# CIONET

## CREATING EFFECTIVE LEADERSHIP & A DIGITAL PERFORMANCE CULTURE

**Business**

**"Leadership weighs more than technology"**

On December 10, 2024, the Telenet Business Leadership Circle, moderated by CIONET's Hendrik Deckers—delved into the themes of effective leadership and fostering a culture of digital performance.
The participating CIOs shared their perspectives on best practices, their experience with various leadership styles, and the challenges of guiding teams through projects that are demanding from both technological and business standpoints.

The consensus in the group was clear: people, not technology, pose the greatest challenges.

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Defining good leadership is not straightforward—it doesn't exist as a standalone concept but rather as part of a broader framework. Leadership is closely tied to how an organization defines its strategic direction and executes it.
In some companies, a strict top-down approach is the norm, while others allow their business units greater autonomy to chart their own course. Regardless of the approach, one constant remains: business and IT must work hand in hand to achieve the organization's goals.

## A good leader wears many hats

What makes a great CIO? Yes, they must be able to set clear long-term objectives, in addition to concrete short-term goals, but their leadership style itself can evolve over time, depending on what stage of its evolution the organisation is in. In the initial phases, the CIO might give very specific instructions but then take on an enabling role in a subsequent phase, or later still take on a more supportive role.

Good leaders, according to the participants, succeed in growing with what the team needs as circumstances change. One of the CIOs referred to the scrum methodology, which originally comes from the military world. The idea is that a team doesn't have a permanent leader, rather the role falls to the person who is best placed to lead a specific mission. So it could be one team member for one project and another for the next. The goal is not so much for the leader themselves to be a high-performer but for them to succeed in creating a high-performing team – or organisation.

## Balancing organisational and shareholder goals

A CIO who is a strong leader must do more than just talk. They must also listen carefully and sense what's going on in the team. A strong leader empowers the team rather than forcing actions. This is key, as it's only with genuine buy-in from every team member that a project can succeed. But no matter how skilled the CIO is in getting the team on board, they must also take the shareholders and their goals into account.

A strong leader succeeds in balancing these two elements – the interests of the organisation and those of the shareholders. That makes the CIO a Chief Influence Officer. After all, the CIO has a presence at every level of the organisation. Calling things as you see them at each of these levels – the board, project groups, their own team, but also the shareholders – can be particularly confrontational. But a strong CIO can explain a complex IT problem briefly and clearly. And, as the participants say, even if the CIO sometimes delivers an inconvenient truth, by communicating clearly there is a greater chance that the message will be received correctly.

This clear communication is not only important between business and IT, but also between IT and external partners. The point is that IT should not be forced into the role of "order taker". In today's digital world, it's IT that's driving businesses more than ever. That's why IT – in partnership with the other stakeholders – must be given the space to participate in directing the organisation. For the same reason, IT must also dare to say it doesn't want to answer a certain question, if necessary. "No" must be an option.

## Conclusion

Leadership is always a balancing act, a search for the correct balance on various fronts: centralised vs. decentralised, top-down vs. bottom-up, leading vs. supporting. Every organisation is different, every situation is different, and therefore every leader is different. So leadership isn't something set in stone, rather it is constantly evolving.

**Benedikte Paulissen**
Chief Customer Operations Officer
Telenet

## Leadership in the service of a common goal

"Leadership is a very important topic," says Benedikte, "particularly in the context of Telenet's digital transformation." This digital transformation fits within the strategic decision that Telenet took in 2017. At the time, the company decided to roll out a strategy that focused entirely on improving the customer experience.

That decision had far-reaching consequences. First of all, Telenet had to build a completely new IT environment. The legacy IT environment – which had grown over years and comprised diverse technological stacks – wasn't suitable as the basis of a digital transformation. The migration to this new environment took place in 2023. "Something went wrong for 2% of our customers," says Benedikte.

A migration with a success rate of 98% is definitely something to celebrate. "But 2% of 2 million customers is a lot of people with a problem." Telenet now describes that period as a learning experience. "It was definitely useful to understand exactly what had happened that led to that crisis, not only on a technical level, but also in terms of leadership."

### New operating model

To complement the completely new IT platform, Telenet also chose to implement a new operating model at the same time. For example, the company no longer has a separate IT department. Instead IT is located as close as possible to the business, within the business units themselves. "We still have a few overarching services, such as network and security. But all software – i.e. IT that directly affects the business – is part of the business itself."

