Senior Management Visibility is a Contact Sport
by Pete McGarahan

"If you don't like change, you're going to like irrelevance even less"
– US Army Chief of Staff (ret.) General Eric Shinseki

My message is simple: As a support leader, you must set a course for positive change and impact by engaging senior management in your function. Senior management is the most powerful, influential force you have to champion your support organization; and no single group has a greater ability to make you obsolete.

Seriously; getting senior execs on your side is a contact sport, and you will take some hits, suffer some bruises and carry some scars. However, if you fail to enroll executive leaders, you instantly consign yourself and your team to being a commodity player where irrelevance is one budget cut away.

So what is your plan to create and execute a "Full Contact" plan to address your senior management challenge? Let me offer this outline:

1. Lead with courage and confidence
2. Be a relentless Customer Advocate
3. Always be Networking
4. Moments of truth
5. Communicate, communicate, communicate
6. Commit the execs? It is the only way

1. Lead with courage and confidence
The perceived value of the support organization is directly related to its manager’s ability to lead with courage and confidence, building relationships and communicating effectively to all levels of the organization. Demonstrate strategic leadership in broadening your services portfolio beyond technology to
comprehensive business process support. And be confident in your ability to transform your support organization to deliver best-practiced, cost-effective, enterprise-wide support.

Remember that courage and confidence feed one another. In the course of my career I've heard all of the excuses for not stepping forward:

- "I am too busy"
- "My boss won't let me"
- "I do not know how to be strategic"
- "I am scared I won't be able to deliver"
- "What if it hurts my career?"

But the real question to ask yourself is, once again: accomplishment or irrelevance? The choice is yours.

2. Be a relentless Customer Advocate
You are the first and best Customer Advocate for your company! It is up to you to represent the customer to the organization, and the organization to the customer.

Today's successful support leaders use this charter — the Voice of the Customer — to uniquely position themselves within the IT hierarchy. They use fact-based insights to address customer needs, requirements and issues, as well as champion IT Service Management best practices. In this way, these Customer Advocates are catalysts for deepening the relationship between customers and the IT organization.

What does this voice sound like? Courageous and confident. Armed with data, facts, analysis and reports that are jewels of continuous improvement. Able to articulate cause-and-effect decision scenarios. Well-prepared with a Balanced Scorecard, which presents the tradeoffs and linkages among naturally opposing metrics such as cost-control demands, customer service requirements, and dynamic market forces such as resource availability.

As Chief Customer Advocate, it is up to you to efficiently and effectively reconcile these demands. Otherwise, your customers will find another source
(decentralized, more expensive and inefficient) or completely bypass Tier-1 and go directly to Tier-2 and Tier-3 resources (delaying key Infrastructure and application upgrades and rollouts, more expensive, no tracking, visibility or management).

Above all, remember: Courageous, confident leaders model a "No Excuses, Just Solutions" philosophy and behavior.

3. Always be networking
It is imperative for you to view every event as a networking opportunity. Whether it is email, phone calls, meetings, informal lunches or company sports and social activities, every interaction you have with your customers is a one-time opportunity to enhance your team's professional and business savvy image. Every interaction gives your team a broader understanding of that customer, an opportunity to build upon the existing relationship as well delivers against the marketing communications plan.

Regularly engage your customers wherever and whenever you encounter them. Understand what they do, how they do it, and how they use technology and applications to be more productive. Nothing strengthens your "voice," and your ability to articulate it to senior management, than firsthand knowledge of your customer. In addition, use surveys and focus groups (formal and informal), floor walks, and onsite visits to add to your knowledge base. Other ways to gather intelligence include service desk open houses, customer training, attend their departmental meetings and new-employee orientation sessions.

What does all this have to do with gaining senior management visibility? Everything. Networking is the secret weapon in gaining executive team support and involvement. You have to meet them on their own "turf." If you engage in their activities, events and meetings … invite them to lunch … ask them about themselves and what their pain points are … you'll build the trust and confidence necessary to champion your cause.

In fact, mature support leaders know that more business is done based on trust and relationships than any other reason. They drive themselves to become
seasoned professionals in the art of networking and building positive relationships in the same way highly successful sales people do.

Who’s your first target? Your most natural champion — your Chief Information Officer (CIO). If the CIO is unaware or indifferent to the value and importance of the support organization, then your job is exponentially tougher. Certainly you can network with business managers, build relationships, and create outside-in pressure, but you must create CIO buy-in. Help the CIO understand that the customer’s perception of IT is directly related to their experiences with the service desk, and that affects their perception of not only the service desk, but of the CIO personally. Leverage this opportunity to make your CIO successful in the eyes and voice of the customer.

Well-respected consultant (and former boss of mine) Susan H. Cramm recently published an article in CIO magazine entitled, “New Year’s Resolutions for CIOs.” In the article she identified a number of key commitments for CIOs, including:

- Spend one day a week with "one level down" and the "front line"
- Fix the top service issue
- Seek information that will broaden your perspective and ensure that you live, and lead, in the real world

Susan impresses upon CIOs that "all your other accomplishments will suffer if you are unable to deliver a level of service consistent with what your business delivers to its customers. Stop ignoring it or excusing it; there are a million good reasons why your service is the way it is, but none of them matter." (Emphasis ours.)

This is exactly what support leaders need to focus on — assisting their CIOs in gaining the real-world experience needed to help them understand root causes and champion your improvement program that eliminates persistent problems and challenges.

