

ActionCo Reinvents Business Leadership

ACTIONCO set record gains in revenue and trounced competition in a recent survey of customer satisfaction by an independent agency. "The market was moving so fast, we had to find a way to turn on a dime," said **Robin Bell**, a senior executive at ActionCo.

Architecture is the key to their agility and customer responsiveness, but it wasn't always that way. We interviewed Robin Bell to find out more.

What prompted the shift? Several years ago we looked at what we were doing. In every business unit, we had stovepipe systems—often duplicate systems doing the same thing in some idiosyncratic way. There was no integration, no common interface, no common technologies, no common approach—we couldn't even cobble the systems together. If one part of the business changed, the other parts could not keep up. Fixing systems took all our time, and generally the fixes just broke something else.

The Vision Thing

VISIONARY LEADERSHIP sets ActionCo apart. Two years ago, pressures on business performance were at an all-time high. A short-term view dominated business leadership, as they scrambled to cut costs. In contrast, Robin Bell looked to architecture to create an advantage so compelling it would completely overshadow competitor's efforts to shave costs.

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We couldn't keep doing business that way. So we chased after one technology fad after another: client-server, objects, components, middleware. Each was touted as *the* solution, and the pro-mises seemed reasonable enough, but there was no master plan. On the heels of each failure, our technical people got more and more discouraged. They wanted to get back to small teams of 2 or 3 people hacking away in isolation. But our applications and systems just aren't that simple any more.

As Grady Booch puts it, "the dog-houses have been built." Most of today's mission-critical systems are the equivalent of skyscrapers. They have to be architected.

What is architecture? Formally, architecture is the structure of the system in terms of parts and their interrelationships, and their externally visible properties.

In business terms, architecture is about aligning technology with the business. It is about setting the important pieces in place so that the big goals can be accomplished. It is about making sure the parts work together as a system, so that more can be done by the system than the sum of the parts.

How does architecture set you apart? Where it makes sense, we architect applications as a family. This has significantly increased our reuse and integration across systems. Tradeoffs are visible now, and we can make the call between local business optimization versus overall business effectiveness. Our enterprise-wide technology architecture helps us avoid redundancy while enhancing consistency and integration. All this makes us more agile. It reduces the development and maintenance burden, and we are able to shift on the fly in response to customers.

What about competitors? Our architecture competency is not easy duplicate. We made the investment—not everyone is willing to

do that, and most bail part way through. We went through a major shift in the way we do things. We owe as much to our developers and project managers for following as we do to our executives and architects for leading—not everyone has both good leaders and good followers. And Bredemeyer Consulting helped us do this—not everyone gets to work with Bredemeyer Consulting. ☺

Architecture Competency

It's not just about training!

BREDEMEYER CONSULTING helps clients enhance their architecture competency. They are quick to point out that architecture competency is not just training for architects. Architecture competency is the ability to translate business vision into technical vision, to translate business strategy into architecture strategy, and to effectively execute that strategy.

But architecture—as in enterprise architecture, IT architecture, technology architecture and software architecture—is a new profession. Establishing architecture competency involves creating organizational readiness to take an architectural approach to systems building. Executives need to know how architecture can enhance their business's competitiveness and how to set up their organization to leverage architecture. Managers need to know how to manage teams using architecture. Architects need to know how to create architectural strategy, how to create architecture blueprints, and how to lead the technical community in implementing the architecture.

And it's not just know-how. A cultural change needs to accompany the shift in strategic approach. Dana Bredemeyer points out "Such change is hard. It takes vision and a passion for success."

This is a fictitious vision. Bredemeyer Consulting can help you create a vision for architecture in your company, and can help you be successful in rolling out the vision. See <http://www.bredemeyer.com> for more on our services.