



From Roadmap to Boardroom: The Making of a Strategic CPTO

Tech Leaders Connect Dinner co-hosted by Insight-AI

What turns a strong CTO into someone the CEO and Executive Committee trust with far more than technology?

That was the question at the heart of a recent roundtable of CTOs and technology leaders. The discussion ranged widely from product ownership and private equity to board politics, commercial responsibility, delegation, customer focus and the changing influence of technology leaders, but one theme ran consistently through the conversation:

Becoming a strategic CTO or CPTO is not simply the next stage of becoming a better technologist. It involves a change of perspective: from delivering technology to helping deliver the business.

And this type of transition rarely happens overnight; it's built through experience, mistakes, exposure, relationships and, importantly, a conscious decision to operate differently.

Strategic leadership begins with letting go

For many technology leaders, early career success comes from being the person who can solve difficult problems. They know the detail, they understand the architecture, they can intervene when something goes wrong and their personal capability is part of what makes them valuable.

But the very behaviours that create a successful technologist can eventually limit a senior technology leader. One of the recurring observations during the dinner was the need to stop trying to hold on to everything personally. A chance conversation with a senior CIO provided one participant with a particularly important lesson: it is not all yours to do.

The shift into leadership means becoming comfortable with success delivered through other people and that can be difficult. There's satisfaction in personally solving technical problems. Executive leadership provides a different kind of reward: creating the environment in which other people solve it.

This also means deliberately moving away from the detail. Not abandoning technical understanding, but recognising that the CTO's greatest contribution may no longer be having the answer. It may instead be asking why, creating the right conditions and ensuring the organisation is solving the right problem.

Interestingly, AI is complicating this transition. Some senior technologists are finding themselves drawn back into hands-on creation through generative AI. But even here, the experience may resemble managing a team through prompts more than returning to traditional development. The underlying leadership challenge remains the same: where does the CTO personally create the most value?

Stop solving technology problems. Start solving business problems.

Perhaps the clearest dividing line between an operational CTO and a strategic one is the nature of the problems they choose to solve. The strategic technology leader moves beyond asking "What technology do we need?" and towards asking "What problem is the business trying to solve?". That sounds straightforward, but it changes the entire relationship between technology and the organisation.

Technology strategy stops being an independent roadmap and starts becoming one of the mechanisms through which business strategy is delivered. For CTOs and CPTOs, that requires fluency in a different language. Discussions with the CEO and CFO cannot depend on those executives learning how to speak technology. Technology leaders need to become comfortable discussing such topics as revenue, margin, cost, customer experience, risk, growth, market opportunity, value creation and metrics need to follow the same principle.

Infrastructure uptime, deployment frequency and technical debt may matter enormously inside the technology organisation. In the boardroom, the more important question is often what those things mean for revenue, customers, cost or business risk. Strategic influence begins when the rest of the executive team sees technology leadership in those terms.

Delivery earns a seat at the table. It does not make you strategic.

At board-level, strong delivery matters. Indeed, successful delivery is often what gives a CTO credibility with the board in the first place, but there is a trap: a CTO can become highly trusted to deliver and still never become part of strategic decision-making.

Once operational credibility has been established, the next step has to be made deliberately: stop being the executive delivering the technology agenda and start being the executive who contributes to the wider business agenda.

That requires being prepared to engage with the same questions that occupy the CEO. Are we going to hit the numbers? Are customers buying? Are we investing in the right things? What risks are we taking? Can the organisation execute? Where should capital be deployed? And what happens if our assumptions are wrong?

A strategic CTO needs to be comfortable with uncertainty because that is the environment in which boards operate. Boards rarely make decisions with perfect information. Technology leaders accustomed to engineering can find that uncomfortable.

At board level, however, “good enough” can sometimes genuinely be good enough. The decision is not always about finding the technically optimal answer. It is about understanding the balance of risk, reward, timing and opportunity.

Commercial responsibility changes the conversation

One of the strongest themes from the discussion was the value of commercial exposure. CTOs who have run a business unit, owned a P&L, taken responsibility for a product or worked directly with customers often see the organisation very differently.

Suddenly the questions that were mentioned earlier that occupy a CEO are no longer theoretical because revenue has to arrive, customers have to stay., products have to sell. Costs have consequences and risk becomes personal.

One participant described the change as beginning to think like the CEO including lying awake worrying about customers, sales, finance and the possibility of failure. This level of commercial responsibility can be uncomfortable for technology leaders. But that discomfort may itself be part of the development process.

Product leadership can be particularly powerful. Building a successful product requires technical understanding, certainly, but it also demands creativity, customer insight, commercial judgement, prioritisation and an understanding of markets.

The conversation repeatedly returned to customer focus: A feature-led CTO risks building what the organisation assumes customers want whilst a customer-led CTO starts with the customer problem and allows that understanding to drive the product.

And where a separate Chief Product Officer exists, the relationship between CPO and CTO becomes critical. Technology and product cannot operate as neighbouring silos if the organisation expects the combination to create value.

Understand the board you actually have

There's no such thing as the generic board. Some organisations are founder-led, others are private-equity backed. Some are pursuing growth whilst others are preparing for an exit, acquiring businesses, reducing costs or simply trying to maintain a stable operation.

