursuits while ensuring alignment of decision making with goals; the second is a necessary component of digital transformation. If direct reports don't understand or agree with the IT vision, they can't or won't support it or promote it to their organizations. CIOs need the unwavering support of their teams to make the culture changes that are needed in enterprise DX.

- **Spark entrepreneurial behaviors:** One of the most important, yet difficult to obtain, attributes for modern IT organizations is entrepreneurship – the proactive "searching and solving" of important business problems and opportunities. CIOs cannot afford for their teams to always wait for instruction. They need entrepreneurial business- and customer-focused leaders who can solve problems and innovate to advance the IT organization. Given the crush of operational work, CIOs must publicly underscore the importance of entrepreneurial behaviors.

- **Gain buy-in, engage, and motivate:** The CIO's direct reports are executives in their own right and have their own views about what should be done and how. CIOs must master a tricky balance of communication that ensures that all team members feel heard and that strategies, goals, and actions include direct reports' ideas and contributions wherever possible.
- **Ensure fitness and success in role:** Technologists often get promoted into management roles that they aren't well suited for and may not even want. CIOs, especially those that are new to an IT organization, should discuss each direct report's role and work, including span of control, talent and talent management, organization culture, and customer relationships – dimensions that contribute to success or failure.
- **Develop and mentor staff to meet changing needs:** One of the CIO's most important responsibilities is developing staff to meet the needs of the IT organization and the business. The traditional "one and done" career development plan is not sufficient: the skills and qualities needed by IT executives have now changed dramatically. CIOs need a dynamic and interactive process to shape and guide development of their direct reports.
- **Champion integration and alignment of IT assets and strategies:** While DX is the "order of the day" for CIOs, they need to instill in their direct reports the critical importance of a clear alignment of IT and the business in relation to the organization's workers, assets, and plans. The CIO's team must maintain that alignment and cannot be distracted from that alignment.

## Unique Challenges in Communicating with Direct Reports

Unlike communicating with the board of directors and LOB executives, it would seem that CIOs should have an easier time communicating with their direct reports, as, after all, they report to the CIO. In fact, the communications are often more complex, more nuanced, and indeed more impactful than those with the other stakeholder groups. In tackling the organizational changes needed for IT to become a true enabler and driver of enterprise DX, the CIO's team may face the need for unprecedented change that cuts to the core of their work and personal lives. Direct reports can represent a significant challenge to the CIO's communication skills (see Table 1).

**TABLE 1**

**Keys to Successful Communications with Direct Reports**

Action	Rationale
Develop staff	For the members of the CIO's team, the next career step up is the CIO role; some will aspire to that step. CIOs must have the confidence to develop their staff to be able to take on the CIO role without worrying about their own replaceability.
Anticipate power shifts	Digital transformation inevitably drives changes in strategies, roles, and responsibilities. Seasoned IT executives who have spent years honing their managerial and technology skills can be threatened by new requirements for soft skills and ability to coach self-directed teams, especially if younger colleagues are better versed in the new job requirements. CIOs should anticipate such shifts and work with their teams to develop needed new skills.
Nurture diverse profiles	CIO teams can have significant differences in experience, personalities, attitudes, risk acceptance or aversion, business savvy, and other attributes. CIOs must understand those differences and craft individualized and tailored communications strategies for each direct report.
Attend to operations	While CIOs with strong teams can pay more attention to the business-focused side of IT, their IT executives cannot afford to ignore the operational aspects of running IT infrastructure and applications. CIOs need to communicate the need for customer and business orientation while recognizing the demands of running IT infrastructure and operations.
Discourage weak soft skills and business skills	Technology and operating skills used to be of prime importance: CIOs are likely to have senior staff who are rooted in technology and lacking in necessary soft skills and business acumen. CIOs must find ways to either help those staff members develop the skills or change the roles and responsibilities of the incumbents. In either case, communicating the gap between actual versus needed skills is an important first step.

Source: IDC, 2018

In contrast with CIO-LOB executive communications described in another document in the series, CIOs and their direct reports live in much more similar worlds – but closeness and familiarity may lead to potential pitfalls (see Table 2).

**TABLE 2**

**Never Do This**

Mistake	Risk
Communicate too much	If communications are too frequent and granular, the CIO runs the risk of micromanaging, real or perceived, which will alienate and frustrate IT executives.
Assume understanding and agreement	Miscommunication can result in inaction, wrong actions, or frustration on the part of CIOs and their team.
Push too fast and hard	Change takes time and can feel threatening to many IT executives. CIOs must firmly move the organization ahead while being realistic about what can be a multiyear process.

Source: IDC, 2018

## Crafting a Communication Strategy for Direct Reports

In our previous two documents in the series, communications focused on informing and educating, learning, engaging, establishing urgency, and persuading or influencing. To that list, communications with direct reports adds developing, mentoring, and coaching; assessing and appraising; and working through them to cascade communications out to the rest of the IT organization. That makes some facets of communication more personal and hence challenging and definitively rules out "winging it" as a CIO communication strategy. The most important element in CIO-to-direct report communications is a strategy for each report that is tailored to their attributes, effectiveness, aspirations, and the changes in thinking, behaviors, and practices that will be required as the organization evolves to meet the needs of enterprise DX. How?

