

Maverick* Research: The Eccentric Leadership Cycle for CIOs

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CIOs must often work with eccentric executives. This research recommends a cycle CIOs can use to help them embrace eccentrics and cope with some of their more challenging behaviors. (Maverick research deliberately exposes unconventional thinking and may not agree with Gartner's official positions.)

Key Findings

- Eccentric executives can be an asset to the organizations they lead, often by thinking outside of traditional constraints and challenging their teams to achieve extreme objectives they would not have otherwise attempted.
- The extreme requests of eccentrics can be especially challenging to CIOs and others in both a technology and a leadership context, because eccentric leaders may push them well beyond any CIO's ability to execute.
- Executive eccentricity may sometimes be the result of a mild, hidden or undiagnosed mental disorder that may manifest into some unacceptable behaviors and demands. Statistics show that certain disorders are common in the general population, in the workplace and in executive teams.
- Techniques that CIOs find effective in dealing with eccentricity often resemble techniques such as behavior modification, inspired by psychology and psychiatry, rather than traditional management tactics.

Recommendations

- CIOs should embrace eccentricity in themselves and in other executives and use sound methods to cope with the challenges of the more extreme eccentric executive behaviors.
- CIOs can apply a seven-step cycle to cope with eccentricity, but understand that the cycle regularly repeats itself, since eccentricity can be mitigated and managed, but rarely changed.
- Use "accept" and "detach," the first two steps in the model below, in every individual eccentric incident to help get oriented and select the most appropriate tactics for the situation.

- Apply Steps 3 through 7, "analyze," "accommodate," "set boundaries," "reinforce" and "collude," to understand the eccentric situation and achieve the best outcome for yourself, the eccentric and the enterprise.

Table of Contents

Analysis..... 2

 *Maverick Research..... 2

 Defining Eccentricity..... 3

 The Business Case for Psychological Diversity..... 3

 Eccentrics Are Already in the Executive Suite..... 4

 The Eccentric Executive Cycle..... 5

 Accept That You Cannot Change the Eccentric..... 7

 Detach From the Situation and Depersonalize It..... 8

 Analyze Eccentric Executives and Their State of Mind..... 9

 Accommodate and Give Eccentrics Some of What They Need..... 11

 Set Boundaries and Define Limits the Eccentric May Not Cross..... 11

 Reinforce the Boundaries That You Have Set..... 12

 Collude With Your Team and Help Them Cope Effectively..... 13

 Repeat Ad Infinitum..... 15

Gartner Recommended Reading..... 15

List of Figures

Figure 1. The Eccentric Executive Cycle..... 6

Analysis

*Maverick Research

This is "Maverick" research, designed to spark new, unconventional insights. Maverick research is unconstrained by our typical broad consensus-formation process to deliver breakthrough, innovative and disruptive ideas from our research incubator. We are publishing a collection of more than a dozen Maverick research lines this year, all designed for maximum value and impact. We'll explore each of these lines of research to help you be ahead of the mainstream and take advantage of trends and insights that could impact your IT strategy and your organization (see Note 1 and Note 2).

Defining Eccentricity

In "Maverick* Research: Embracing Eccentric Leadership — Strategies for CIOs," we defined eccentricity and different categories of eccentrics. This subsequent research note details a seven-step cycle CIOs can apply to deal with "eccentric incidents" as they occur.

We defined "eccentrics" as individuals exhibiting extreme, unusual, or unpredictable behaviors and thoughts that both benefit and challenge those around them. An eccentric may have a mild, hidden or undiagnosed mental disorder. An "eccentric incident" is an individual instance of an extreme or unusual behavior on the part of an eccentric, which a CIO must deal with on a situation-by-situation basis.

Most societies find the subject of mental or behavioral disorders or behavioral anomalies taboo. When behavioral anomalies become a topic of discussion, the most extreme versions of disorders are the most likely to garner public attention, and in a largely negative context.

This research specifically focuses on CIO challenges when reporting to an eccentric executive, or dealing with peers who may be eccentric. While direct reports of a CIO are as likely to be eccentric as any other employee, CIOs have more options for dealing with eccentrics who are in their reporting line. A CIO might for example, recommend specific types of training for an eccentric employee, provide coaching, set boundaries through mentoring or, in extreme cases, use disciplinary tactics.

Although the research which follows can be useful in dealing with eccentric employees, its primary focus is to help CIOs and other IT executives cope with eccentric peers and C-level executives to whom they report and, therefore, have less ability to correct or control.

