JCC Executive Partners

Leadership Series

Elevator Pitches in IT?

Advancing and Articulating Topical Strategies

John Chambers
JCC Executive Partners

I. IT Leadership Responsibility; Brevity Balancing Thoroughness

"Do you have an hour or so?"

That's the snarky answer to the questions you get, and the wrong way to answer. But it might be the first thing that comes to mind when you get the questions:

"What is our disaster recovery plan?
"How do we use the cloud?"
"What should we do about BYOD?"

The questions are all over the map, endless and almost unwieldy. In an impromptu conversation with other peers or executives, your job is to demonstrate credibility and answer in all of 30 seconds.   It's hard to believe that your job as IT leader demands that you are an elevator pitch master.   But you have to be. And you also have to back it up, for your sake and the company's.

I recall the first one specifically, when I was the head of IT at a life sciences company. It was a hallway conversation as the founder/CEO and I crossed paths one morning. "John, are we proactively addressing disaster recovery?"

I could have said, "Sure are. Have a good day"   At which time, I would have expected all my credibility to lie in dust on the corporate floor.

Is the CEO looking for a yes or no answer?   Or is the CEO, or any strategically minded executive, collaborating with executives throughout the enterprise, ensuring that critical company strengths exist, and the life blood of the company is protected?   He was collaborating with me, whether "I got it" or not. Your executive peers, the Lines of Business (LoB), the company leadership, the BoD are learning. Just as you are.   And in learning, they are synthesizing the information and considering its applicability to the company mission.

This can include operational processes, financial management, technical infrastructure, market expansion, customer success.

What is expected is that you are prepared with an elevator pitch for a nearly infinite number of business oriented questions.   After all, you are the head of information technology, the business within the business, and you are GM for an extraordinarily complex business of supply chains, operations, innovation, and potential management of applications, assets, and organizations.

You're not done there, however.   Your elevator pitch, your proof in understanding the latest issues of industry, operations, and innovation, the latest trends and markets, must be backed up with action. Understanding how to explain and define a strategy is critical to achieving it.   But it's "smoke and mirrors" if there is not an aligned and integrated means for advancing that strategy.

So how can we have an action plan for every possible buzzword in industry?
Certainly some activities will be inapplicable to your environment, but in many cases the questions (so-called buzzword queries) are applicable to many universal constants and standard enterprise processes, which umbrella its constituent parts.

For example, let's go back to our question on disaster recovery. If I wasn't prepared to answer the question in an elevator pitch, then I wasn't in the right position to be leading IT.   But fortunately I was prepared.   And disaster recovery was a subset of a more far-reaching mindset within our security professionals:

> "*Disaster Recovery is one domain within our overall <u>Business Continuity Strategy</u>; the four major domains within Business Continuity include our:*
> - *Crisis Management Framework*
> - *Tools and Teams Structure*
> - *Disaster Recovery Processes*
> - *Resumption of Standard Operations.*
>
> *Of course, the accountability for these domains cuts across all Lines of Business and so we've integrated them within each of the LoB's operational responsibilities.*
>
> *Nevertheless, we take the leadership role in severity assessment, gap analysis, continuous improvement. For example, there are many processes in the company that can afford no downtime, as they critically impact the revenue base and customer satisfaction. Others areas will demand a higher risk appetite.*
>
> *Within our Business Continuity, we continually assess readiness, integrating risk mitigation efforts as part of our daily rigor, and testing our ability to handle crises, including Disaster Recovery.*"

Done in thirty seconds. End of story? Hardly, because the next comment implicitly assured that the strategy was real, tangible and thorough. His response came immediately.

"Great. Let's ensure that the business review team has a consistent understanding, and I want to again emphasize the shared responsibility."

Translation – "Be prepared to thoroughly discuss this at the next executive staff meeting." It was then on the agenda. The implicit expectation was that the strategy for Business Continuity, which I explained as including Disaster Recovery, was in fact an active and vibrant strength in the company, and that my words were supported by action.

CIOs and executive staff are typically ready to deliver an elevator pitch (or they ought to be), but the implicit credibility is fleeting (in fact, it's false) if there is not an associated plan or operation which is regularly progressing, communicated and managed. Strategies are not discrete tasks, with start and end dates. They are constantly assessed and applied.

So if the latest buzzword or trend is asked, (i.e., what is our cloud strategy?… or big data?… or M&A… ?) are you prepared to answer in a structured and compartmentalized manner. And more importantly, is there an actionable plan or sustainable process within the company, which you are leading, that ensures capabilities to achieve the strategic goals you have just articulated in thirty seconds?

