The Price of Thinking Out Loud

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The CIO asked for a cup of coffee, and the IT group ended up buying a small South American nation…

While an extreme response to a rather innocuous request, the anecdote serves as an analogy to the kind of thing that happens all too often in our business, and it's the fault of both IT staff and management.

Let's be clear — it's incumbent upon senior executives to be sure when they ask for a solution — or more dangerously, speculate out loud — that they recognize what the people who work for them may come up with and how much work they may put into that crafting that solution.

A couple of years back, I had a Monday morning discussion with a senior vice-president, just after an IT team had delivered a thorough analysis on his desk.

"What's this?" he asked.

"It's the analysis you asked for in the meeting Friday morning," I said.

"What analysis I asked for?" he asked.

"The one yo u were wishing you had before making a decision on that production application," I replied.

"Oh that one," he added "…no big deal — I was just thinking out loud."

Knowing how much work had gone into said analysis, I just couldn't let it go: "Monte, do you realize how many people busted their humps over the weekend to get you that analysis for this morning?"

He didn't.

"A team of four was in here all day Saturday and Sunday," I continued.

"Too bad," he replied. "I thought they already had a good line on the right decision Friday morning — I wouldn't have spent all that extra time…"

I saw another example just recently. A CIO I know asked his technical crew to look at "simplifying the desktop architecture for the whole organization," with the understanding that simplification would lead to "a reduced support load, and therefore reduced support costs.

"But we also want a solut ion that's flexible — if possible" he said. "Can you look at creating the flexibility to run personal applications on our corporate machines so that people don't have to run two separate systems — as long as you can also come up with a solution that doesn't negatively affect corporate applications or security?"

Reasonable or not, the team got to thinking: "He's asking us to come up with a way to give every individual user 'admin' privileges on their machines so they can add applications on their own, but still increase consistency, reduce support overhead and protect the machines and the network to which they connect."

Discussions went off in the direction of dual boot options, of portioned drives, of all sorts of options to give the end user the ultimate flexibility.

And I got to be the fly in the ointment: "Why don't you just tell him that locking down the desktop would be the cheapest, most secure and easiest option to support?"

"But that's not what he asked for," came th e reply.

So I asked, "are you sure he'd want you to look at that kind of solution if he knew how complicated (read: costly) it would be to support and how much time it would take to investigate?"

We have a responsibility to ask before we launch into analysis, to ask questions like: what range of possibilities do you want us to look at and how much time do you really want us to put into the analysis?

When a senior manager understands how much work may be involved in investigating the most elegant solutions that manager might be more inclined to put time and cost boundaries around such investigations. He might suggest, "don't spend more than half a day on the effort."

Asking the right questions before investing the effort will eliminate many expensive wild goose chases in search of what might be considered missions to seek out technical truth and beauty.

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