

5 Attributes of Top-Performing CISOs

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When you think about the highest performing, most influential CISOs—the ones everybody else wants to emulate—you realize they possess certain qualities that make them stand out. IANS sat down with seven infosec executive recruiters to find out what those qualities are, why they matter and how others can develop them. We learned that top-performing CISOs today have five common attributes:

1 Business-focused: Business Problems, Security Solutions

Business-focused CISOs don't live in the technical weeds. They see business problems and find ways security can solve them. To get there, you must be connected with other executives and have a seat at the table when business decisions are being made.

To start putting the business first:

Change your mindset. Steve Martano of Caldwell Partners asks CISO candidates about their last major project. If they can't articulate how the tech and security challenges tie to the business, they don't have a business-first mindset. Define your operations around business issues that have security solutions.

Translate security projects into business results. Michael Piacente, co-founder at Hitch Partners, says CISOs tend to focus on how to implement a new technology stack or solve a security problem, but not on how the security work they do improves the business. They put together Lego pieces of tech, but don't consider how those blocks fit into the larger structure of the company. To stand out, you need to look at the big picture, understand how each security task drives business outcomes and educate your teams to think the same way.

"It's easy to understand your own corner of the business," Austin Krissoff, who leads the cybersecurity practice for global executive firm True Search, says. "Great CISOs think about the broader organization – what space are they playing in, what's the broader ecosystem, who are the customers? Those are the areas where they build relationships."

2 Influencers: Getting the Business on Board

Elite CISOs can empathize with their customers, product teams, engineering teams, subordinates, C-Suite executives and the board to better understand what those groups care about. This empathy helps build stronger cross-functional relationships and increase influence. You'll face opposition. You'll need to deploy security solutions that other lines of business won't like. Your ability to influence others to see the value of what you do is instrumental to success.

Krissoff explained that the best CISOs have courage and conviction. With a small staff, but huge responsibility, CISOs must wield influence to keep up with those demands. CISOs stare at threats and vulnerabilities all day and need to tell the business and the C-Suite where the risk is and how to fix it. Courage and conviction drives the top CISOs, and is the foundation of becoming an influencer.

"Successful influencers are as capable of handling technical issues with the security team as they are translating a security challenge into terms the C-Suite cares about," Brett Starr, co-founder of security-focused executive search firm Hitch Partners says. "The best leaders we know are either technical, curious or both."

To build influence:



- **Pursue continued education in a broad range of subject areas.**
"If you're 10 miles deep, but can't nimbly talk about different subjects, there's limited value you can bring to a board meeting," Martano says.
- **Hone communication skills:**
 - o Get involved with a public speaking organization like Toastmasters.
 - o Talk with your chief marketing officer about branding and messaging best practices.
 - o Hire a coach to improve your communication to different lines of business.
- **"Get involved in external situations more frequently,"**
Krissoff says. Involvement beyond security helps you get more comfortable communicating outside of your areas of expertise.

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Team Building: Dropping Ego and Empowering Others

You know CISOs are great team builders when they leave a position and members of their team follow, says Kris Rides, founder of executive recruitment firm Tiro Security. These CISOs aren't poaching staff; they're building such a strong team-first culture that subordinates follow them.

"Unsuccessful CISOs are the ones who dictate security policy to the organization vs. viewing themselves as confident enablers and influencers seeking win/win business solutions," says Starr. They want the whole team to get the win.

To stand out as a team builder:



- **Know how to connect with subordinates:** CISOs must be effective mentors and coaches. They need to walk teams through technical projects. They have to handle communications in times of crisis and opportunity. Being able to empathize and connect with subordinates across a wide range of situations is integral to building a team.
- **Focus on your program, not your ego:** Ego helps when you're climbing the ranks, but you need to set it aside when you become a CISO. Being realistic about what you can do, and empowering your team to do the rest ensures you:
 - o Build trust.
 - o Help your workers develop new skills.
 - o Lay the basis for succession planning. In fact, Martano says CISO candidates with clear successors rise to the top when he's working to fill a role.
- **Be a talent magnet:** Turnover is endemic in security. To attract talent and keep people on board:
 - o Take the time to understand the personal and professional goal of your team members. Then, use regular check-ins and formalized review processes to build your workers toward those goals.
 - o Assign real responsibility—employees today value making a difference, not titles. To do this you'll need to avoid micromanaging, create a culture that values problem-solving and support workers when they fail to create growth opportunities.
 - o Coach and mentor your subordinates. When your people develop into leaders in their own right, you'll get a reputation that draws talent to you.



4 Passion: A Driving Interest in Security

CISOs with a passion for security are just as ready to dive into a deep discussion with a pen tester as they are to do security awareness training for new hires. They have what Piacente describes as a “violent approach to curiosity.”

Passion pushes top CISOs to develop new skills because their curiosity and hacker mentality makes them want to solve problems everywhere. As they get embedded in the business, that doesn't change. It just expands.

To foster such passion:



- **Be active in the community.** Go to conferences, take advantage of speaking engagements, participate in industry organizations. Take every opportunity to share ideas and fuel your passion for the craft. There's a practical element to this, too. Starr says CISOs who don't engage the community are tackling their problems alone. CISOs who get involved are suddenly joining with hundreds of other CISOs trying to deal with the same issue.
- **Wear a lot of hats – well.** From building security awareness to escorting visitors who don't have clearance through R&D, passionate CISOs take on a variety of tasks because they love activities that strengthen security, Krissoff says. Rides concurs and says elite CISOs get involved in technical security projects outside their primary work role because they're interested in where the industry is going and want to be part of the work.

5 Crisis Leaders: The Calm in the Middle of the Storm

When crisis situations arise—think a data breach or tech emergency—CISOs must be the calm in the middle of the storm. The best CISOs develop prior relationships across risk, legal and other departments so they can bring their technical acumen and business influence together during a crisis. They don't panic when dealing with uncertainty, ambiguity and emergencies because they've developed the breadth of knowledge they need to excel.

Rides describes this using a simple analogy: “You're a bit like a duck on a pond looking very graceful with everything under control and your feet are busy paddling underneath.”

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To stand out as a crisis leader, high-performing CISOs:

- **Tailor their messaging** to the specific audience they are addressing.
- **Prioritize work** based on what the business needs, not isolated security problems.
- **Have a plan** and a foundational process to enact in collaboration with cross-functional leaders.

Top CISOs are Business Execs

The message from our group of recruiters is clear: The best CISOs aren't technologists trying to fit into the business. They are executives with the technical and business chops necessary to understand how security helps solve business problems. As Jamey Cummings, Senior Client Partner of Technology Officers and Co-Leader for Global Cybersecurity at Korn Ferry put it, the best CISOs are "business executives who happen to be very good at security." ■

Become an Impactful CISO



The executive recruiters we spoke with also said the five attributes that make top CISOs stand out all require three foundational skills. They urge CISOs to focus on:

- 1. Strategic leadership:** The best CISOs know how to delegate tasks, prioritize resources, equip subordinates and develop a team, all within the framework of overarching organizational goals.
- 2. Executive presence:** Top performers are able to tailor their conversation to the folks in the room, with equal comfort in board room and among their teams. They are situationally aware and use that awareness handle a wide range of responsibilities across lines of business.
- 3. Communication:** Technical skills are table stakes for CISOs, but top CISOs stand out because they've developed the soft skills, particularly communication skills, to build influence within an organization and get the right messages to the right people.



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