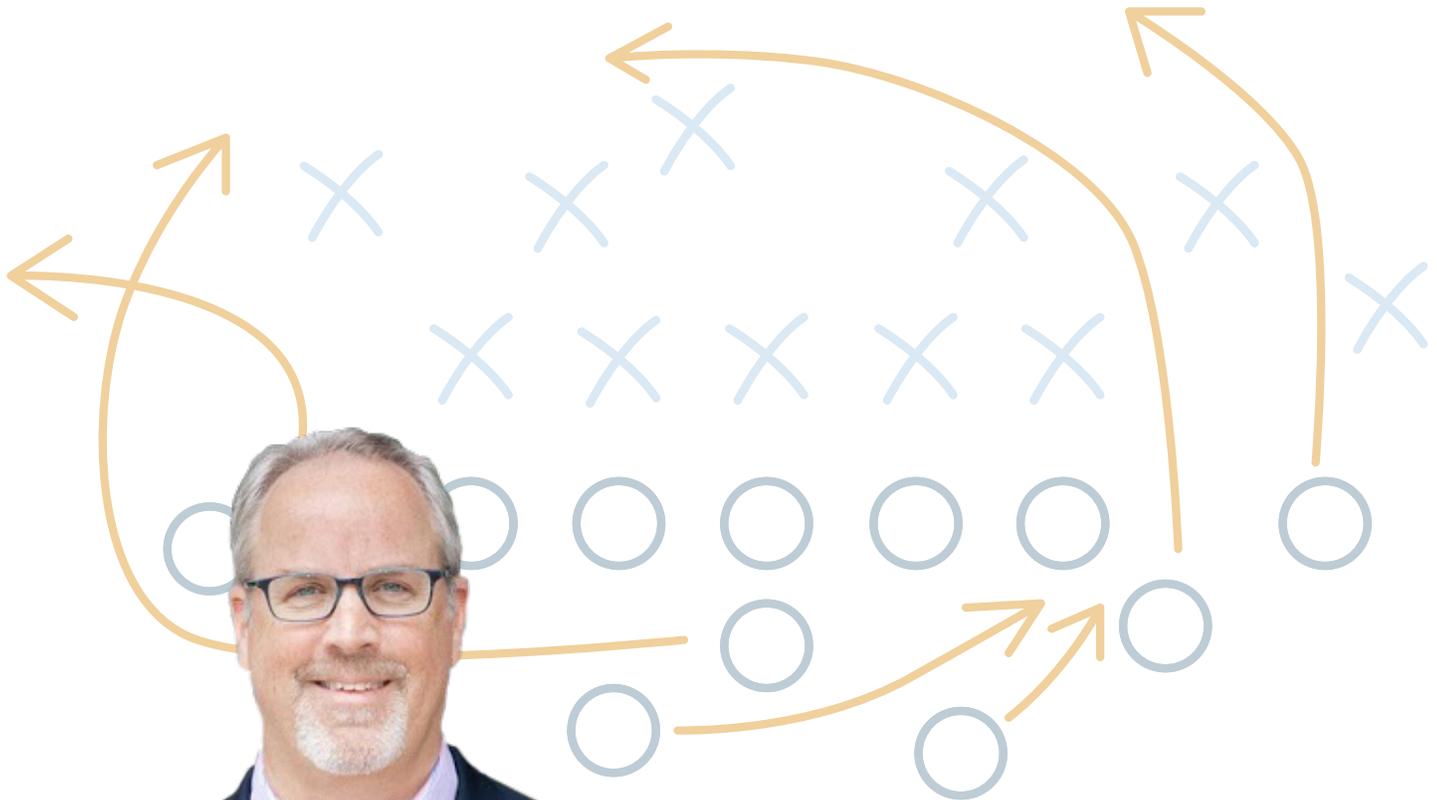# FORTUNE 1000 IT LEADERSHIP PLAYBOOK

Why IT Leaders Must MOVE TO OFFENSE to Win in 2020

By: Sean McDermott

Sean McDermott is an IT Operations futurist, engineer and serial entrepreneur who has been driving scalable digital transformation with Fortune 1000 companies for over 30 years.

WINDWARD

There is an adage that gets talked about in sports and the military that has a surprising application for IT leadership –

THE BEST DEFENSE IS A STRONG OFFENSE.

