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British philosopher Bertrand Russell once opined, “The only thing that will redeem mankind is cooperation.” Indeed, all of life’s adventures are made easier through the contributions of others.

The mainframe industry is more complex than ever for CIOs sorting through the labyrinth of platforms, operating systems, databases, and languages. In our often-frenetic world of implementing information technology, it should be inviting to think of the contributions of the parts exceeding the whole.

But for reasons both historically rational and irrational, this isn’t the common mind-set. Rather, the idea of cooperating “factions” within the industry is almost an oxymoron—between customers and vendors, consultants and vendors, even customers and consultants.

The entire attitude of caveat emptor has created a paranoia of sorts that doesn’t allow for simple cooperation. In fact, a culture has developed where it’s simply not believable these parties could work together.

This needs to change, and it’s everyone’s responsibility to adjust their approaches and attitudes to accomplish it, as the significant contributions sincere parties can provide each other offer tremendous advantages. Let’s consider each of the roles.

Vendors working with customers: A salesperson doesn’t have to compromise fundamental principles. In fact, if his approach isn’t aimed at serving the best interests of his prospective customers, his career will be short-lived. Unfortunately, many sales cultures where the numbers are all that matter result in “ice cubes to Eskimo” transactions. This doesn’t represent the role of the true sales professional.

- Be a consultant first. As a member of the technology industry, vendors should be apprised of the alternative solutions.
- Lead with the customer’s interest, really listening to their needs without morphing them into what you sell.
- Approach the encounter as a long-term relationship. Recommend what they need, not what you sell. Remember the lesson in the movie “Miracle on 34th Street”? When Kris Kringle recommended that Macy’s customers could find what they were looking for at competitor, Gimbels, Macy’s management was horrified. However, they soon discovered that sincere care for the needs of the customer was rewarded with loyal, repeat customer sales.

Customers working with vendors:

- Despite past experiences, allow all vendors their shot at serving your needs. Don’t lump them together as one bad apple. Good salespeople will be working to help you, not just sell you.
- Realize that just as your organization has goals, objectives and needs to prosper, the vendor is part of a business as well. Treat the relationship as any other business relationship.
- Be candid with your requirements. For example, don’t ask the vendor to “invest in your quest” with onsite meetings, demonstrations, and other efforts without disclosing your company’s timeframe and budget capabilities.

Consultants working with customers:

- Consult! As an industry expert, you should be aware of the variety of technologies to help the customer. If a Java approach makes more sense, but your skill set is .NET, recommend the Java solution. It’s the customer’s needs that win.
- Check your own interests at the door to build trust with your customer. Don’t be afraid to say you don’t know; your job is to find out, not have an answer to every question.

Customers working with consultants:

- Delegate research and ask for recommendations from consultants.
- Differentiate between a hired hand and hired mind. If you’re looking for information and guidance, be sure that’s what you’ve brought on board.
- Check to see if any recommendations include technology/skill sets outside their competencies.

The world of the mainframe executive is full of options for failure and success. We have exceeded four decades of enduring solutions in the mainframe community—a true marvel for any technology standard. The cooperation of the various participants has created this success and will continue to redeem the mankind of our industry.

That Sums It Up. **ME**

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