II. The Executive Summary, Not Platitudes

A client had mentioned to me, "I might be able to speak to most of the latest IT issues, I pretty much keep abreast of them, but we are not quite sure how to get our arms around all of them, operationally. How do we get started?"

Whether we're talking about developing a crisis management plan or a due diligence effort, whether understanding the TCO of key business processes or preparing for client audits, it's not surprising to hear the question. And it's not reserved for a new intern. The "How to get started" question will arise from many senior executives.

Is it that these folks are stupid? Sadly this insult is bandied about by many line managers or company associates. Some happy-hour dinner commiseration will hear the characterization, whether borne of jealousy, arrogance or downright sourness. When company's struggle with any kind of change or improvement, one can be sure the "stupidity" arrow is aloft, triggered by associates that should have been spending more time in asking how they could do their own jobs better.

The reality, however, is that "How do we get started?" is not only perfectly valid, but also has several levels of meaning -- all of them business-oriented and exceedingly appropriate. The question is as much an executive impetus and kickoff challenge as it is a query. The CxOs are driving forward market expansion, competitive analyses, shareholder value and client perceptions. They have their hands full with organizing a sensible and presentable image of performance and future success. They are seeking not only a definition or an understanding of the latest trends and challenges; they are seeking and expecting a comprehensive assessment of readiness in meeting the challenge. What are we doing about this and how does it apply to our company strategy? Are we prepared?.

If you can't articulate it, then it's not a competitive advantage for the company. In most cases, particularly for broad strategic issues, or those that the BoD has encountered in other conversations, their expectation is that you are prepared and driving forward.

So for my Crisis Management presentation, what was I going to say? There were five major topics that I would cover, and these five were backed up by IT and corporate teams' accountabilities and actions.

A. Define the Subject in Business Context

Ask several leaders and managers what a cloud strategy is (or DRP, or BYOD, or Big Data) and you'll get as many answers. For cloud, your definition must corral the jargon and the sales pitches throughout industry and explain what the cloud means for your company, how it can be embraced, how it's leveraged for your company's specific and particular needs -- what it is, and is not.

The same occurred for Disaster Recovery, and my job was to delineate what Disaster Recovery Planning (DRP) really meant in the context of our company strategy. It was not really DRP, but a Business Continuity paradigm that we in IT had advanced, and were leading. DRP was only one part of it.

By contextualizing it, not only did I have additional credibility but the BoD and the IT Steering committee were able to assess, collaborate and drive improvement, in turn helping me refine the strategy.

B. Maturity Levels of the Strategy

The BoD, your executive peers, business review committees require an expectation of what constitutes the company's present capability, benchmarked against the optimal best practices. The IT leader must quantify the company's present state vs. desired state.

In Figure 1 below, notice how the Business Continuity Strategy is organized and structured into domains and subsidiary disciplines. Our disciplines were configured for best practices relative to Governance and Business Orientation. Governance attributes demonstrate how we control and operationalize the

---

Drive returns that last

domain; Business Orientation attributes ensure that the IT domain is aligned and aimed at business processes and business progress.

In our methodology, we employ a 1 – 5 range across both disciplines (governance and business orientation).
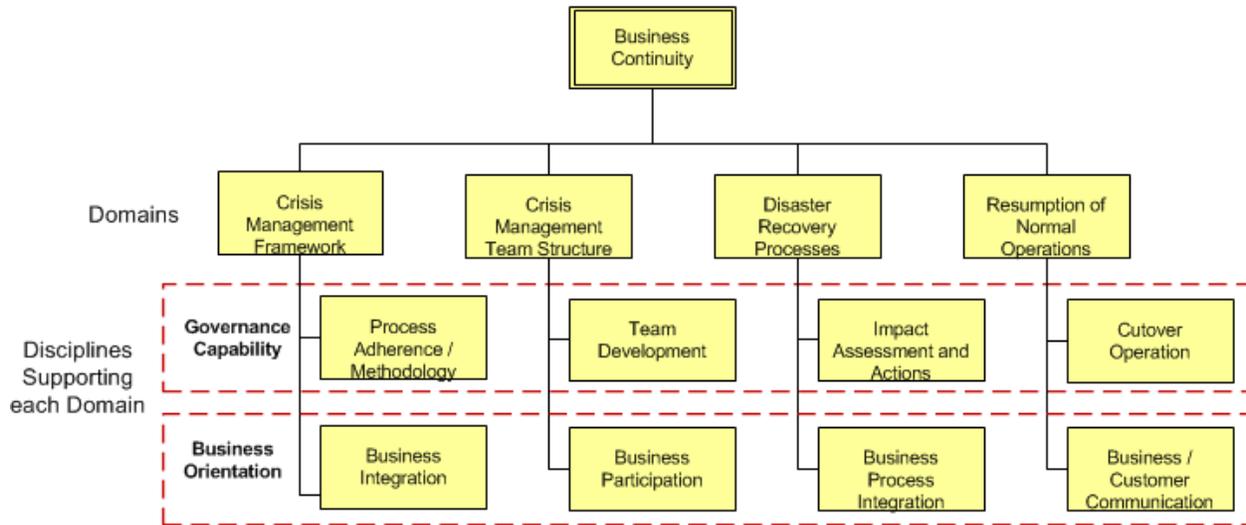