Consider that CIOs who report to eccentric CEOs, for example, have a more limited set of tools available, which do not include requiring CEOs to get specific training to deal with an eccentricity they may not even agree they have. CIOs may find themselves ostracized by eccentric executives, and may find their employment at risk if the executives decide they cannot work with the CIOs, or the CIOs decide they cannot cope with the eccentrics.

The Business Case for Psychological Diversity

Psychological diversity can provide enterprises with the kind of "out of the box" thinking that can lead to competitive advantage and creativity. At the same time, psychological diversity is not without its challenges, particularly when that diversity and eccentricity exist in the executive suite. Therefore, CIOs and IT executives must develop healthy strategies for dealing with some of the more challenging aspects of having eccentric peers and executives.

The stigma and unconscious bias against individuals with mental illnesses remain in many workplaces, despite the best intentions of corporate leaders and most other employees. While laws have focused primarily on protecting those with illness from employment discrimination, the net result of the laws is often silence regarding mental illness, rather than the benefits of creating a mentally healthy workplace and embracing psychological diversity.

Numerous research studies have demonstrated that diversity is not merely a societal preference based on cultural standards and beliefs, but instead is an imperative that brings positive, financially quantifiable business results. Each time enterprises have embraced diversity in some dimension, profitability has increased. "Psychological diversity" is one of the next potential frontiers in executive and staff diversity and pursuit of profitability.

Consider the 2009 research, "[Does Diversity Pay?: Race, Gender, and the Business Case for Diversity](#)" by Cedric Herring in the American Sociological Review, which showed that, on average, the most racially diverse companies bring in nearly 15 times more revenue than the least racially diverse. Mr. Herring's research concludes that, for every percentage increase in racial or gender diversity up to that represented in the relevant population, sales revenue increases approximately 9% and 3% respectively.

Recent research studies have focused on gender diversity on boards, including a 2011 report by Catalyst, led by Nancy Carter and Harvey Wagner, entitled "[The Bottom Line: Corporate Performance and Women's Representation on Boards \(2004–2008\)](#)." They looked at the financial returns of companies with three or more women on the board of directors. These gender-diverse companies outperform companies with all-male boards by 60% in return on invested capital, 84% in return on sales and 60% in return on equity.

In a 2014 study from PwC, "[Creating a Mentally Healthy Workplace – Return on Investment Analysis](#)," The Mentally Healthy Workplace Alliance, stated that for every dollar invested in creating a mentally healthy workplace, \$2.30 is generated in benefits to the company. While the PwC study focused primarily on the nonexecutive population, the collective research indicates that embracing gender, racial, and psychological diversity in a healthy way can result in significant financial returns.

Recommendation:

CIOs and enterprises should embrace psychological diversity at all levels as a potential source of innovation, creativity and out-of-the-box thinking that can help drive results.

Eccentrics Are Already in the Executive Suite

Psychological diversity already exists to a significant extent in the executive suite. Most CIOs, when polled at Gartner events, agree that they either have worked with an eccentric executive in the past, or are working with one today. Most CIOs embrace the unique strengths of eccentric leaders, while acknowledging the difficulty in dealing with some of their more extreme behaviors.

In previous research, we identified three categories of eccentric executives. They are:

- **Compulsive Eccentrics:** Behaviors resemble high-functioning obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD), other anxiety disorders and the autism spectrum. Some CIOs describe micromanaging executives whose inability to diverge from repetitive tasks or a fixation on details resembles a compulsion.
- **Impulsive Eccentrics:** Behaviors resemble high-functioning bipolar disorder and attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD). CIOs describe these eccentrics as highly innovative and

entrepreneurial, but with a limited attention span and difficulty focusing and planning for the long term.

- **Egotistic Eccentrics:** Behaviors resemble high-functioning narcissistic personality disorder and antisocial personality disorder. CIOs describe these eccentrics as bold risk takers, who push the organization to attempt the extraordinary, but who can be volatile when challenged.

The categorizations were not provided by the CIOs, but instead are an output of this research. The categories are deliberately descriptive and nondiagnostic in nature. It is not the intention of this work to encourage CIOs to become amateur diagnosticians or psychologists, or to risk labeling executives unnecessarily and inaccurately.

The more general categories of impulsive, compulsive, and egotistic are used here to describe broad groups of easily recognizable behaviors in nonclinical terms, and will be used later in this research to organize sets of tactics that CIOs can apply in specific situations. For a more in-depth analysis of the specifics of these categories, please refer to the previous research note, "Maverick* Research: Embracing Eccentric Leadership — Strategies for CIOs."