Those circumstances fundamentally affect what the board expects from technology. A technically obvious investment may make little sense to an owner approaching an earn-out whilst a private-equity investor may have a very different investment horizon from a founder. A growing organisation may accept technical debt that a mature business cannot and a company pursuing acquisitions may value integration capability more highly than architectural elegance.

Strategic technology leadership therefore requires more than understanding the business strategy, it requires understanding the motivations of the people making it and the CTO needs to ask: What does success look like for this board, with these shareholders, at this point in the organisation's life? That's because context matters.

There was also recognition that not every board functions well. Senior leaders can spend considerable energy questioning their own effectiveness when the deeper problem is a dysfunctional executive environment. Strategic maturity for a CTO or CIO includes learning to distinguish between the two.

Board influence is partly about relationships and politics

Technology leaders do not always enjoy the word "politics", but board roles are inherently political. not necessarily in a negative sense, but because decisions involve people, interests, priorities and influence. Understanding personalities therefore becomes an important part of executive leadership.

Different CEOs require different approaches. Some welcome direct challenge. Others respond better to a private conversation before the meeting. Some want detail and others, still, want a concise recommendation. The effective CTO learns both what needs to be communicated and how the individual receiving it is most likely to engage with it.

Several practical principles emerged:

- No surprises: Bad news rarely improves with delay.
- Challenge without cornering people: Give executives routes through difficult decisions rather than forcing them publicly into positions they cannot easily retreat from.
- Do not become emotionally attached to being right: If the evidence changes, say so.
- Build alignment before the board meeting: Major decisions shouldn't arrive cold at the formal meeting.

- Use relationships: NEDs, advisers and other senior executives can be valuable channels for understanding concerns and developing support. And perhaps most importantly:
- People are more likely to support something they helped create: The strategic CTO therefore does not simply present the technology strategy to the board.

Where possible, the board should recognise part of itself within it.

Challenge the board — then commit to its decision

Executive leadership inevitably involves disagreement. The CTO may believe a technology decision is wrong, a transformation is too ambitious or the organisation is moving too quickly. The discussion emphasised the importance of being willing to say so.

Technology leaders may be particularly valuable in managing organisational change because they often see dependencies and implementation risks that others miss. Sometimes the most valuable recommendation a CTO can make is not to change something.

But challenge comes with a corresponding responsibility. Once the board has considered the options and made its decision, the executive team has to operate as a team. The CTO may disagree with the conclusion but still needs to commit to delivering it and that requires removing ego from the equation.

The objective is not for the CTO to win the argument. It is for the organisation to make the best possible decision and then execute it successfully which needs the CTO to think like an investor.

A useful challenge emerged towards the end of the conversation: Would you spend your own money on this?

Technology leaders manage significant amounts of other people's capital whether that capital ultimately belongs to a founder, shareholders, investors or an institution, the principle is the same. This creates a useful test for technology decisions: Would I invest in this product, accept this level of risk, fund this programme, and own the P&L. And have coherent thinking around what return is to be expected and what will happen if it is the wrong decision.

This mindset changes conversations about technology investment. Instead of explaining why the organisation “needs” a particular platform, architecture or programme, the CTO begins thinking about competing uses of scarce capital and that's much closer to the decision the board itself is making.

The strategic CTO is becoming more important, but may also need to reinvent again

Technology is now fundamental to almost every organisation. Businesses increasingly fall into two broad categories: technology businesses and technology-enabled businesses and that should strengthen the influence of CIOs and CTOs and AI is accelerating the trend.

Technology, data and product decisions increasingly intersect with business strategy, customer experience, workforce decisions, risk and competitive positioning. Participants felt this is bringing technology leaders closer to the centre of executive decision-making and, in some organisations, closer to the CEO.

But there is an interesting paradox: Future CEOs and board members are likely to be considerably more technologically literate than many of today's executives so the CTO cannot therefore rely indefinitely on being the person who uniquely understands technology. Their value will increasingly come from what they can do with that understanding and the next generation of strategic technology leaders may differentiate themselves through their ability to connect technology, product, customers, commercial opportunity and organisational change.

So what makes a strategic CPTO?

There was no suggestion that there is a single career route or leadership model. The transition happens in stages and it involves deliberately acquiring experiences, finding allies, accepting responsibilities outside the traditional technology function and becoming comfortable operating in areas that may initially feel unfamiliar.

But a number of characteristics repeatedly surfaced. The strategic CTO or CPTO talks in the language of the business and measures technology through business outcomes. They understand customers, markets and commercial reality and accept responsibility for business risk rather than distancing themselves from it. They create success through other people and understand the motivations and personalities around the board table.

CPTOs challenges appropriately but supports collective decisions and they think about capital as though it were their own. They are always seeking to move beyond features and roadmaps towards value creation and proactively create opportunities to participate in wider business conversations.

Perhaps the strongest test for the success of a commercial CTO is whether the CEO misses the CTO's judgement when they're not in the board room. A genuinely strategic technology leader is not someone the board calls when they need a technology decision or even strategic technology delivery. Instead, they need to be one of the first direct reports the CEO calls when they need to make a critical business decision.