



Accenture Cybersecurity Forum

Uniting leaders in security

"The Evolving CISO Leadership Role"

The Accenture Cybersecurity Forum (ACF) convened a virtual roundtable titled, "The Evolving CISO Leadership Role," on January 21, 2021.

During this roundtable we explored important questions about the challenges and opportunities faced by CISOs in balancing technical, operational and strategic responsibilities. In light of the SolarWinds breach, what steps should we take to further evolve our leadership and contribute to our enterprise's management of risk? What are the evolving CISO leadership best practices? What should we, as CISOs, stop, start and continue doing? Our speakers included Accenture Security subject-matter experts, peer CISOs and board members. The session was hosted by Kris Burkhardt, Accenture CISO and ACF chair.

The roundtable was conducted under the Chatham House Rule: ACF members are free to use the information shared, provided that neither the identity nor the affiliation of the speakers or participants is revealed.

An evolving enterprise role

Reportedly, the CISO role was first established in the mid-1990s. Since that time, enterprises have undergone digital-based business transformation, adopted new business models and witnessed a threat landscape that is becoming increasingly challenging. In response, the CISO role has evolved from that of a tech-savvy specialist to a business-outcome-based advisor. As a subject matter expert said, "Our job is not to make the enterprise the most secure. It is to enable the business to work in a balanced risk format."

"Clearly, the role has evolved and become more challenging," said another subject-matter expert. "Today, there are as many different ways to be a CISO as there are CISOs." One thing many CISOs have in common, he added, is that, "In many ways the CISO is the moral compass of the company."

A CISO added, "In many cases the CISO is the most senior executive who is thinking about risk. There may be opportunities for pathways into other disciplines, such as physical security, fraud detection or supply chain security." In fact, the CISO's role is becoming much broader in terms of enterprise risk management, as technology and data are so critical to enterprise strategy.

“Because CISOs often have a broader operational and IT perspective on risk and remediation, they can often evolve into a CIO or Chief Risk Officer role,” said the subject matter expert.

Communications and relationships

Boards of directors are well aware that cybersecurity is a key element of enterprise risk management. The National Association of Corporate Directors (NACD) now offers a CERT Certificate in Cybersecurity Oversight and posts a variety of publicly available information about what directors should expect from [cybersecurity briefings](#). These trends underscore the importance of building productive relationships between CISOs and board members.

During the forum discussion, board members and CISOs stressed the value of creating relationships with board members who can help in preparing presentations to the full board. Board members said they welcome deeper discussions to help CISOs prepare presentations. “Leverage board members to help refine your communications. They want to help,” said a board member. Periodic deep dive discussions with key stakeholders can be effective in raising issues that don’t necessarily need to be surfaced with larger audiences.

CISOs recognize that opportunities to address the entire board have certain parameters. For example, one CISO said they are limited to 10 slides. A 10- to 15-minute time slot is common. Help the board and business understand the trade-offs in making risk management decisions. “Don’t take it personally if they don’t see risk in the same way that you do,” said a CISO.

Because outcomes are a top board and business priority, CISOs can gain credibility by using their experience in delivering business outcomes, forum members said. Act as a valued, but humble, business advisor and coach. Focus on business strategy and how it is supported by cyberstrategy investments and initiatives. Deliver concise insight about risk, resiliency and survivability. “The key is to build trust with the business, speak like businesspeople and act as a business enabler,” said a CISO. Board members are smart, said another, “Don’t try to teach us about technology. We want to understand how technology supports business strategy.”

Language is also important. Don’t lead with handwringing and technology-speak. Avoid “Chicken Little” pronouncements that undermine long-term credibility. A subject matter said CISOs can avoid creating separation from their audience by using the term “we” instead of “us” or “they.” A CISO added, “The word ‘no’ is out of my vocabulary. I speak in terms of ‘yes’ and ‘how’ we’re going to support business strategy.” Another CISO added, “Risk is the common currency we should use to communicate with those on the front lines.”

Transparency is a core principle of effective CISO communications. Board members don’t like surprises. Telling the board about an event that happened four months ago can undermine confidence and lead to difficult questions, said a board member.

Stop/continue/start

To help drive the evolution and elevation of the CISO role, forum members engaged in a stop/start/continue analysis. Topics included communications style, knowledge of the business, and security operations.

Stop:

- “Never open a discussion with senior leadership with technology,” said a CISO.
- Avoid arrogance. CISOs can’t take for granted earlier successes in securing funding and support. A CISO recommended, “Check your ego at the door so you can build relationships you can call on when you need their assistance.”
- Stop being tools-focused and tactical and start being strategic. Bring an end-to-end process perspective to the discussion.
- Stop spending an inordinate amount of the time on technology. Redirect those efforts to better understand the business and identify how to help colleagues perform better.

Continue:

- Developing a deeper understanding about how the enterprise ecosystem makes money.
- Demonstrating empathy. Know the responsibilities and concerns of every business lead, what makes them successful and what risks they’re facing so you can teach, guide and hold them responsible.
- Being involved in managing third-party risks.
- Using the visibility of cyber threats in the news media to raise understanding with the rest of the business. Coverage creates opportunities.
- Running security as a business. Measure and understand the utilization of your team, capacity planning needs and how your risk posture is improving relative to the business.

Start:

- Have a vision about what you are—and aren’t—going to do that you can clearly articulate to the rest of the business and your team.
- Get leaders to follow corporate cybersecurity guidance. Make others correct their own mistakes.
- Make sure that, as CISO, you understand the business and business process risks. Steer the technology discussion around those risks. “If you’re not doing that, you risk losing your audience,” said a board member.
- Executing security fundamentals well can help build the case for additional investment. “Be brilliant in the basics and then understand how evolutionary tools fit into your overall security program,” said a CISO.
- Build relationships that you can call on when you eventually need support. “We all know that edicts don’t work so well,” said a CISO, “But if you’ve got an informal network and everyone’s comfortable with where you’re headed, you can accomplish much more.”
- Be a corporate risk manager, not just a technical guru.
- Keep asking the question: How is this going to help the business, make it safer, and what are the trade-offs?

Conclusion

Many CISOs are taking the initiative to contribute additional value to the enterprise and elevate their leadership role. “Change is hard but it is not as hard as being irrelevant,” said a CISO. “You’re going to need a whole new set of skills to survive in the shark tank as a general executive or with the board.” One way to build those skills is to constantly develop and nurture the talent of the cybersecurity team. Use their skills to free the CISO to focus on higher-order priorities such as board communications.

CISOs are also advised to build a greater sense of empathy by recognizing what the board and business needs to hear about and what information is best left to a smaller set of stakeholders. Understanding the enterprise value chain and putting yourself in the audience’s shoes is essential in a leadership role. “You have to demonstrate a sense of empathy,” said a subject matter expert. “And that may mean you have to start building that muscle.”

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