

5 Counter-Intuitive Actions That Can Make or Break a CTO In The First Year

The first year will define a new CTO's tenure and set the tone for transformative impact. This critical period represents an unparalleled opportunity to spearhead technology-driven evolution. These five counterintuitive actions are the five to thrive.

1. Build Great Relationships

3. Understand Customer Experience

2. Get Good at Board Meetings

4. Align with the Product Roadmap

5. Communicate Context Before Content.

As a CTO advisor and executive coach, I have observed most CTOs jump right into execution and try to establish their technical prowess, which while it may seem urgent is not as important as these five crucial actions. By focusing on five key areas, an incoming CTO can profoundly demonstrate vision and leadership. The first one year may be decisive, but the journey has only just begun.

As the CEO's tech guru, the CTO guides critical tech decisions and investments, keeping the CEO and board apprised of cyber risks, infrastructure needs, development progress and competitive landscape. Leveraging expertise on emerging tech, the CTO plays a strategic role in evaluating trends and advising how to harness innovations to achieve business success.





Famous examples include Microsoft CTO Kevin Scott informing CEO Satya Nadella on intelligent cloud and AI advances or Sprint CTO John Saw overseeing the Nextel network integration for CEO Gary Forsee. On a company level, the CTO ensures technology delivers value and differentiation. They map technology architecture to business priorities to enable new capabilities, efficiencies, and innova-

products to expand the company's ecosystem while also bolstering security. Or Goldman Sachs CTO Marco Argenti migrated core platforms to the cloud allowing faster software delivery and data analytics. The CTO role is thus increasingly mission-critical - a 2019 PwC survey of US CEOs found 61% planned to prioritize recruitment of tech officers to optimize digital operations. With technology permeating every industry, an effective CTO is often key to strategic growth and progress.

1. Build Great Relationships

While you might be tempted to dive into tech first, but, let me tell you, having coached over 1000 tech professionals, your ability to develop these relationships is critical. This is what I see the most successful CTOs doing. Building great relationships sets the groundwork for your new role.



As Chief Technology Officer, cultivating strong relationships with the board, CEO and broader organization is critical for aligning technology strategy with business goals, securing buy-in on critical tech initiatives, and receiving the support and resources necessary for execution. The CTO needs to earn the trust of their CEO, peers, teams, and customers. They can never assume that it is given. It has to be earned. An open partnership with the CEO is essential for the CTO to get started on their new and impactful role. Positive rapport with board members enables the CTO to communicate technology vision and needs and instill confidence. Across the organization, sturdy connections allow the CTO to assess business needs, spur collaboration on tech solutions, and demonstrate technology's value. With trust and goodwill established, the CTO and CXO can more deftly navigate political tensions, make strategic trade-offs, and obtain backing for transformational technology changes that drive competitiveness and innovation.

Having solid relationships with their peers, as well as the Board are the two most common blind spots for new CTOs and CXOs. Overcoming them proves beneficial for their short- and long-term success. One area CTOs may tend to overlook is their relationship with the operational leaders. Operational leaders are great allies for the CTO as they are the people who make the grand vision a reality. "Everyone in the rowboat must understand the why, where, and how to make it to the destination," says Mark Eimer, CTO of Hackensack Meridian Hospital. Everything the CTO envisions and executes has to be supported from an operational standpoint.

2. Get Good at Board Meetings

Typically, the CTO would be ready to show their technical prowess. However, the Board is craving for their leadership chops. Presenting to the Board of Directors is a pivotal moment for any employee, as it offers a prime opportunity to directly communicate with and influence the leaders who steer the company's strategy and vision. Board members possess tremendous power and their buy-in on key projects, proposals, and initiatives can make or break their success. Typically, the CTO would be ready to show their technical prowess. However, the Board is craving for their leadership chops. Presenting to the Board of Directors is a pivotal moment for any employee, as it offers a prime opportunity to directly communicate with and influence the leaders who steer the company's strategy and vision.



Board members possess tremendous power and their buy-in on key projects, proposals, and initiatives can make or break their success. Therefore, presentations to the Board demand rigorous preparation, sharp delivery, and thoughtful responses to questions to make a compelling case that persuades directors to lend their support. A successful Board presentation represents a chance to demonstrate leadership skills under the scrutiny of the company's most discerning critics. With so much on the line, the CTO needs to be diligent to ensure presentations to the Board are impactful and create a strong first impression. Something I learned from how Board meetings were planned at Intuit and GoDaddy was that you only pick and discuss critical topics.

