Building a Strong Relationship with the Business

What is the IT-Business Relationship?

"It is a set of beliefs that one party holds about the other and how these beliefs are formed from the interactions of […] individuals as they engage in tasks associated with an IT service" (Day 2007)

What do we know about the Business-IT relationship in organizations ?

- It is a multifaceted interaction of people and processes.

- It is complex. Different expectations and accountabilities may lead to lack of trust.

- It tends to cluster into patterns (e.g., IT is a necessary evil; IT is a support but not a partner; business and IT are partners).
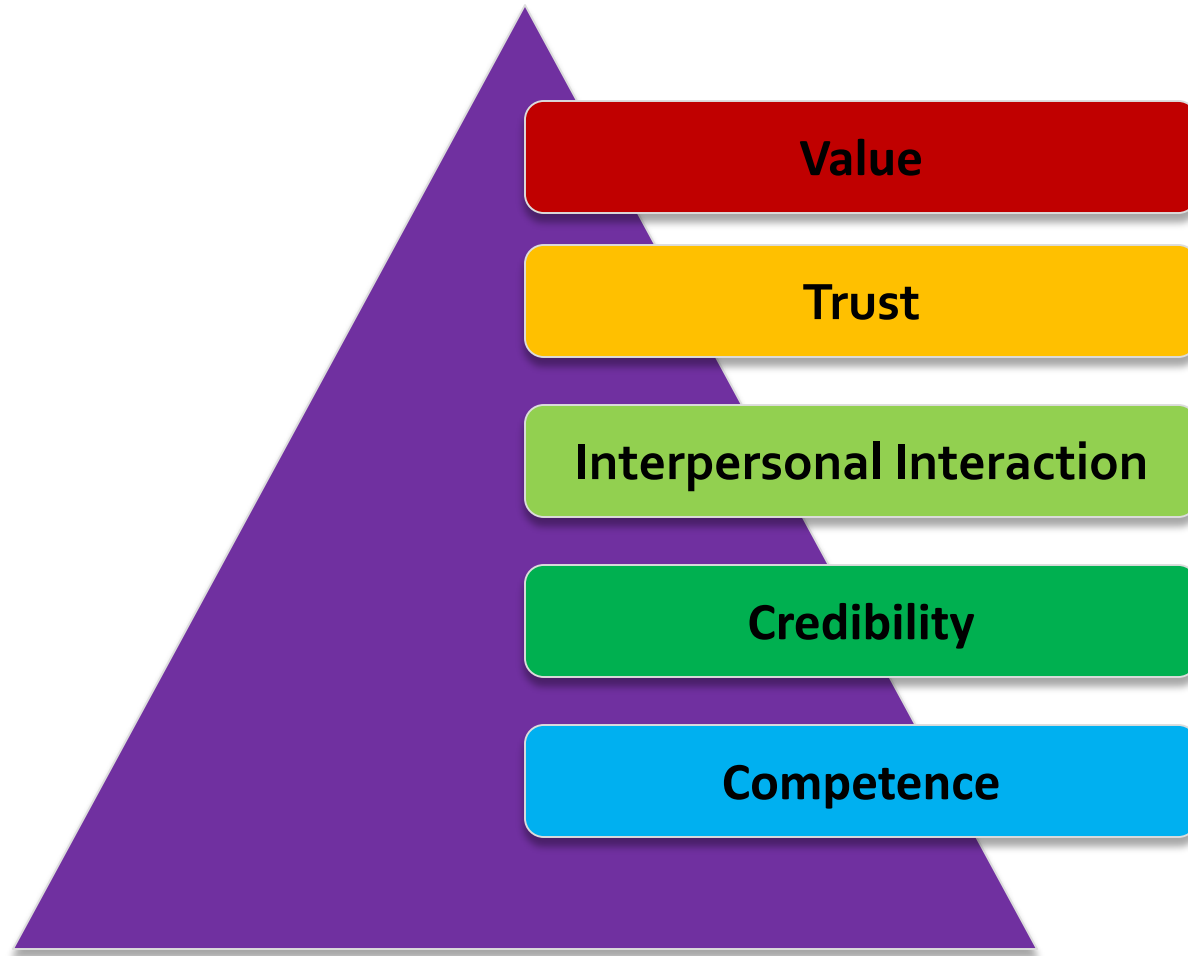
Characteristics of the Business-IT Relationship

- IT has to keep proving itself.

- The business is often disengaged from IT work.

- Business expectations of IT change continually.

Characteristics of the Business-IT Relationship (continued)

- The relationship is affected by the interaction of many people and processes at multiple levels.

- Clarity is often lacking around expectations and accountabilities.

- There are many "disconnects" between the two groups.