Figure 1
Hierarchical Structure for Business Continuity Strategy

If I were delivering a strategic presentation relative to Due Diligence, or Service Financials, or Supply Chain execution, would I be prepared to assess our capabilities and present our capabilities in a structured and measureable framework, such as the above?

C. Answer the "So what?" question.

Is there a reason to progress along a maturity curve for your specific subject matter strategy?   Nobody's perfect, and is perfection something that is worthy of attaining. What are the costs of 100% Business Continuity perfection, such that not a single company process is ever inhibited by any kind of disaster, large or small?

There are negative consequences for stasis.   And risks are higher for an organization that is at level 2 on the business management maturity scale vs. level 3.   These negative consequences affect the bottom line in terms of spending, hampered revenue and quality/regulatory problems.

But a rigorous assessment of how much is good enough is critical to business astuteness.

Drive returns that last

Figure 2
Negative Consequences (associated risks)
are higher at the low end of business maturity

D. Financial Impact

Moving from Level 2 to 3, for example, has a commensurate cost. It also has a commensurate gain. The financial analysis will drive the decision making process, particularly as it related to how much is good enough, and at what point is our Crisis Management approach or PMO process or BYOD strategy, or M&A process, rigorous enough?

As advancing business processes cost money, not advancing them also costs money. Where can the gaps be sealed and how does a particular strategy (crisis mgmt., portfolio, M&A, etc.) directly bear on the bottom line of the company?

A financial assessment of current state and ability to reach future state is critical to assessing the feasibility of the strategic progression, and the impact it will have to the bottom line.

E. The Way Forward

What is the appetite for change and how urgent is the plan? How can we balance the current capacity for sustaining work with transformational change initiatives?

Drive returns that last

For IT leaders, 3 months may be too short a window for milestones within a strategic area, but progress must be shown in that quarterly period.

A strategic goal that extends into years is suspect. It's not that optimal strategic capabilities are derived in short order, but progress must be visible and effecting positive financial change in the organization in a matter of quarters, not years.

This is not to say that 3 – 5 year plans are without value. Transformation across an enterprise is an enormous task, but it is incumbent on the corporate leadership to illustrate and realize tangible gains, identifying specific milestones that are not just sign posts in the journey but rather are Maturity steps that derive bottom line benefits. There's no shortage of ideas; while it's the responsibility of executives to consider creative ways of advancement, these visions are useless if they cannot be operationalized. An executive ought to know how to present the vision in terms of achievable milestones.

If the roadmap is measured in years, then what are the benefits within a six month time window, such that the company will gain market share even through these initiatives?

III. Executive Presence

Presenting these strategies is your responsibility. You've got the elevator pitch down; you've considered the domains and disciplines within a specific technology or process strategy; your staff has gone through the painstaking efforts of maturity analysis, risk assessment, impact and road mapping. These strategies should be shared and articulated to peers and board.

For an officer of the corporation or an executive who runs a Line of Business, it is not unreasonable to expect they can deliver the same elevator pitch that you delivered to the CEO. Your leadership and presentation becomes theirs as well. You are accountable for delivering on the strategy and proving that the pitch is operationally advancing.

There's no room for empty buzzword hand-waving when it comes to Financial Management, Risk management, Operational Excellence, Cloud Presence, or any IT strategy. While you must be articulate in defining and presenting how IT is managing a specific strategy, your behind-the-scenes actions must also be thorough and leveled in business acumen. This requires understanding where you are across a myriad of strategic domains and the road ahead, based on objective, sound assessment and scientific progress.

About JCC Executive Partners

JCC Executive Partners provides consulting to C-level and upper management executives in deriving *and sustaining* greater returns from their business, IT, operational, and strategic investments. Via a trust-based and collaborative approach to assessing a firm's environment and IT strategy, JCC Executive Partners streamlines teams and operations and promotes technology alignment to drive sustained returns.

JCC Executive Partners' practice principal is John Chambers, whose 25 years of professional experience spans diverse IT systems and business management disciplines, project methodologies, quality management techniques, and technology development. Chambers has championed and steered multiple global programs and cross-cultural technology implementations for small and large enterprises.