It is important to note that CIOs themselves are also sometimes among the eccentrics in the executive suite. While this subject will be the theme of future published research, CIOs who are reading this research may recognize something of themselves in the eccentric behaviors described. More importantly for the purposes of this research note, CIOs may notice that members of their team may be using elements of the eccentric executive cycle on them. When applied in a healthy and well-intentioned manner, this is often for the benefit of the CIO, the team and the enterprise.

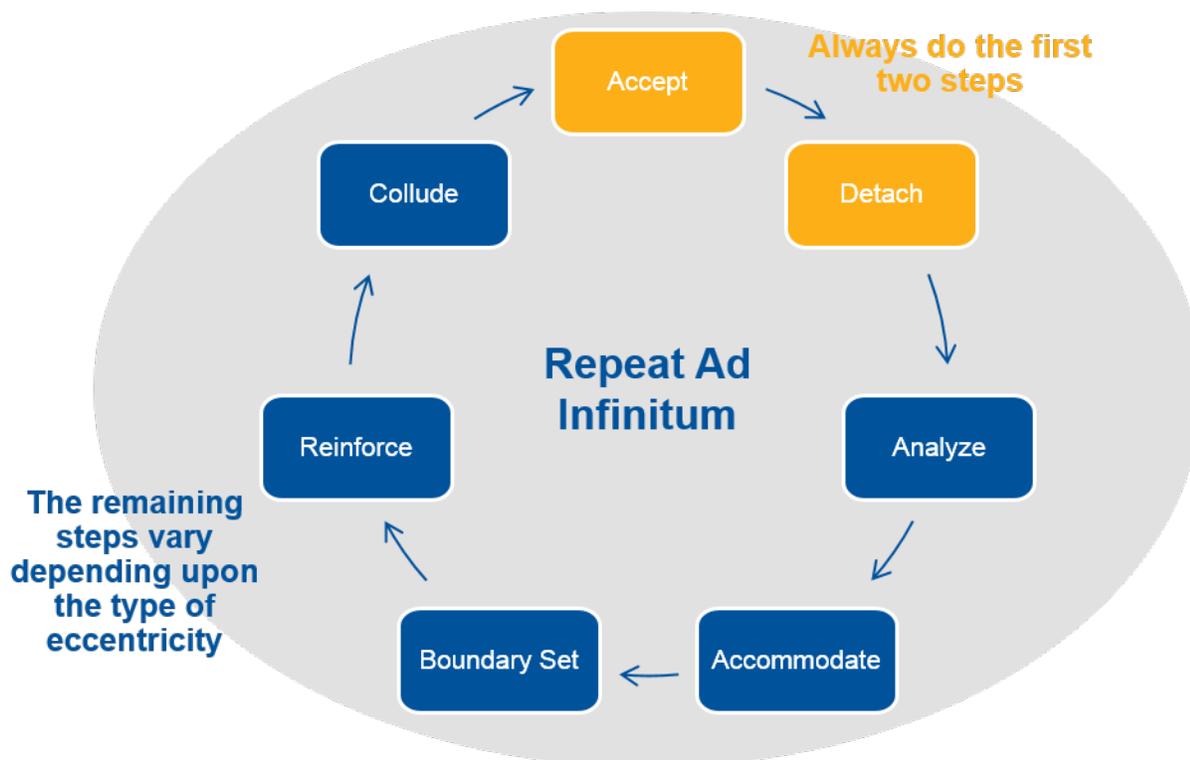
Recommendation:

CIOs should attempt to identify if members of their executive suite, including themselves, may be eccentric. If you, as the CIO, observe, or realize as a result of this research, that members of your team are applying elements of the eccentric cycle to help deal with you, you should continue to allow them to do so.

The Eccentric Executive Cycle

Most CIOs do not have a background in psychology, yet many of them describe tactics and techniques they have successfully applied with eccentrics that have a strong basis in psychology. Their strategies and tactics are synthesized in Figure 1.

Figure 1. The Eccentric Executive Cycle



Source: Gartner (October 2015)

The first research note in this set (see "Maverick* Research: Embracing Eccentric Leadership – Strategies for CIOs") described how CIOs can identify the types of eccentric executive they may be dealing with and offered sets of tactics to help them deal with each holistically. The cycle provides a process CIOs can use to deal with individual "eccentric incidents."