The Foundation of a Strong Business-IT Relationship

Pyramid diagram showing foundation levels from top to bottom:
- Value
- Trust
- Interpersonal Interaction
- Credibility
- Competence

Building Block #1: Competence --
The Key Competences

- *Expertise* – the ability to support a technical recommendation and have up-to-date knowledge.

- *Financial awareness* – the ability to identify the value of IT in terms of ROI and total cost of ownership.

- *Execution* – the ability to understand the business, develop a vision and operationalize strategies.

Building Block #1: Competence -- Strengthening Competence

- Find ways to develop business knowledge in all IT staff.

- Link IT's success criteria to business metrics.

- Make business value an explicit criteria in all IT decisions.

- Ensure effective execution in all IT activities.

Building Block #2: Credibility

Credibility is the belief that others can be counted on to do what they say they will do. It is built by:

- Keeping agreements.

- Acting with integrity, honesty and openness.

- Being responsive (e.g., delivering on time and under budget).

Building Block #2: Credibility -- Strengthening Credibility

- Communicate frequently and explicitly.

- Pay attention to the "little things".

- Utilize external cues to credibility.

- Assess all business touch points.

Building Block #3: Interpersonal Interaction – Key Dimensions

- **_Professionalism_** - can be developed by five sets of attitudes and behaviors:

- ✓ Comportment (i.e., appearance and manners on the job)
- ✓ Preparation (i.e., displaying competence and good organization.
- ✓ Communication skills
- ✓ Judgment (i.e., making right choices)
- ✓ Attitude (i.e., caring about doing a job well)

Nontechnical communication

The ability to translate and interpret needs, not only from business to technology and vice versa, but also between business units.

- ## *Social skills*

  The ability to build mutual understanding, to enable all parties to get comfortable with one another and to uncover hidden assumptions.

- ***Management of politics and conflict***

  The ability to understand the role of politics and how they can affect the IT work (i.e., addressing conflict and use it to deliver creative solutions).

- Expect professionalism.

- Promote a wide variety of social interactions at all levels.

- Develop "soft skills" in IT staff.

Building Block #4: Trust

The most important way to build trust is through an effective governance:

- Integrating planning, defined accountabilities, and clarity of roles and responsibilities are key aspects of an effective governance.

- An effective governance addresses the business' expectations of its IT function.

Building Block #4: Trust – Strengthening Trust

- Design governance for clarity and transparency.

- Mandate the relationship.

- Design IT for business expectations.

Conclusions

- Business-IT relationships are complex, with interactions of many types, at many levels, and between both individuals and across functional and organizational entities.

- Four majors components are needed to build a strong business-IT relationship: competence, credibility, interpersonal skills, and trust.

Communicating with Business Managers

The Importance of Communication

- Communication is a key social element of the organizational alignment between IT and business.

- One of the most important skills IT staff needs to develop is how to communicate effectively with businesses.

The Importance of Communication

Good communication is essential for:
- ✓ Building trust and partnerships between the business and IT
- ✓ Helping IT to manage the business perceptions of IT
- ✓ Understanding the priorities and pressures of the business
- ✓ Conveying the business value of IT

Principles of "Good" Communication

Principle 1: The effectiveness of communication is measured by its outcomes.

Principle 2: Communication is social behavior.

Principle 3: Shared knowledge improves communication.

Principle 4: Mature organizations have better communication.

Principle 1: The effectiveness of communication is measured by its outcomes

- Communication should be measure by its outcomes rather than our intentions.

- Communication can get distorted through filters such as politics, culture, and personal points of view.
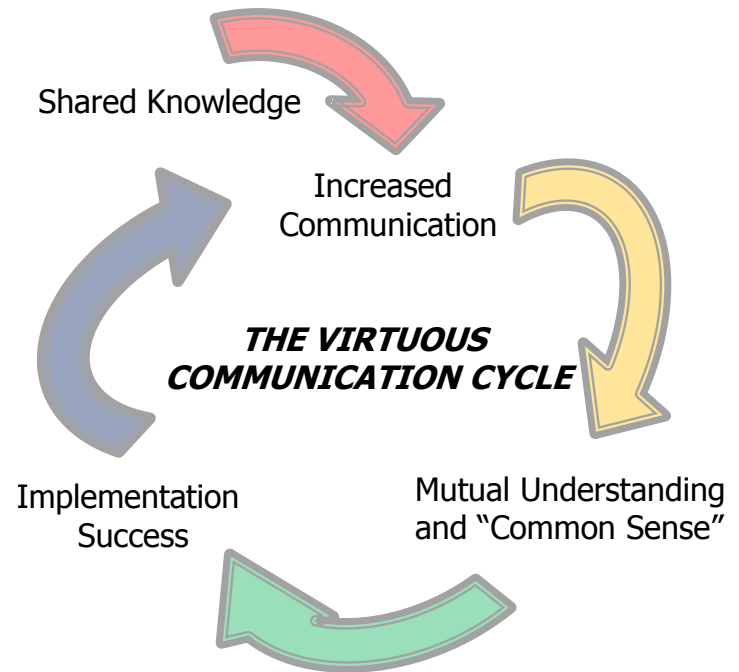
Principle 2: Communication is Social Behavior

- Communication not only transmits ideas; it also negotiates relationships.