The basis of this idea is that by initiating proactive action you can mitigate an opposing attack and actually create a strategic advantage. Nowhere else is this illustrated better than in the military ambush situation. Soldiers are trained when ambushed to not only put all firepower into the enemy, but to actually attack with the greatest "anger, desperation and intensity" one can muster. This level of intensity may feel counterintuitive, yet we can all see why it's necessary for soldiers under attack.

We can apply to this adage to the Information Technology (IT) field if we redefine who the enemy is that we encounter every day. As IT leaders, we are faced with challenges from every direction, from people and behavior, to budget constraints, unrealistic expectations of business stakeholders, and increasing complexity of Digital Transformation. Mergers and acquisitions can completely derail our annual goals. Macro-economic conditions change business priorities. Even managing people is unprecedented in history, with four generations in the workforce now, all with different needs, wants, and desires. All this is wrapped by the notion that IT is generally populated by technical people that love to build things and are inherently distracted by the newest, coolest technology that is sure to solve our problems, but rarely does. Building an "offensive mind" is a unique skill, which is the exactly why NFL all seek elite Offensive Coordinators. Here's an indisputable truth, you can never win a game if you don't score a point – if you can't score the best you can do is tie. And we all know ties don't win Championships.

WHY IS INFORMATION TECHNOLOGY ON DEFENSE?

So why has IT been on DEFENSE for the past 20 years? The answer is complex and can be summed up in three primary areas:

1 **External Macro Impacts to Organization Derail Our Best Laid Plans** – these are broad-based, external events that can have massive impact on the Company on a whole and trickle down to all departments. These include economic and market conditions, large scale mergers and acquisitions, rapid shifts to the competitive landscape and disruptive business models, consumerization of IT and increase demand for digital transformation. Macro Impacts are generally un-avoidable, yet they can derail an entire year's priorities, However, they are also slow moving and somewhat predictable if IT leaders are observing trends in the marketplace.

2 **Internal Micro Impacts to the Company Shift Priorities on a Dime** – these are internal events that can change priorities rapidly, sometimes overnight. These include budget changes (positive and negative, especially at end of year), requirements from business unit and stake-holders, reorganizations, regulatory changes, data breaches, adopting disruptive technologies, and even Executive whims. Micro Impacts can have massive impact to organizations in a very short amount of time and sometimes can be very unpredictable. A good example is a data breach, that can single handedly change the priorities of an IT organization within hours and derail the efforts of every on-going project or employee priority.

3 **Human Resistance to Change Slows us Down** – these are all about human behavior and our ability to accept and embrace change. Change is hard, we know that. Humans are conditioned to opt for safety and security. It's part of the HumanOS (operating system) that has been pre-wired for tens of thousands of years. Shifting to OFFENSE demands change, reassessment, and improvement. Change-adverse organizations will struggle to make the shift to OFFENSE. Enacting change requires vision, empowering leadership, and the courage to make hard decisions for the better of the whole. It's lonely at the top.

The pressures of IT are immense, especially when you consider the three factors above with technology changing so rapidly (re: Moore's Law) that keeping up with the complexity is almost impossible. Peter Diamandis shared his thoughts with Singularity University saying, "the forces driving innovation are accelerating and compounding. We're entering a period of time where we are about to start hockey sticking." Keeping up with current technology is a daunting, never-ending task and it's not slowing down.

But we don't have to accept defeat as our destiny. We simply have to begin **MOVING TO OFFENSE**.

MOVING TO OFFENSE STARTS WITH LEADERSHIP

As the Leader, the responsibility of **MOVING TO OFFENSE** lays at your feet. You set the vision, you make the hard decisions, and you provide your staff every opportunity to be successful. Chances are if you are reading this, YOU are the franchise player your organization needs.

There is a reason why you are the leader. No one else sees the world like you do. Most people can't see beyond the project they are working on, but you see the bigger picture. Your staff are depending on you to bring your vision and experience to the team. They crave direction. The best path for success is to build a team of A-players who thrive in change, provide them with a vision they can emotionally subscribe to, and give them the autonomy to execute. Create agreements with your team, not expectations. Expectations are one-side and usually poorly communicated. Agreements require dialog, negotiation, and commitment. Then hold them accountable for their agreements and do everything in your power to break down barriers to allow them to succeed.

"Every battle is won before it's ever fought."