## Performance culture

The IT migration and the shift to an Agile organization were not originally planned to happen at the same time. However, they ended up overlapping, which created a lot of change all at once. This resulted in many issues and confusion around accountability. Telenet learned valuable lessons and responded by developing a performance culture. "The focus is on three key elements," says Benedikte. "Clarity, accountability, and open feedback."

### Clarity

A leader must create clarity so that it is clear what plans are in place. This clarity comes from clearly describing the long-term objectives, in addition to the short-term key results. "Clarity is a skill. That's why we have provided training in this area," adds Benedikte.

### Accountability

The second characteristic of a performance culture is that the leader is accountable. First of all, good leaders are accountable for their own actions. In addition, they ensure that the team members also take accountability for their work. However, this accountability can only exist if there is clarity about the objectives and key results within the team.

The importance of this accountability increases further when a company relies heavily on external partners – and therefore also depends on these partners when it comes to accountability. "That is precisely why we decided to slim down our partner portfolio," explains Benedikte. "We've kept Infosys and Accenture as our two main partners."

### Open feedback

The third essential element of a performance culture is open feedback. "We opt for care-frontation – genuine feedback that names things concretely but delivers the message with care." This only works in the context of a team that feels safe to express their opinion, supported by an inclusive leader.

## The customer always comes first

The new culture ensures that Telenet can prioritise more efficiently. After all, the priorities are no longer in silos but are supported end to end across the entire organisation. It's a way of working that coincided with the introduction of agile methodology, with the constant pursuit of a better customer experience and a higher level of customer intimacy as the goal.

**Stijn Raemdonck**
CIO
Ontex

## Leadership in a people-driven organisation

The Belgian company Ontex is the largest European producer of baby care solutions, feminine hygiene and adult incontinence products. Ten years ago, the company made the strategic decision to enter the branded business. The decision to sell both business-to-business and business-to-consumer put the company in a precarious position. "About four years ago, a major intervention was needed to keep the company afloat," says CIO Stijn Raemdonck. "Leadership saved the company at that time."

That new leadership decided to sharpen the company's focus to three product groups and two major markets – Europe and the US. "That turned out to be the right vision," Raemdonck continues, "even if it was a major challenge to actually implement that vision. We had to work out how to get the employees on board with that new story." For Ontex, the answer was very clear: by being close to the people. "We are a very people-driven organisation. Our CEO is constantly travelling from one location to another to spend time with our people."

### Enablers

Stijn Raemdonck leads an IT team of 150, supporting Ontex's staff of 7,000 people. "As CIO, I have to translate the CEO's message for the team," he says. "But that certainly doesn't happen automatically." To get everyone on board, Stijn brought together a group of 15 "enablers" – employees who act essentially as stewards within the team, with the aim of ensuring that everyone is on board.

"We work with short-term deliverables. The "enablers" immediately see where the pain points are. They know what's needed." It's an approach that stands in stark contrast to classic, long-term IT projects. "When a project like that is finally finished after years of work, the original question often turns out to be outdated. We prefer to avoid that."

## Open relationship with partners

Stijn has also reviewed the partner landscape. "Over the years, relationships had been established with literally dozens of partners, each of whom was involved in various projects in one way or another." Stijn chose to simplify that landscape considerably. "We've retained a handful of larger partners, and we have a very open relationship with them – no secrets, cards on the table." The idea behind that approach is simple: for the organisation to be successful, its partners must also be empowered to succeed.

An important observation in Ontex's approach is that business and IT are very close together. "They are not two separate worlds," says Stijn. "It's always business and IT. Of course, one person can't always manage the maturity of the technology, data and processes. In practice, you have to split the job between different employees, in business and IT. But they can't possibly do without each other."

# CIONET

## About CIONET

CIONET is the leading community of more than 10,000 digital leaders in 20+ countries across Europe, Asia, and the Americas. Through this global presence CIONET orchestrates peer-to-peer interactions focused on the most important business and technology issues of the day. CIONET members join over a thousand international and regional live and virtual events annually, ranging from roundtables, programs for peer-to-peer exchange of expertise, community networking events, to large international gatherings. Its members testify that CIONET is an impartial and value adding platform that helps them use the wisdom of the (IT) crowd, to acquire expertise, advance their professional development, analyse and solve IT issues, and accelerate beneficial outcomes within their organisation.

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# Business

## About Telenet Business

Telenet Business, part of the Telenet Group, is so much more than connectivity. As a managed service provider they help Belgian companies turn their digital challenges into business opportunities. They support and unburden, large and medium-sized enterprises as well as small entrepreneurs. You can count on them for high-quality managed services such as internet, telephony, solutions to collaborate and communicate digitally, cybersecurity and smart displays.

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