Eccentric incidents are instances of extreme behavior on the part of an eccentric, for which the potential for both positive and negative outcomes exists. The executive eccentric cycle can help CIOs analyze individual incidents, break the situations into their component parts and take practical steps to maximize positive outcomes, while minimizing the negative ones.

Some examples of "eccentric incidents" as reported by CIOs include:

- "My CEO is very entrepreneurial, creative and high energy. Unfortunately, he barely sleeps and doesn't seem to realize that other people do sleep. He called and woke me at 2 a.m. last week because he had an idea. He does this all the time."
- "During meetings my CFO is very detail-oriented, and no data point gets by her. You can always count on her to know the numbers and not miss anything. But during meetings, she tears up presentations as soon as she is done with the discussion, and tosses the shreds around the room."

- "Our president is very bold and likes taking risks. Sometimes he takes big risks and loses big, but, more often than not, he wins big. But if he doesn't get what he wants from a staff member, no matter how small the request, he is likely to yell, scream and berate the individual. Sometimes he will fire them. Sometimes not. Then he acts like nothing ever happened."

Dealing with such incidents is difficult and often risky. Working for or with an eccentric executive is not for the faint of heart or the risk-averse. Fortunately, the eccentric executive cycle can help. What follows is a step-by-step description of how CIOs can work through the cycle each time they are faced with a real or potential eccentric incident.

Accept That You Cannot Change the Eccentric

The first step in the cycle is "accept" that most of the behaviors and personality traits of eccentrics are as immutable as your own and, therefore, it is neither desirable nor productive to seek to change their behaviors in a radical or permanent manner. It is not unusual, for example, that CIOs may encounter entrepreneurial executives who are creative but unable to plan ahead in the extreme, and on some conscious or subconscious level have as an objective, "I want them to learn how to plan ahead better!"

Alternately, some CIOs who deal with executives who take extreme risks, yell and berate, may have as a goal, "I want them to start treating people with respect and care about other's feelings." Such eccentric behaviors are often a result of a low level of empathy, where the eccentric is unable to sense the feelings of others and will unintentionally offend them.

Unfortunately, CIOs' efforts to change such behaviors almost always lead to frustration, because they involve attempting to change the essential nature of eccentric leaders, which may be clinically impossible. Consider that modern psychiatry and pharmaceuticals can often ameliorate extreme behaviors, but rarely eliminates them permanently.

Given that, it is unrealistic to think that untrained individuals would help to drive a different outcome, no matter how sincere and well-intentioned the desire. And, in the highly unlikely case a CIO succeeds in changing an eccentric, he or she risks interfering with some of the eccentric leader's unique strengths.

Acceptance involves changing the objectives around eccentric incidents and relationships. Consider these alternative objectives:

- "I will try to figure out which of my CEO's ideas really need to be acted on and when, rather than reacting to all of them."
- "I will focus on mitigating the effects of the CEO's eccentricity, rather than believing I can stop it from happening again."
- "I will help my team deal with as many of the negative effects of all the eccentric behavior as I can."

Recommendation:

Do not seek to change the eccentrics in your workplace, but to deal with them in a healthier and more effective manner. CIOs can determine their success at the "accept" step by assessing the degree to which they seek to change the nature of eccentric leaders, rather than to mitigate their negative effects.

Detach From the Situation and Depersonalize It

Successful CIOs proceed to a second step by detaching from eccentric incidents so that they can better cope with them. Interactions with extreme executives can be very stressful encounters for CIOs and for others, and it is helpful to confront that stress by detaching, before deciding what to do next. CIOs describe detachment in several different ways.

Detach Intentionality: Some CIOs describe the importance of detaching negative intention from the motives of the eccentric. Most eccentrics often mean no harm, and their lack of empathy or their inability to control their own sometimes ritualized or impulsive behaviors is usually physiological, rather than an intentional choice on their part to behave poorly.

Several CIOs shared their observations that, "When I thought he was doing it on purpose, I became so angry that I just reacted and could not deal with him effectively." Alternately, they noted, "I was so focused on trying to unravel why she was acting that way that I could not focus on how to deal with what she actually did or wanted."

Recommendation:

While normally it is highly constructive to empathize and try to understand the point of view of the individual you are trying to influence, with eccentrics this can be both frustrating and nonproductive. By focusing on "what" they are doing, rather than "why" they are doing it, CIOs can often achieve a better outcome.

Detach Emotionally: Many CIOs shared the importance of detaching emotionally from the situation and not taking the eccentric's behavior personally. While CIOs sometimes inadvertently trigger eccentric incidents, more often than not the eccentric's extreme behavior has little to do with the CIO.