Sun Tzu
The Art of War

To be a great leader and succeed in **MOVING TO OFFENSE** you must learn how to "read the defense." Payton manning is considered one of the greatest NFL quarterbacks in history, despite his sometimes rough skills – he's known for his "wobbly" throws. But Payton Manning is notorious for studying hours of game films before games and his ability to "read the defense" giving him a superpower for making adjustments to plays seconds before snapping the ball. He drove defenses crazy, because they couldn't react fast enough to counter his offensive attacks.

In IT, you are the quarterback and you need to read the defense. Defenses like pending mergers, upcoming budget cuts, potential staff and contractor layoffs. You need to continually be looking at market conditions and trends, reviewing what competitors and peers are doing, performing blue sky-gray sky financial projections, and training your team to be A-players.

Much like the NFL, you create the plays and empower your team with the autonomy to execute on the field.

UNDERSTAND YOUR VISION

The first critical aspect of **MOVING TO OFFENSE** is to develop your vision. Your vision needs to be both long-term and short-term, but also be realistic in the context of your company. Every company is different, so ensure that you understand the capabilities and limits of your organization. We need to be able to self-reflect on our vision to ensure it aligns with the outcome we actually want. I've made the mistake of having a vision that is misaligned with my desired outcome. As a runner, I have been drawn to running a marathon, but found myself in a constant battle with the dedication to training it would require. In reflection, I realized that my goals were completely misaligned. My goal should never have been to run a marathon. It was a goal I would never achieve because I could not execute on the massive amounts of training involved and I was not emotionally committed. In fact, failing at training for the marathon derailed and demotivated me for long stretches of time. In my heart of hearts, I didn't want to run a marathon. I realized that my real goals were to optimize my blood test results and how I looked in the mirror. So I switched my execution to focus on diet and running 5Ks four times a week. I lost 30 lbs in four months with 75% less effort, and my test results are, as my doctor says, "fantastic." For me, running a marathon was the absolute **WRONG** vision to set for myself. And in today's market as IT leaders we all need to be prepared to sprint and make meaningful progress in the short-term without losing sight of our long-term objectives.

> Your vision for **MOVING TO OFFENSE** needs to consider the right goals for your organization and allow for realistic execution based on time, budget, and value to the business.

Before investing massive amounts of time and money in "cloud" like other companies, perhaps spending more time on a strategy to migrate legacy applications (or not) to cloud-based infrastructure is a better short-term goal. If you have a long-term vision of automating your IT operations over the next 3-5 years, perhaps the short-term vision is to document and organize all your operational processes and tools over the next 12 months. To succeed we will need to be able to break our long-term vision up into short-term projects that are achievable and measurable. A clear, concise, and obtainable vision is critical when communicating to your team and setting goals for execution. However, when I say obtainable, that doesn't mean it won't have it's own set of challenges. We are laying the foundation to prepare for a rapid acceleration of technology that is unprecedented. You'll need to push the envelope and a turn around is totally possible. Only two months into a 6-month season, the Washington Nationals were 19-31, all but abandoned by fans and enthusiasts as an inevitable losing season. Five months later they are the 2019 World Series Champions. Your vision can inspire and unlock the human potential, and create amazing, if not improbable, results. The power of humans to shift when properly motivated is incredible.

5 STEPS TO BECOME A BETTER OFFENSIVE LEADER

In 2017 Kyle Shanahan took over the San Francisco 49ers, who the previous two years had a combined win-loss record of 7-25. Change doesn't come quickly, but Shanahan broke the organization down, assessed every part of the team, treated specific areas and addressed systemic issues. Progress was slow, with a combined record from 2017-2018 of 10-22 and in 2019 they finished with a 13-3 record and successfully made it to Super Bowl LIV.

We need to take this same approach to **MOVING TO OFFENSE** in IT. A methodical and strategic approach to execution that will compound to create a big shift in the next couple of years. We will break this down to five distinct areas.

