Go Get Your Gold Medal: It’s Your Turn to Stand on the Podium
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Have you ever wondered how it would feel to stand on the top step of an Olympic podium, lean over and have a gold medal placed around your neck? You not only have family, friends and coaches cheering you on, you have a whole nation behind you. It must be an overwhelming moment. While few ever have that opportunity, you can be the go-to champion in your organization. How can that happen?

Let’s start here. As a professional, you know that thoughtful system architecture, proper data modeling, high quality coders, strong business sponsorship, adequate budget and timelines, clear and approved requirements, proper project management and system testing are some of the known requirements for successful Business Intelligence (BI) systems. As a professional in the BI field, you must be able to embrace these things since they form the foundation of successful projects. For most people, understanding concepts is good enough, but hopefully you want more – you’re going for the gold, to stand on the podium for you and your company.

Below are some core principles that can put you on the path to becoming a gold medal champion in your organization and increase your value in the marketplace. What a great win/win thought.

Ten Golden Principles for Business Intelligence Champions

1. Be Passionate

If you do not love data it is hard to get on the winners’ podium. Think back about what you have proudly accomplished in your life. I guarantee you it was not achieved without passion. Passion does not just come naturally for everyone. If you don’t have it—it must be developed. Improve your passion by setting goals and achieving them.

Believe, strongly, that the best opportunity in your life is the one in front of you right now. Focus on what you’re doing, grow your understanding about it and then develop your passion for it!
Here’s what’s great. Once you find and nurture that passion, the excitement will become obvious to those around you. Passionate people are like magnets that attract attention, better opportunities and bigger paychecks.

2. Go Back to School

Dig deep and learn the business details of your company. Take some time (usually your own free time) and learn what exactly your company does and the basics of how they do it. If you were the new CEO, what would you need to know about the basic operations of the business? What are some of its challenges and opportunities? What does your company do to make money? What costs does it have? What problems is it facing from competitors? Is the company growing? How much is it growing?

And most importantly for you, once you understand things better—how would the company benefit from valuable and transformative Business Intelligence results that you can deliver?

Take the time necessary to learn the skills that are valuable for your business and your career. Keep up to date with the latest technologies and available tools—learn and understand their capabilities, functions and differences. Read constantly. Take advantage of all the Internet-based content, both written and video. Deepen your knowledge of the tools that you are currently using—and then learn new techniques and methodologies that make you a better professional in the field. Learn tools that may not be needed in your current job but appear to be up and coming new technologies. This is especially true for the trends and directions for Big Data platforms and technology.

3. Learn How to Communicate

In a recent survey, major IT employers said one of the biggest problems with new talent in the IT marketplace is they have no clue to how to present their findings and present business ideas and concepts to their team and to management.

Take some time and improve your presentation and speaking skills. Excellent and no-cost presentation training resources are readily available on the internet. Here are a few to check out that I personally recommend:
Practice writing reports and giving presentations to friends and colleagues that will give you honest feedback. If they won’t listen, do it at home and record it. Then watch yourself on the recording. Learn your materials and be confident in your delivery.

4. Be the Expert

Tough data and design problems usually don’t have a simple, or even obvious answer. Dig deep into those problems even if it feels like it should be someone else’s responsibility. Throw out all the assumptions made so far and follow logical methodologies. Spend quiet time thinking about the problem at hand. When you think you have some insights, pull in some co-workers to get opinions. But you be the person that pushes and takes the lead. Learn from this first effort and start over, if needed, until a significant answer is found. Keep pushing until you are the one who solves the problem. The result: you are the expert and are on your way to gold medal status.

5. Never Stop Questioning

What do you do when you get that uneasy feeling about system results that you or your customers are seeing? Whatever you do, do not ignore that “gut feeling.” Develop the kind of attitude where you, personally, will not stop searching or questioning until things make sense and feel right.

Gold medal professionals rely significantly on their intuition and give that extra push at some point in the process. The result is something that produces correct results that have value. Correct and meaningful results can put you in a position where you stand out to your peers and to management.
6. Coach a POC Team

A great proof-of-concept (POC) effort can have a big influence on your overall project delivery skills. Work with your team and in the appropriate situations do not try to build a complex, fully-developed system when quick progress and results could probably be more important to management.