Some CIOs noted: "I used to take it personally, but then realized that the CFO behaved like that with everyone." When eccentric leaders behave similarly with all stakeholders, it is indicative that the behavior has more to do with the eccentrics than with the individuals surrounding them. If the extreme behavior only appears toward the CIO, then the situation may be more personal or a personal style conflict, rather than an indicator of true eccentricity.

Emotions are an important source of information and must not be discounted. While the traditional dictum states that people must "control" their emotions, CIOs do better to recognize that emotions are an important source of information, particularly when dealing with an eccentric leader. When CIOs sense strong emotion in themselves or the eccentric, it can indicate a potential eccentric incident is imminent and help them prevent it from happening. One CIO explained, "When I sense the CEO has become agitated, I know it is time to switch from my fifteen-minute presentation to my one-minute presentation with three bullet points, or it will end badly."

CIOs describe a variety of healthy techniques to help them detach from an eccentric incident:

- "When he starts, I just start to meditate and continue to do so until the episode passes."
- "I try to keep a sense of humor about the whole thing to keep me from getting stressed about it."
- "I sometimes physically walk away at the first opportunity, rather than reacting, so I can collect my thoughts and decide what to do more objectively."

Managing stress levels during an eccentric incident affects the outcome in more than one way. Eccentrics are more likely to act out while they themselves are under stress, thereby increasing the likelihood of an eccentric incident or the severity of one already in progress. CIOs who can manage their own stress levels through detachment, can also help manage the eccentric's stress level, or avoid inadvertently increasing their stress and the damage associated with the incident. The importance of sensing and managing stress is also emphasized, in the next step in the process, "analyze."

Recommendations:

Pay close attention to your own emotions and stress levels when dealing with an eccentric. Emotions offer useful information that CIOs should use to help them process eccentric incidents, then detach from the situations and focus on dealing with the eccentric behaviors effectively.

CIOs should complete the first two steps on the eccentric executive cycle — accept and detach — every time they are faced with an eccentric incident. These are universal steps that look much the same, regardless of the type of eccentric.

The remaining five steps in the cycle — analyze, accommodate, boundary set, reinforce and collude — look different depending on the type of eccentric leader in question. For each step, CIOs will find a description of the step, followed by recommendations on how to apply that step for each of the three types of eccentrics referenced earlier — the impulsive, the compulsive and the egotistic.

Analyze Eccentric Executives and Their State of Mind

When eccentric incidents occur or appear imminent, after detaching from the situation, CIOs must next analyze specific elements of the situation to determine the best way to proceed. According to CIOs, some of the elements they consider are:

Decide good day or bad day: Many CIOs report that each interaction with an eccentric begins with analyzing whether the eccentric is having a good day or a bad day. Bad days are those where eccentrics may be particularly stressed, and their behaviors may be extreme. Stress affects eccentrics in much the same way it does any other individual. When under stress, they may revert to habitual behaviors and simply not have the focus or energy to keep impulsive or compulsive tendencies under control.

Indicators of stress vary by each individual, but many CIOs have shared "tells" they observe, which indicate that the eccentric may be having a bad day, and therefore, it may not be a good time to bring up a difficult or challenging topic. Some "tells," according to CIOs, include:

- "If my colleague has his shoes off, it means he is having a good day and is relaxed. So it is a good time to approach him. Shoes on, means come back another day."
- "I always ask her assistant if she's having a good day or a bad day. The assistant always tells me if it is better to talk now, or to wait an hour, a day or a month to approach."
- "When my CFO starts talking incessantly and interrupts, I know he is stressed and cannot disengage from the current topic and start a new one. So I will wait him out, then give him some time to recover so he can focus at another time."

Recommendation:

Analyze the type of day an eccentric is having, and adjust your timing accordingly. Timing is often a significant factor in getting a positive result from an eccentric, and poor timing can trigger more extreme reactions than occur with executives who are not eccentric.

Notice predictable patterns: Many eccentrics are predictable to a certain extent, and by being attentive, CIOs can sense patterns they can leverage to ease their interactions and prevent incidents. CIOs describe the following examples:

- "My president enjoys talking about sales. Any other topic, she gets impatient and agitated. So anything sales-related, I take my time discussing; anything else, I keep as short as possible or don't discuss at all."
- "My CEO is always easier to approach when the interaction is scheduled, and he has time to plan and think about it. If you try to approach him in the hall for anything other than saying hello, he gets frustrated, so I avoid it."
- "My CFO hates PowerPoint and explodes every time he sees a slide deck. So everyone learns quickly that if you want something from him, never show him a slide."