VISION

OPERATIONALIZE

PRESCRIBE

DIAGNOSE

EXECUTION
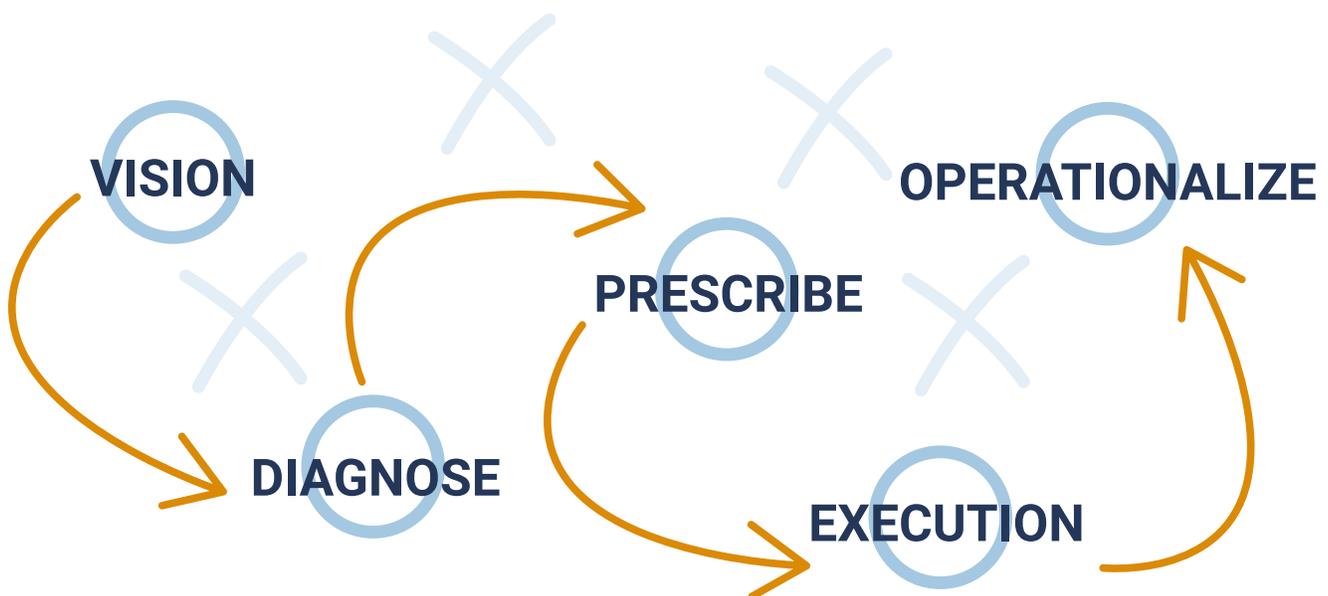
VISION

As the leader, you need to create the vision. What do you want to the organization to be and how will you measure it. From a healthcare perspective, you might visit a doctor and say, I want to be healthy. But what does that mean? Do you want to focus on losing weight, quitting smoking or minimize your risk factors for a heart attack? And how will you measure it? You can measure your weight, your cholesterol levels, BMI, body fat, heart function, but which of these are indicators of your desired outcome and demonstrate your small wins along the way. In IT, you need to create a tangible vision with aligned objectives, such as customer response times, service provisioning times. Service Level Agreements, or cost metrics. Ensure that these objectives are measurable, such as 100% availability, provisioning and delivering a laptop in 48 hours, Meant Time to Repair of 99.999%, bug fixes in 24 hours. Vision and Objectives are relative to every IT Leader and Company, but make sure it is clear, concise, and measurable. And simple to communicate (more on that later).

DIAGNOSE

"Assessment" seems to have become a 4-letter word in IT lately. I hear this all the time, "not yet another assessment, we just want to get something done." The frustration is understandable, based on years of dealing with Big 4 Consulting Firms charging millions for PowerPoint studies, with no plan for execution. But we can't see what we can't see. We need to understand the systematic issues that are under the hood so we can build a winning **OFFENSIVE STRATEGY** that has a chance at succeeding. We need to assess the holes and weaknesses in our tools. people, and processes while creating a plan for how to address them.

Some questions to ask are:

- Do we have the right systems to measure our progress?
- Do we have the right technology to execute our vision?
- Are our processes well documented? How can they change and shift, if needed?
- How do we measure user adoption and the user experience?
- How do we collect and implement feedback?
- Do we have the right people to execute the strategy?

We need to be introspective about our leadership, communication styles and ability to drive change as an organization.

