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[callout: the business makes the rules ]

or if you have the space

[callout: You must look outside your world to understand the market, business and political dynamics that will determine your fate.]

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Around 3,500 years ago a civilization flourished along the Nile. It had been in existence for over 1,000 years, and had long since determined that it was superior to every other civilization it knew and had cornered the market on the right way to do things. There was one right way: their way. This civilization had the best communication system, the most impressive monuments, a prosperous economy, a tested and triumphant military, international trade, centuries of experience in medicine, vast civic projects, art and culture, a fearsome panoply of gods and a secure and smug ruling class who knew to the core of their beings that nothing could ever change the way things had always been, and always would be: their way.

Until one day, across the trackless deserts to the East that since time began had been an impervious barrier to invasion, came great clouds of dust. A mighty army that swept all before it came raging down upon the people of the Nile. The mighty legions of foot soldiers of the Pharaohs, with their spears and bronze swords were decimated, sliced to pieces by the spinning blades attached to the one thing that the Egyptians had never developed in their long and glorious history: the wheel. Thus, the Egyptians learned the bitter lessons: that to be inwardly focused, to only ask yourselves if you're successful, and to turn your back on the external factors of your environment are marks of fatal hubris.

We see this sad tale repeated today in our world of business intelligence. I recently spoke with an IT executive from a multi-billion dollar US based global organization, whose company name most people in the world would recognize. I'll call them PictureCo. PictureCo had made a good faith effort to build an idealized, custom built, hub-and-spoke data warehouse following the dictates and advice of the technologist champions of this cause. They had been reasonably successful, having fended off most of the political and cultural challenges that trip up most of these large scale, top down projects. Unfortunately, the CFO had recently become convinced that the organization needed several analytical applications offered by SAP which required SAP's BW turnkey data warehouse. The plain political facts were that there was no way that PictureCo was going to fund two multi-million dollar "we are the solution" data warehouse projects. Suddenly, the entire custom data warehouse project was up for grabs, having gone from slowly building business value to politically endangered species literally overnight.

This team, like so many others blind-sided by the political reality that the business makes the rules, was the functional equivalent of the ancient Egyptians. These teams have been led astray by surveys that only ask IT the questions about cost and success (when was the last time the business and IT could even agree on the definition of success?) and a wide variety of analysts, gurus, theorists and vendors who are completely self absorbed in the culture of technology. Just as the ancients were fatally ensconced in the comfort of their "our way is the only way" approach to civilization, old-think teams are being sliced apart by the razor sharp knives of turn-key data warehouses and low cost analytical application systems driven by business needs and powerful political forces.

How can you survive?

- 1) Accept the fact that you must look beyond the world of technology. Advice, statistics, analysis and recommendations regarding business systems that are based solely on technological perspectives, surveys, interviews and input are at best skewed and at worst a direct route to dismal failure. You must look outside your world to understand the market, business and political dynamics that will determine your fate.
- 2) Accept the fact that there is no one, single path to the goal. There are multiple paths to an integrated, scrubbed, detailed, historical information resource for your organization. Both top down and bottom up models work, and both lead to the same goal. To ensure success the path you choose depends not on technology, nor analysts, nor ivory tower theorists, nor IT skewed surveys, but on the unique political and cultural characteristics of your organization.
- 3) Accept the fact that the future is federated. Whether you like it or not, the business is going to buy turn-key solutions from a wide variety of vendors, and you're not going to have a lot to say about it. Build in a federated, architected manner; thereby assuring you are part of the solution, not yesterday's foot soldiers watching the sunlight glint off of the approaching knives of the wheels of progress.

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