Analyze the three types of eccentrics: Different eccentrics have different patterns, which are important to analyze. By adjusting the analysis by eccentric category, the information becomes more useful and easily applied.

- **Compulsive eccentrics:** Often need multiple rounds of data before they can make a decision. Analyze the number of rounds of data that they usually request — and how far in advance — to achieve a positive result.
- **Impulsive eccentrics:** Will have many ideas, but often lose interest in them over time. Analyze the amount of time that passes before they lose interest, whether it is a few minutes, a day or a week, and avoid taking action until you know that the impulsive leader is still interested.
- **Egotistic eccentrics:** Often react poorly to being challenged. Analyze the risks of challenging them. Note if eccentrics merely scream and shout, or if they marginalize or fire those who oppose them before choosing a strategy.

Accommodate and Give Eccentrics Some of What They Need

When CIOs accommodate eccentric executives, it enables them to take advantage of the unique strengths that brought those leaders to the executive suite. When dealing with some of their more challenging behaviors, accommodation involves giving eccentric leaders what they want, or feeding the eccentricity — so long as it does not conflict with the CIOs' ethics and values or pose a significant business risk.

CIOs must always assess the value of accommodating challenging behaviors versus challenging or ignoring directives that might weigh on their teams' time, stress levels and resources. In some situations, it may be more productive to accommodate the eccentric, rather than risk a larger-scale incident from occurring.

Consider common accommodations by eccentric category:

Impulsive eccentrics: Many CIOs report having a budgetary reserve on hand for last-minute requests to accommodate impulsive executives who tend not to plan ahead. As one CIO noted: "The CEO always has new ideas, and I keep staff and resources on-call to deliver what he wants whenever it is possible. That way, those times when I simply cannot deliver on an immediate request, he is more likely to be understanding."

Compulsive eccentrics: CIOs report planning ahead and phasing the delivery of information to accommodate compulsives. As one CIO described: "Even when I have all the information for a business case ready, I deliver it to him in pieces, because if I give it to him all at once, he will still ask me for more. It is less about the information and more about the process. If I follow his process, it goes better." CIOs who try to avoid the process and not accommodate, often report a negative result from incidents, like nonapproval of funding or significant damage to the relationship.

Egotistic eccentrics: One of the most critical aspects of dealing with egotistic executives is accommodating their "need to be right." Their aversion to being corrected or having others disagree with them openly can be extreme and challenging to deal with in times of conflict. One CIO explained his tactic as follows: "When the COO and I disagree, I will agree with him anyway, if anyone else is in the room. Then I will work with him privately to find a way to change his mind."

Unfortunately, accommodation alone is not desirable. When used alone, accommodation may not only reinforce an eccentric's behaviors, both desirable and undesirable, but also may accelerate or exacerbate those behaviors. CIOs must always provide reasonable accommodation, particularly of desirable behaviors, but know when to reverse their tactics and set boundaries as well.

Set Boundaries and Define Limits the Eccentric May Not Cross

Sometimes, it is simply not possible or wise for a CIO to accommodate an eccentric. Some eccentric behaviors can be personally disruptive to a CIO, disruptive to the IT department, tie up valuable IT resources that may be better deployed elsewhere and create business risks. When this occurs, successful CIOs engage in boundary setting to limit the eccentric's impact on the IT department, the business and themselves.

But setting boundaries is challenging and fraught with risks for the CIO. It is particularly difficult in IT departments that have been placed in the more traditional role of service provider, where the expected response to every request from a colleague or executive is "yes." When that colleague or executive is eccentric, behaving as a service provider and saying "yes" to myriad extreme requests can create chaos and disruption on a grand scale. Therefore, CIOs must practice setting boundaries on the eccentrics and make clear which lines they cannot cross, while assessing the risks and rewards of doing so.

Consider these CIO boundaries by eccentric category:

Impulsive eccentric: These executives rarely write things down, or record decisions that they have made. As a result, they may revisit decisions repeatedly or change course without realizing the implications their new direction may have on a CIO or an IT investment. CIOs report setting boundaries on such eccentrics by recording their decisions, then reminding them when necessary. As one CIO noted, "I send her an email every time we decide something, and when she starts to drift in a different direction, I hold her to what we decided and what was recorded in the email."