In many situations, answers or insights are needed immediately—and the ability to generate quick results is a vital skill for a gold medal champion. Get a proof-of-concept working quickly to show others what is possible. Sometimes you might have to learn some new technologies to make it happen quickly, but now you are even more valuable to the company. The POC attitude is often the best way to quickly provide an “ah-ha moment” to your project users and to your management.

7. Question Everything

Taking things to the next level can be hard for some personalities. It is the notion of constantly, and often, asking WHY? You don’t need to be a jerk, but politely and professionally question almost everything that you hear—both formally in project meetings and informally around the water cooler. Do not make any assumptions. Don’t let others make assumptions for you. Improper assumptions can kill project momentum and budgets.

You don’t have to ask all the questions publicly (write them down and get the answers later), but never take the answers you get at face value. Be a sincere and polite “questioner” of all assumptions and then do your own homework. As I mentioned above, let your gut feelings also direct you. When you ask a lot of questions, people start coming back to the table with more answers. As your team starts to dig in more based on the professional questioning, you will feel confident in the results.

8. Stand Up and Be Heard

I’ll just use on example here—there are many more. Source systems often have flawed data models—it can happen with old, new or under-designed production systems. Use your influence to push for better source system data models to produce better, high value data. Use your newfound confidence as a presenter, questioner, and overall professional to convince your company to create the proper designs or enhancements for existing systems in order to obtain usable and valuable data to feed your Business Intelligence models.
There are many opportunities to stand up and be heard about things that could be done to make the company more effective, more competitive, more intelligent and more exciting. Go back to the top and read point 2 again.

9. Build Bridges Not Barriers

Business users can get frustrated with their IT support. IT teams often get frustrated with business users because they are not clear on requirements and always want more. Sometimes more could have been done upfront if the business users had just told them. Understand this chasm and then build bridges by being the person who uses every skill at their disposal to understand the business and work professionally with their user base. Do everything in your power to create meaningful, concrete business requirements through professional interactions with the business users.

I personally believe that this is skill is the hardest to master in any organization and those who do understand it will always be in demand. When you’re in demand, you know what that means to your wallet and to your sense of worth. Spend a lot of time on this skill and you’ll be rewarded.

10. Make “ROI” Your Middle Name

Two things often hurt BI project funding and perception in a corporation’s project wish list: vague requirements and weak financial benefit calculations. This is problematic because non-champions get lazy and rely on intangible results from BI efforts. For example, the project benefits statement focuses on phrases like “better decision making from reporting and metrics.” Not very exciting, is it? Hard to measure? Absolutely.

BI champions focus on BI requirements gathering with the goal of addressing specific business problems. By focusing on problem solving, you can employ ways of calculating real monetary benefits when the project is up and running. With good monetary metrics in hand, you can now be confident in the discussing ROI. One guaranteed path to success is to be effective in confidently developing and showing ROI metrics to management.

Look at industry case studies, see where failures occurred, read about success stories, brainstorm about tangible and measurable business benefits, develop a toolkit of tips and tools for successful requirement gathering and how to measure business results from BI initiatives. This is easier for some than others, but it’s a sure way to find yourself at the top of the podium someday.
Summary

If you are willing to work hard and follow these guiding principles, you can stand on that podium. If you’re lucky, you’ll stand there with a few others that have a direct impact on your career. Being great isn’t easy, but it’s worth it.

About the Author

Steven Crofts, Vice President of Marketing at iOLAP, oversees all aspects of the company’s day-to-day marketing, corporate communications, research and thought leadership for its rapidly expanding global consulting programs. Steven brings to iOLAP a strong background in marketing and executive management, with extensive experience in the business-to-business technology industry. He has spent a significant amount of his career in the Business Intelligence and Data Warehousing marketplace. In 1996 he became the owner and CEO of the Data Warehousing Institute (TDWI), which he sold to 1105media in Los Angeles several years ago. He has worked as a volunteer with the Boy Scouts of America for over 25 years.

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