PRESCRIBE

As Peter Drucker says, "culture eats strategy for breakfast." Once we have the diagnosis, we can focus on putting together a multi-year roadmap to execute your vision. The roadmap needs to manifest your vision, set desired outcomes, define the milestones, timelines, and roles. Think very hard about the order of your execution, priorities, and ability to get quick wins to build confidence and momentum with your staff. Now's the time to recognize who your A-Players are. The people on your team that believe in your vision and whom you trust to make the day-to-day decisions to ensure it is executed. If you diagnosed that provisioning new services is taking too long, determine where the issues are, such as manual, time intensive tasks, non-integrated tools, or multiple data entry points. If you are not meeting SLAs, identify the key business services you need to monitor and the systems that need to be customized to collect the right data. If costs are misaligned to your budget, identify where your costs are going, such as internal staff, external consultants, tools, facilities, etc. You might consider resources like the TBM Framework to better understand costs, consumption and performance and make business aligned decisions.

> *"Culture eats strategy for breakfast"*
>
> Peter Drucker

Ensure you consider the necessary process improvements and technology decisions that have to be made in 2020 and beyond. Ensure that your roadmap includes the mechanisms for measurement so you can track performance of initiatives and make adjustments rapidly. I also highly recommend identifying some "low hanging fruit" so that you can get some quick wins to build confidence and momentum early. Align your vision to monthly and quarterly milestones, so that your staff feel they are making progress regularly. When we all feel like we're winning while making progress on larger initiatives it can ease the daily grind on less desirable tasks.

> When you walk into a doctor's office they don't pull out the prescription pad and start writing a prescription before they have diagnosed the issue. When **MOVING TO OFFENSE** you must diagnose your weaknesses and then create realistic prescriptions that can be executed as part of a multi-year digital transformation strategy.

EXECUTION

Execution eats strategy for lunch. How many times have we sat down and decided we want to lose weight, exercise more, quit social media, only to end up right back where we started (or even worse)? Execution is where the rubber meets the road, and the most disciplined team wins. This is where true leadership shines, as keeping your team motivated and on track can be a grueling task. Project management becomes critical here with well-defined processes for assessing progress. Ensure that your project managers are not just "spreadsheet jockeys," but have context of the initiatives so they can understand the impact of decisions and results (or missed deadlines). Create key performance metrics and measure them regularly and religiously. As the Leader, your job is to measure process, prioritize efforts, make strategy decisions, and break down barriers for your staff to be successful.

The Agile methodology is highly effective for this type of shift. With our clients we develop a 3-Year vision with clear metric improvements, such as "Zero Down Time." We then develop three one-year Major Milestones and twelve quarterly Milestones. We break down each quarter to six two-week sprints. Sprint planning and release meetings are scheduled and mandatory, never missed. Executives are briefed every two weeks with progress, issues, and challenges to the timeline, as well as current metric reports. And most importantly, we celebrate our successes on a quarterly basis, led by the Executive Team, and name a quarterly "MVP." Do not underestimate the criticality of celebrating the team success and acknowledging progress. The HumanOS wants to feel like our efforts are meaningful so make sure to build in celebrations and acknowledgement.

> Remember to celebrate every win and every failure to keep your team motivated and inspired to reach the end goal. The truth is, if you aren't failing you aren't setting the bar high enough. Showing your team failure is as important as winning is the key to rapid digital transformation.

> *"Execution eats strategy for lunch. Ensure that your project managers are not just spreadsheet jockeys."*
>
> - Sean McDermott

TIPS FOR
FLAWLESS EXECUTION

1
Set the strategic vision

2
Prioritize efforts

3
Align tasks to strategic initiatives

4
Create performance metrics

5
Measure metrics religiously

6
Break down barriers to progress

OPERATIONALIZE

Engineers have an Achilles Heel. Let's just acknowledge the fact that we like to build things and many of us do not like running things. In fact, we've found that most people start losing the "excitement" about halfway through the Execution. However, for any large-scale initiative or a strategy as large as **MOVING TO OFFENSE**, the most important result of success will be **ADOPTION**. Your vision, strategy, and execution have to ensure that ongoing operations is considered – from the beginning. In order to be effective at operationalizing you need to develop a Governance Model from the beginning to measure improvement and ensure that issues can be identified and corrected quickly. Governance is like shooting an arrow – if you are 5 yards away you can be off by a few degrees and still hit the target. However, that same few degrees at 50 yards could leave you off target by 10 feet. Time elongates errors and not having a well-defined Governance model can have disastrous results in a 3-year strategy. Your Governance model needs to have well defined objectives, key performance indicators, roles and decision-making processes. You need to identify barriers and break them down, such as training, passive aggressiveness, technical issues, security issues, etc. Lack of Governance will result in a short-term spike of improvement (much like a mirage), only to regress to the old normal.