Compulsive eccentrics: They often have difficulty knowing when to stop asking for information, and may ask for information in terms of quantity rather than quality. Some CIOs have successfully set boundaries by focusing on the quality instead. As one CIO explained, "I told him he could not have another seventy pages of analysis. Instead, we negotiated and agreed to the types of data that we needed to make the decision, before I gave him any additional information."

Egotistic eccentrics: These leaders are often the most risky when trying to set boundaries, but they are also the most essential. Some CIOs report having executives call them at all hours of the day or night, simply because they had an idea and wanted to discuss it. Many egotistic executives have no understanding of (or don't care about) the level of disruption this behavior may cause. A CIO told one colleague, "You may email me after midnight, but you may not call me," to be clear about the specifics of the boundary.

It is important to note that eccentrics need not understand why these boundaries are being set for them. Understanding why you set the boundary is not required, since it may be impossible for an eccentric to understand your reasoning for setting it. It is arguable that, if they could understand your reasoning or the distress that led to the boundary setting, they would not have done the extreme behavior in the first place. For example, if an egotistic could understand that it is "rude" or "impolite" to call someone at 2 a.m., and relate to the distress this causes, he or she would not have called in the first place.

So bear in mind that a genuine understanding of why the boundary was set is optional. It is essential however, that the eccentric understands the nature of the boundary itself in specific terms, that is, "do not call me between 11 p.m. and 6 a.m.," and CIOs report that usually the executive will comply. Eventually.

Reinforce the Boundaries That You Have Set

Eccentrics will eventually comply with the boundaries a CIO sets, after significant reinforcement. Some CIOs report treating eccentrics in a manner that resembles the behavior modification

techniques practiced by psychologists. Behavior modification is a learning process, which involves extinguishing undesirable behaviors by withholding what the individual wants, and motivating new behaviors through repetition and a reward system.

The CIO uses repetition over an extended period of time to train or "modify" the eccentric leader's behaviors to fit within a preferred boundary. While most CIOs do not set out to behaviorally modify their executives, the reinforcement process many of them follow has a similar structure and a similar end result.

The reinforcement process usually looks something like this:

- The CIO sets a boundary: "Do not call me after midnight."
- The eccentric breaks the boundary, because this is simply what he or she does.
- The CIO picks up the phone at 2 a.m. and politely reminds the eccentric of the rule by saying, "Do you remember our rule? Let me remind you ... and what time is it now?"
- The CIO then declines to discuss whatever the executive called to talk about, as that would reward the eccentric for violating the boundary, and instead says, "I look forward to talking with you after 6 a.m. I am hanging up now. Have a good evening."
- The eccentric breaks the boundary again, at least one more time, because that is what he or she does.
- The CIO repeats the process above, reminding the eccentric of the rule and withholding the desired 2 a.m. conversation, because the boundary was violated.
- After repeated reinforcement discussions and more appropriately timed 6 a.m. discussions, sooner or later the eccentric adopts the boundary.

At some point during the reinforcement process, CIOs must occasionally repeat the second step of the eccentric cycle — detachment — and remind themselves that eccentrics likely have no ill intent, but that changing ingrained behaviors requires time, patience and consistency.

When CIOs reinforce boundaries in a patient and consistent manner, many eccentrics will adopt the new boundaries and foster no ill feelings as a result. Often boundary setting can foster mutual respect and understanding instead.

Collude With Your Team and Help Them Cope Effectively

One of the greatest challenges for CIOs in dealing with eccentricity, is that many eccentric executives go beyond dealing with the CIO and will often reach out to preferred members of the IT team directly, or will engage those who simply happen to cross their path. While this is the prerogative of any senior executive, and is often culturally desirable to break down hierarchical structures, many midlevel and junior staff are not well-equipped to deal with eccentric executives and may find the experience almost traumatic. Repeated experiences may cause significant disruption to an IT department and its ability to deliver.

It is important that CIOs coach and "collude" with their teams to help them deal effectively with the strengths and challenges of eccentric leaders. For example, junior staff may be so flattered that the CEO contacted them directly, that they may act on whatever the CEO requested without checking with anyone first, and without considering potential negative consequences of that action.

While CIOs should avoid micromanaging their teams, they should, at a minimum, provide them with strong guidance about dealing with the eccentric, and even become a strong buffer between the eccentric executive and their team when the team becomes a target. The tactics that CIOs employ often resemble collusion, because they require a team-based approach that the eccentric may or may not be aware of and is, therefore, risky to employ.

