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z/Bottom Line



ERIC L. VAUGHAN

Rules of Engagement

The British philosopher and social critic 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 friends, partners, and colleagues. The mainframe industry is more complex than ever before for CIOs sorting through the labyrinth of choices of platforms, operating systems, databases, and languages. In our often-frenetic world of implementing IT, 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. In fact, the idea of cooperating "factions" within the industry is almost an oxymoron: between customers and vendors, consultants and vendors, even between 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 that these parties could actually work together.

This needs to change, and it's the responsibility of all involved to make fundamental changes in their approaches and attitudes in order to accomplish it. Why do that? Because the significant contributions that sincere parties can provide to each other can offer tremendous advantages. A set of ground rules can change the game and, for the betterment of the industry, let's consider each of the roles:

Vendors working with customers:

- Be a consultant first. As a member of the technology industry, vendors should be apprised of all available solutions.
- Lead with the customer's interest, really listening to their needs without morphing their needs 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 over at Macy's competitor, Gimbel's? Macy's management was horrified; however, they soon discovered that type of sincere care for the needs of the customer was rewarded handsomely with loyal, repeat customer sales. Trust had been established.

Customers working with vendors:

- Despite past experiences, allow all vendors their shot at serving your needs. Don't lump them all 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 you're dealing with is part of a business as well. Treat the relationship as any other business relationship. You'd never dream of setting up a telephone call with your customer and then simply miss the call, or not return theirs. Good business acumen should prevail in all relationships.

- Be candid about 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. It's not fair to the relationship to ask for the vendor's expense when you're either not capable or ready to advance the opportunity, given the correct solution.

Consultants working with customers:

- Consult! As an industry expert, consultants should be aware of the variety of technologies that can help a customer. If a Java approach makes more sense, but your skillset is .NET, recommend the Java solution. It's the customer's needs that win.
- Check your own interests at the door. You'll build trust with your customer when you do.
- 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. Delegate; don't abdicate.
- Differentiate between a hired hand and a hired mind. If you're looking for information and guidance, be sure that's what you have brought on board.
- Check to see if any recommendations ever include technology/skillset outside their competencies.

The world of the mainframe executive is full of options for failure and success. In April 2004, we celebrate the 40th anniversary of the mainframe—a true marvel for any technology standard. The cooperation of the various participants has helped to create this success and will continue to redeem the mankind of our industry.

And that's z/Bottom Line. **Z**

About the Author

Eric L. Vaughan is president and CEO of illustro Systems International, LLC. He has more than 20 years of experience in the IT industry and is leading illustro in its focus on helping IT executives extend and enhance their existing investments.
Voice: 214-800-8900 • e-Mail: evaughan@illustro.com