

The still-evolving role of the CSCO

In 2010 the IBM Institute for Business Value published a report titled *The smarter supply chain of the future*. It characterized CSCOs as the organization’s important but still somewhat invisible “chief orchestrator.”

As they always have, supply chain leaders were juggling so many challenges, primarily cost containment, risk management, globalization, and real-time data visibility. Fast forward a decade-plus, and the challenges are different (or maybe they’re not), but the post-COVID spotlight on CSCOs almost burns. These execs have emerged from their office in the warehouse to a seat in the boardroom, where they continue answering questions about supply shortages, re-shoring or friend-shoring, the death of control towers, and how they are enhancing the value chain through automation and generative AI.

Navigating both the headwinds and tailwinds

As we enter 2024, the latest Think Circle meeting found CSCOs fretting about the chaos that may emerge from increasingly volatile geopolitical headwinds. Navigating around four major conflict zones in the Middle East, Korea, China, and Russia/Ukraine and with more than 76 national elections happening in 2024—paired with ongoing economic uncertainty—these headwinds are non-trivial.

And yet, CSCOs are also encouraged by some of the “tailwind” developments post the pandemic. Optimism in technology advancements, excitement in some regions of the world and some industries, and opportunity from some government initiatives, like the Inflation Reduction Act and CHIPS Act in the United States are generating enthusiasm as organizations and industries stabilize their global supply chains.

What has remained consistent over the last decade (and will persist into the next) is that CSCOs play multiple roles—many that have nothing to do with moving things from place to place. These Thinkers tell us they are coaches, therapists, technologists, and data security guards, among other things.

“We are being asked to do things we haven’t before to manage the uncertainty and the environment of work culture and psychology as well. The supply chain leader of the future may be that of a therapist... no longer a transactional leader.”

“2024 is poised to bring lots of change. Geopolitical instability (elections, wars, and hot zones all over the world). We must navigate and overcome uncertainty with a progress mindset.”

Confronting the surge of employee anxiety

“We are being asked now to model the uncertainty. Supply chain employee anxiety is worse than during the pandemic—then we knew the root cause—now we are modeling things we cannot see and it is causing real job and career anxiety.”

In a shift from the last session where CSCOs couldn’t sleep at night for the opportunities that generative AI sparked, they are now up at night wondering how to help stabilize their employee base.

Several Thinkers acknowledged that change on the horizon will be personal and will affect jobs.

“If you look at the economics... a common factor is costs have gone way up. There’s a cost tsunami coming. We must go after that. It’s going to affect the person sitting next to you. There will be less people that are better enabled.”

Developing the capabilities necessary so that the workforce is re-skilled to prosper alongside AI requires investing in education and training programs to help teams use AI for enhanced decision-making. Open communication, trust, and transparency are essential when introducing enhanced digital technologies into supply chains across their workforce and partner ecosystem.

Overall, achieving a balance between employing AI and alleviating workplace anxiety requires mindfulness and planning. Building a culture of trust and transparency can ease employee anxiety during times of uncertainty by encouraging innovation, providing access to reliable information and resources, and promoting a positive outlook toward future opportunities.

“We are doing our end-of-year review with my teams, and never has positivity been more important. Employees may feel less anxious if they understand and foresee how AI will enhance their careers and future work.”

“There are clear tasks and activities where AI outstrips everything else. Lines in the middle are more nuanced than AI can handle, and the human can outperform AI. It will be interesting to see how we start integrating AI further into our work.”

A new role for CSCOs: becoming an alchemist

Given the importance of managing employee anxiety, there is immense power CSCOs can build through self-awareness, adaptability, and communication skills as the driving forces behind impactful leadership. We invited Simon (Mac) McKenzie, CEO of the Bridge Institute to share his wisdom on leadership and humanity.

Mac took us through a leadership framework that emphasizes the value of fostering personal development and growth to tackle complicated global challenges effectively. These are the seven ways adults make sense of the world:

<p>The Opportunist operates in a self-centered frame. Time horizons are short. Nearly all of us move through this stage as teenagers; some never move beyond it.</p>	<p>The Diplomat is all about fitting in, how to not rock the boat. Being a diplomat doesn’t mean this leader is diplomatic, however.</p>
<p>The Expert is a high-performing individual contributor, typical of a professional with about a decade of experience. Experts have knowledge and skills in a particular area, but may lack a broader perspective.</p>	<p>The Achiever is inquisitive. Mac says about 50% of the world’s leaders fit into this category. Achievers lead teams across multiple levels and cultures.</p>
<p>The Individualist is making the shift to question everything. This leader can embrace plurality of thought and is good at speculation and new ventures.</p>	<p>The Strategist considers multiple perspectives to arrive at an informed opinion. This leader can inspire global teams and transform organizations.</p>
<p>The Alchemist leads societal transformation. By definition, an alchemist is a leader who creates something through a seemingly magical process. Few global leaders understand the world this way, but perhaps CSCOs are well positioned to move into these roles.</p>	

Being a good leader and a good human

As CSCOs build their own skills as well as shore up their team’s capabilities, anxiety can make both life and work feel overwhelming. To cope, leaders are looking for tools they can use. Mac shared a simple “box” framework that includes three approaches, which he calls ETC: Emotion, Truth, and Choice.

Emotion
Assess what you are feeling, physically and emotionally.

What is your mind saying about you, others, the situation, and the consequences? Acknowledge (without judgment) your “in the box” state.

Truth
Take a deep breath, then tell the truth.

What is really true in this situation, not what you think or feel, but what is true if you were looking from outside your box?

Choice
Take another deep breath, then choose.

From a position of truth, evaluate your options and then make a conscious choice about what you intend to do or not do.

“Sometimes we get constrained by our thinking. We can be out of the box or in the box. Some of us spend 5% of our time in the box, some spend 50%, and some spend all of their lives in the box. As leaders, we need to help people find the out-of-the-box versions of themselves.”

“We can spend more time breaking down emotion and using technology to find those undeniable truths—put a framework in place and... use the emotion and the truths to make the right choices.”

As they look toward new roles, exciting technologies, and interesting challenges in 2024, CSCOs are optimistic about avoiding what one Thinker described as the “doom loop.” Some are taking a “yes, but” approach, as in—yes, AI might eliminate some repetitive and routine tasks, *but* imagine how we can also integrate the technology into existing or new roles and do better work.

Perhaps CSCOs are poised to be the new alchemists... as Arthur C. Clarke once said: “Any sufficiently advanced technology is indistinguishable from magic.”

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