- **Be clear about the purpose of communications.** CIOs and their direct reports talk about a varied set of topics, and there may be confusion about the reason for a given exchange. CIOs should be clear in their communications with their direct reports about the purpose of their communications, whether focused on executing IT's mission, identifying needed changes in roles and behaviors, or developing new skills and attributes.
- **Create and articulate the shared digital IT vision.** At the heart of DX-related CIO communications are the vision, mission, and goals for digital and organizational change. High-performing CIOs must articulate a compelling vision, crafted in collaboration with their leadership team. This vision helps their direct reports make the connection from IT's work to operational and business model transformation so that they, in turn, can recruit their workers to execute the mission. The iterative process is a virtuous cycle that builds on itself and strengthens CIO-direct report communications while ensuring that the vision and goals are truly shared and embraced.
- **Adopt a "change framework."** Changing behaviors is difficult, and trying to do so by instructing direct reports about "how they need to change" is futile. It is better to use a framework, such as John Kotter's "see-feel-change" approach, which informs the content, structure, and timing of communications. In his book, *The Heart of Change: Real-Life Stories of How People Change*

*Their Organizations*, Kotter proposes that "people change what they do less because they are given analysis that shifts their thinking than because they are shown a truth that influences their feelings." CIOs can apply Kotter's approach by working with direct reports to:

- Understand what changes are needed (see).
- Understand why changes are needed and why they are urgent (feel).
- Embrace, orchestrate, and execute changes (change).
- **Assess current state and identify transformation goals.** An important step in developing IT executives is working with them to identify and formalize their goals for change – in other words, what changes in thinking, behaviors, practices, and communications will the executive need to undergo to achieve needed change. Those goals form the foundation for CIOs to create individualized communications strategies using the change framework to add structure.
- **Create strategies and plans for each direct report.** CIOs are experts at planning and executing technology strategies. Yet many do not apply the same rigor to developing and executing communications for their staff, resulting in hit-or-miss results. Minimally, such plans should have formally identified time slots for communications, defined methods for increasing understanding of each executive, goals and a road map, identified measurements for determining success, and avenues for feedback used to refine the plan and strategy.
- **Meet one-on-one.** Most CIOs and their direct reports have frequent discussions about IT matters, personnel issues, system failures, and the like: Those are not one-on-one meetings. True one-on-one meetings focus on specific topics of concern to the direct report and/or the CIO – including what's working or not working in their interactions. Moreover, one-on-ones should have homework and deliverables and include assessments of the direct report's work along with recaps and takeaways to cement progress. Above all, CIOs need to keep to schedules and not revert to "drive-by meetings" or email.
- **Communicate outward too.** While communicating with direct reports to help ensure their success, CIOs should also make sure their teams are visible to the business and get credit for their accomplishments. By communicating those successes outward, CIOs build self-confidence in their staff while building the reputation of their team, which also makes the CIO look good.

## ADVICE FOR THE TECHNOLOGY LEADER





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While this document has focused on the importance of CIO-direct report communications, it's also true that "actions speak louder than words." CIOs must back up their communications with actions that mirror their communications. Consistent and tightly synchronized communications and actions have a far greater impact than words alone. CIOs should carefully assess the consistency of their actions, behaviors, and words as they construct and evolve communication strategies for their direct reports (see Figure 2).



**FIGURE 2**

**Essential Guidance**

<b>Roles</b> 	<b>Timing</b> 	<b>Actions</b> 	<b>Outcomes</b> 
CIO and direct reports	Now	Assess readiness of direct reports to drive needed transformation of the IT organization and discuss current and desired states of communication including frequency, length, mode, and topics.	Create a baseline, identify performance gaps, and begin development of communication strategies.
CIO and select IT staff and LOB executives	Now	Discuss performance of direct reports and gather feedback on needed/desired changes.	Obtain a 360-degree view of each direct report's effectiveness and needed changes.
CIO	Now	Create plans and road maps for communications with direct reports to address role changes and development needs.	Provide a framework and structure for ongoing communications.
CIO and direct reports	6 months	Use one-on-one meetings and a mix of formal and informal communications for evolving the IT vision, mission, and goals.	Keep the IT mission front and center with direct reports and solicit their innovations and improve alignment and team cohesiveness.
CIO and direct reports	6 months	Make one-on-one sessions working meetings with homework, assessments, and takeaways.	Focus working sessions to accelerate the learning and development process.
CIO and direct reports	12 months	Conduct at least annual checkpoint assessments to assess the progress made and the effectiveness of communications.	Avoid falling into a communications rut with little impact.

Source: IDC, 2018

**LEARN MORE**

**Related Research**

- *A CIO Communication Framework for the Digital Era: The Board of Directors* (IDC #US43779918, May 2018)
- *A CIO Communication Framework for the Digital Era: Line-of-Business Executives* (IDC #US43779818, May 2018)

## Synopsis

This IDC Perspective discusses how CIOs can communicate effectively with their direct reports. The CIO's team must help formulate the transformation vision, mission, and goals; engage and motivate workers to embrace and execute the vision; and help create a "flywheel effect" that sustains continuous transformation. CIO-direct report communication is a critical linchpin in achieving organizational and digital transformation. This document is the third in a series of three documents that focus on CIO communications with the board of directors, LOB executive peers, and direct reports. This document describes what's different about communications in the digital era, lays out goals of CIO-direct report communications, calls out the challenges and pitfalls in communicating with direct reports, and offers strategies for improving the effectiveness of communications.

"Digital transformation requires IT executives to change the way they think, act, work, and communicate in relation to their direct reports," says Marc Strohlein, adjunct research advisor with IDC's Research Network. "CIOs need to spearhead change with their direct reports to multiply their effectiveness in the organization."

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