Consider the types of collusion that are appropriate for different types of eccentrics:

Impulsive eccentrics: These executives will often go around the CIO, seeking immediate satisfaction from an IT staff member to start a project, change an IT system or buy some new IT tool. The impulsive leader may do this not out of disrespect for the CIO, but simply because the CIO is at lunch, or because he or she runs into an IT staff member in the hallway and see no reason not to act on the impulse.

In this situation, CIOs must often coach their teams to listen to the request of the executive, but not to act on anything until they speak with the CIO. Multiple members of an IT team may find themselves running in different directions for one eccentric, unless they coordinate among themselves. They cannot expect an impulsive to let them know how many projects they have initiated, or how many different people they have working on the same request.

Compulsive eccentrics: These eccentrics will often go around the CIO as part of their perpetual pursuit of data and information. If, for example, they did not get "enough" information from the CIO or did not "like" the information, it would not be unusual for them to go directly to IT staff members and ask them for the information.

In such instances, CIOs must coach their teams not to provide any information to the eccentric without speaking with the CIO first. By inadvertently providing different data, or data in a different context, they may distract and derail a compulsive and make it difficult to get a productive discussion back on track. Staff members may also find that they become part of the compulsive's regular information-gathering process, which can be a significant burden on their time, when they thought they were simply providing information for a one-time request.

Egotistic eccentrics: These executives will often circumvent their CIOs to lavishly reward or excessively correct IT staff members directly. It is not unusual that egotistic CEOs will form an attachment, or an aversion, to specific IT staff members they encounter, which can create confusion about reward systems, or bring someone directly into a firing line. The IT staff members may either be the target of, or witness to, the abrasive and demanding behaviors often associated with egotistic executives, and CIOs report that it is not unusual that these interactions end with an IT staff member in tears or in significant distress.

In these situations, CIOs must often buffer their teams from egotistic CEOs, sometimes by attempting to limit their contact with them. In other cases, a CIO can buffer by explaining to IT staff

the kinds of behavior to expect from the eccentric, and coaching them in how to react or in how not to react to the more abrasive behaviors. Most importantly, staff must often be coached that if the egotistic eccentric gets through the buffer and is in direct contact with them, they should say "yes" to whatever the eccentric requests to avoid inadvertently triggering an incident, then find the CIO as quickly as possible to deal with the situation.

Repeat Ad Infinitum

The seven-step eccentric executive cycle is a tool for CIOs to use to help them embrace eccentricity, while dealing with the challenges of these executives. In the center of the cycle is the instruction to "repeat ad infinitum." CIOs should expect to repeat the cycle "to infinity," because the essential nature of the eccentrics they work with will rarely change. This is both fortunate and challenging, as eccentrics should be a welcome addition to enterprises interested in embracing psychological diversity as a potential competitive advantage.

Eccentricity is not a problem to be solved; it is an opportunity and a challenge for CIOs to manage. With patience, persistence, and an adherence to the steps on the eccentric executive cycle, CIOs can succeed in getting the most out of their eccentric relationships.

Gartner Recommended Reading

Some documents may not be available as part of your current Gartner subscription.

"Maverick* Research: Embracing Eccentric Leadership — Strategies for CIOs"

Note 1 Roots of the Word "Maverick"

Derived from the name of Texas rancher Samuel Maverick and his steadfast refusal to brand his cattle, "maverick" connotes someone who willfully takes an independent — and frequently disruptive or unorthodox — stand against prevailing modes of thought and action.

Note 2 New Ground Broken

This research proposes a model to help CIOs and other IT executives practice behavior modification with their eccentric executives. The research goes beyond the traditional notion of "managing up" or using a purely data-driven or relationship-based model to deal with executives, because we posit that many senior executives are in fact, "eccentric." Eccentric executives have a high intelligence quotient and many skills; however, they may have a mild, hidden or undiagnosed mental disorder, which renders them challenging to work with on a daily basis. Such eccentrics may exhibit extreme or unusual behaviors in the form of what is termed here, "eccentric incidents." The seven-step cycle proposed here is based on models and processes — outlined in the field of psychology — to deal with extreme behaviors and modify the behavior of more extreme individuals to ensure better outcomes for everyone who works with them. This research proposes that CIOs embrace the concept of psychological diversity, and the out-of-the-box thinking that comes with eccentrics. At

the same time, CIOs must use nontraditional techniques to help deal with these executives for a better work environment and improved business outcomes.

More on This Topic

This is part of an in-depth collection of research. See the collection:

- [Driving Your Disruptive Innovations With Our Maverick* Wisdom](#)

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