- *How* you say what you mean is just as important as *what* you say.

- IT staff and managers need to become aware of the power of different linguistic styles in communication situations.

Principle 3: Shared Knowledge Improves Communication

- The more IT staff learns about the business, the better communication becomes.

- Shared knowledge is the beginning of the "virtuous circle".

Shared Knowledge

Increased Communication

THE VIRTUOUS COMMUNICATION CYCLE

Implementation Success

Mutual Understanding and "Common Sense"

Principle 4: Mature Organizations Have Better Communication

"You can't be a partner unless you're a mature IT organization"

- Strong organizational practices support and reinforce good interpersonal communication.

- Mature IT organizations embed appropriate communication at the operational and strategic level.

Obstacles To Effective Communication

- ***The changing nature of IT work:***

IT work has become more complex over time. Multiple cultures, different political contexts, various times zones, and virtual contacts make communication more challenging.

- *Hiring practices:*

  IT skills are changing to become more consultative and collaborative, rather than focused exclusively on technology.

Obstacles To Effective Communication (continued)

- ***IT and business organization structures:***

  IT staff is expected to play a "knowledge broker" role, not only between IT and business but also between business units. Thus, business silos can make this communication challenging.

Obstacles To Effective Communication (continued)

- ***Nature and frequency of communication:***

  Formal interactions improve communication, but communication should not exclusively occur in formal interactions (e.g., through IT governance).
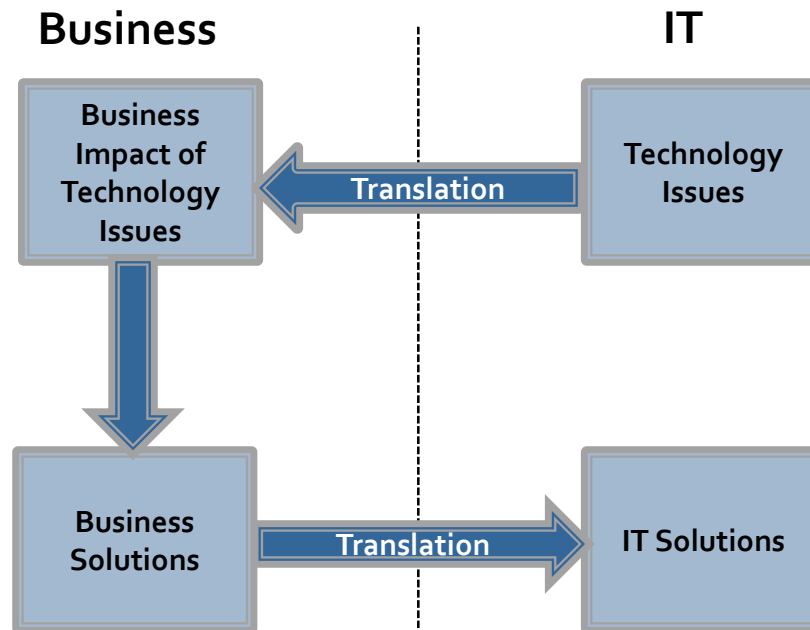
"We definitely need a 'we' attitude in IT, rather than 'us-them' attitude"

Attitude:

Many IT staff are motivated by the desire to be right rather than the desire to communicate effectively.

Communication Skills for IT Staff

● *Translation:*   A four-step process

- *Tailoring:*

  IT staff needs to adapt their communication to the needs of their audience by:

  -- Understanding needs, agendas, and politics.

  -- Choosing the suitable communication method (e.g., reports, face-to-face, e-mails).

- *Transparency:*

The business needs to see what is being done in IT and what it costs. This means:

-- Communication that is honest, accurate, ethical, and respectful.

-- Getting the communication process flowing both ways.

Communication Skills for IT Staff (continued)

- ***Thinking, talking, and listening:***

--IT staff needs to understand how and where to speak and how to listen to others.

-- Communicating innovative ideas effectively involves "getting inside the head of the business".

Recommendations to improve Business-IT communication

- Make the importance of effective communication visible.

- Work with HR to develop new skill expectations and roles.

- Develop communication skills both formally and informally.

Recommendations to improve Business-IT communication (continued)

- Increase the nature and frequency of communication.

- Spend more time on communication.

Conclusions

- Effective communication can overcome misunderstandings, dysfunctional behavior, and, above all, failures to deliver IT value.

- Good communication has both social and organizational dimensions.

- A "virtuous circle" of communication can improve IT performance and perceptions of IT value.