4. Moments of truth
Support leaders have long known that getting senior management on the phones is in the best interest of the company. What better way to open the eyes of senior
management to the nature and importance of the support function! After all, this is one of the most critical and emotional touch points customers have with the organization, which is why it is also the best and fastest way for executives to get unfiltered and unedited customer insights.

One reason this common sense approach frightens most "checklist managers" — those who faithfully rely on formulaic metrics that never expose them to the realities and demands of the business — is fear of the truth and what they need to do to address it!

But what's to fear?

When senior leaders listen to the frontline, they receive honest feedback about current initiatives. It is an enlightening customer satisfaction measurement tool that enables decision makers to understand how corporate programs and initiatives are being implemented, deployed, and acted upon by employees.

Getting the execs on the phones is a simple, powerful way to gain the information they need to support you, so you can take action and make better and faster decisions, deliver business value, and satisfy shareholders.

5. Communicate, communicate, communicate
A support success story is a brief, eight- to ten-slide presentation on the state of the support organization. It should include:

- Breadth and depth of your services portfolio
- Value proposition
- Involvement in current projects
- Business impact measurements
- Cost-effective best practices
- Customer testimonials
- Organizational chart

Tell your support success story to whoever will listen. It works. I know of one CIO who was so impressed by the presentation that he had it mounted on an easel.
outside his office. As senior executives walked by and inquired about it, the CIO told the support success story. That is high-visibility marketing.

For unexpected encounters with senior management, prepare an Elevator Pitch — a focused, deliberate, 15-second message that paints a memorable picture of business value delivered (e.g., impact, results, continuous improvement). Leave them with a confidence, with a great impression, and with wanting more. For example:

"Thanks for asking; everything is going well. We completed an assessment of our support operations against customer needs, industry benchmarks, and demonstrated best practices. From there, we created a 30-60-90-day continuous improvement plan, which aligned our support strategy, structure and services to better address the needs of our customers. We delivered phase 1 where we eliminated 10% of our calls, we are solving more problems, faster at tier-1 while reducing the total cost of support to the organization. I'd love to share with you additional results, business value delivered, and customer testimonials at your convenience. I'd also appreciate it if you could spend a few hours with the service desk so you can see us in action to understand how we’re supporting the business, focused on quality and value and delighting customers"

6. Commit the execs! It is the only way
There is an old rule about influence: "External commitment brings internal commitment."

This is where getting senior management visibility becomes a real contact support. To drive real commitment — where they don't just model lukewarm support, but vigorously and enthusiastically promote and champion your function — you must get their attention and make them commit and champion your ongoing plan of action to a be a best-in-class service and support provider of business value.

Over the years I have developed an open letter to senior management that asks for their commitment and sponsoring of the support organization in the form of a customer service principles contract.
What does success look like?
At the end of the day, did you lead with courage and confidence? Are you satisfied that you acted as the Chief Customer Advocate, doing the right things for your customers, your team and the company? Did you empower your professionals to create a memorable customer experience? Did you network and leverage the relationship to improve your team’s ability to deliver great customer service?

Maybe you did but you still are not visible to senior management. Remember that performance alone is not enough! You must communicate with senior leaders and engage them in your success. If you do, I guarantee that you will gain the visibility you need to demonstrate your value, and you will accomplish great things. You just have to courageously knock on the mahogany door and …………….
Pete McGarahan is an accomplished, widely recognized expert in delivering service and support value to a wide variety of clients for more than 20 years. He blends his extensive knowledge of support industry trends and directions, proven best practices, and business alignment strategies to serve as both a thought leader and mentor for the support community.

After graduating with a B.A. in psychology from Loyola College and receiving his MBA from Iona College, Pete began his professional IT career at PepsiCo. He brought many innovations to the organization’s IT structure, including implementing and supporting the first campus-wide network and centralized PC/LAN Help Desk. He was then promoted/转移到了PepsiCo subsidiary Taco Bell, where he divided his tenure between IT and Business Planning. He was accountable for technology planning and service delivery for all IT services to the brand’s 4,500 restaurants, regional and corporate offices.

Pete later served as Director of Marketing for the Vantive Corporation and Executive Director of Help Desk Institute (HDI) before joining STI Knowledge and Help Desk 2000 in 1997. As Executive Industry Fellow, Vice President of Business Development and Chief Marketing Officer for STI, Pete managed Analyst Relationships, which led to the company’s achieving leadership placement in the Gartner Help Desk Outsourcing Magic Quadrants two years in a row. Throughout his career, Pete has consistently raised the bar for the support industry by creating, teaching and implementing support strategies, structures, best practices and roadmaps for running support like a business.

In addition, Pete has authored countless industry white papers, position papers and articles, as well as served as Editor of Impact, the well-respected support industry publication. He has received numerous awards in recognition of his work, including the prestigious HDI Team Excellence Award. He was also cited as one of the “Top 25 Professionals in the Service and Support Industry” as well as the Help Desk Professionals’ “Legend of the Year” in 2002 and again in 2004.

Company Profile:
McGarahan & Associates is in the business of helping organizations achieve service and support value. By applying extensive real world experiences, focus and industry best practices, we deliver results focused on strategic alignment, support structure, service level management, standard operating procedures, IT service management, staff utilization and training, tool optimization, marketing to senior management and reporting. You can contact Pete at pete@mcgarahan.com.