The pre-read material can be long and detailed but the time with the Board can be used to dive into what is critical and where the CEO and CTO need the expertise of the Board members. A general practice is to send the Board meeting material a week before the Board meeting allowing everyone the time to read and prepare for the meeting.

3. Understand Customer Experience

Dig deeper into the lives of the customers you serve. Touch and feel the products that your customers experience before they sign up when they are new, and particularly when they cancel (or abandon) your products to use your competitors. This will heighten your awareness and help you develop customer empathy. Companies serve different customers with a portfolio of products. The needs and wants of each of these customer types, also known as customer segments, are different. Customer Experience(CX) is the core of how a company treats its customers. Amazon has a leadership principle called customer obsession. Jeff Bezos used that leadership principle to continue highlighting how obsessed he was and how he wanted everybody from the people running the call centers to the engineers, product leaders, and the executives, always to be obsessed about customer experience.

CTOs need to spend time to understand what the different touch points are, what are the different experiences that customers have, and what is the technology stack that brings that experience to life. CTO's can show how much they love the customers by identifying and solving a low-effort high-impact customer problem within the first one year. It is worth more than just having slides to present in their first six months. Every C-Suite employee needs to understand what is working to attract customers and what is causing them to leave to competitors. There are metrics such as NPS (net promoter scores), which give you an idea of where things are. However, you need to go deeper and understand every single touch point that is there, which defines what the customer experience looks like, for your company and the company's product in the hands of your valuable customers.



4. Align with the Product Roadmap

When CTOs view a roadmap, the first question that comes to their mind is about feasibility. Is this roadmap something my team can deliver in the time it states? The successful CTOs ask themselves a completely different question. How will this roadmap serve my customers? They keep asking their Product Leaders and partners for clarity. They meet their customers. If a CTO always starts with what we can and can't do, they will never be able to innovate for customers.



A product roadmap inspires clarity and direction. A roadmap is built through collaboration as different teams need to support it. CTOs do not lead the building of the product roadmap but they do play a leading role in the execution of the roadmap. Product, Engineering, Design, Analytics, Marketing, Sales, and Customer Care all come together to create it. Operational teams that are required to support the product post-launch are often not included in the beginning. Good CTOs keep operational teams involved at all times.

A product roadmap demonstrates that C-Suite is confident about the direction of the products. A solid product roadmap is a function of customer empathy, prioritization, and communication. A CTO / CXO can spend the time digging deep and identifying the key themes in a product roadmap. Themes represent the strategy which sometimes refers to the product pillars of the organization. The pillars help the product, technology, sales, and engineering organizations align on the future of the product. If there is no roadmap, there is no vision for the future. "Fit your product, service, and/or offering to meet current and future customer needs," says Christopher Jures, Director of Cybersecurity Planning and Identity Governance at HMMH.

5. Communicate Context Before Content

Most CTOs would complete the first four points and then rush to identify the action plan. And that does not get the results. Effective CTOs don't just focus on the tactical engineering plans and execution (the how), they also put a lot of emphasis on defining the broader purpose and motivation (the why). Specifically, great CTOs take the time to contextualize engineering initiatives and priorities by tying them back to the company's overall mission statement.



For example, a CTO at a social media company might frame a new machine learning project as supporting the mission of connecting people across the globe. By clearly communicating how engineering work maps back to the company's grand vision or reason for existence, CTOs help provide meaning and emotional engagement for their teams.

Engineers feel more invested when they see that their day-to-day efforts ladder up to a big, aspirational goal. When CTOs take the time to establish and reinforce the "why" in this way, it has tangible benefits. Engineers can focus and make better decisions about priorities. They have context for why some projects are more critical than others. They feel more motivated and buy into the mission, which improves retention of top talent. I have seen these benefits first-hand at previous companies like Intuit and Microsoft by keeping the engineering mission front and center.



About Mahesh M. Thakur

Mahesh M. Thakur is a high-tech executive coach and advisor who speeds up the runway for newly appointed CTOs and CXOs. Mahesh has held technical and leadership roles at Microsoft Bing, Amazon, Intuit Quickbooks, and Intel in the areas of AI, Customer Experience, and Product Management. Mahesh advises visionary leaders to excel through individual and group coaching. Mahesh led the Bing Product at Microsoft which is the world's second-largest AI implementation. Named one of the world's top 100 executive coaches by Dr. Marshall Goldsmith, Mahesh also teaches at NYU and Columbia.



"Every forward-thinking CEO and CHRO should impart Mahesh's coaching to their CTO"

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