As I stated, the key to success is adoption. When operationalizing a platform, we seek to measure adoption as a primary metric. This includes tracking user logins to measure how the system being used. We perform surveys and "drive-by" meetings, where we can talk directly with users and gain feedback. We enact a formalized Change Management Board and change processes to ensure that changes are implemented fast and accurately. We use videos on a regular basis to reinforce behavior and marketing tracking tools to see if people are watching the videos.

Your main focus is to measure, seek feedback, create improvements, and assimilate the improvements into the organization. Rinse and repeat.

"Eighty-seven percent of senior business leaders say digitalization is a company priority and 79% of corporate strategists say it is reinventing their business — creating new revenue streams in new ways. But so far, digital change has been slow and disappointing."

- Gartner

HOW TO
MEASURE ADOPTION

☑ **Track user logins**

☑ **Conduct surveys**

☑ **Do "drive-by" meetings**

☑ **Create a Change Management Board**

☑ **Create training videos & track usage**

☑ **Proactively seek feedback**

ORGANIZATIONAL CHANGE MANAGEMENT IS NO LONGER OPTIONAL

As we discussed earlier, the Human factor is critical to **MOVING TO OFFENSE**. Professional sports represent a clear example. How common is it for a team to have so much talent with expectations for greatness at the beginning of a season, yet fail so miserably to not even make it to the post-season playoffs? Phil Jackson lead the Chicago Bulls to six NBA Championships with some of the most talented, ego-driven people on the planet. He then went to the struggling LA Lakers despite having Kobe Bryant and the Shaq and won five more NBA Championships. Phil Jackson knows how to lead, motivate, and inspire players to operate as a Team and get them to "row" in the same direction. In IT, leadership and vision is critical to ensuring that initiatives are successful, but it starts with your ability to motivate people.

To be successful, you must first understand that all IT projects are a form of "business transformation." Unless it's a simple technology upgrade, all projects will impact your people, process, and technology in some way. This is why strategy and Organizational Change Management (OCM) is mission critical.

Most projects are considered a "success" if they are on-time and under-budget. This is antiquated thinking. While those aspects are important, you need to expand your definition of success to include user adoption and customer value. You must understand what your customers wants and ensure everyone is "enabled" for success. Motivating people to not only change, but to thrive during that change is a sign of exemplary leadership.

There are FOUR key areas to think about when attempting to bring people along for your vision:

1 **Create a Sense of Urgency.** What is your "burning platform?" Meaning, if you and your team were standing on a wooden platform that caught on fire, you'd move pretty fast to get the heck off of it. Find your burning platform, your "why" and the force of urgency your team will respond to. Humans can do amazing things when urgent action is necessary. Urgency is important and we want to stop short of creating panic and a culture of putting out fires all day. Teams who are in constant fight or flight do not have access to their most important brain functions for doing the job at hand. So look for how you can inspire unprecedented progress using urgency as a tool, not a weapon.

2 **Talk People Through Your Vision.** When looking to inspire others consider their most important motivation centers. 1) the Head 2) the Heart 3) the Hands and 4) the Feet. For the Head, help your staff clearly understand the change, why it's necessary, and the urgency required. For the Heart, you need to get them to **BELIEVE** in the why and the way forward. For the Hands, you need to enlist them to participate in the project, to roll up their sleeves. And for the Feet, you need them to spread their belief to others. We in IT tend to believe that communication is documentation. We tend to think that emailing is communication. But communication is really about connection.

The 4 Motivation Centers of the HumanOS

We are all humans and the HumanOS loves a good story. Consider turning your vision into a tory, with a hero (your customer), a villain (your challenges), and a guide (your team) that will help your heroes beat the villain. Help you staff understand their role in this story. When communicating, understand your receiver and what motivates them. A manager is motivated differently than a systems administrator. Engage with people face-to-face. Talk to people, sell them on our vision and their role, and you'll bring them along. Instead of blasting out emails try recording short 2-minute videos. Video personalizes your communication and adds another layer of your humanness so your team feels a deeper connection to you and the vision.

3 **Reinforcement.** IT initiatives are never successful upon the completion of the installation or launch. We all know of projects that required a ton of time and money, but a year later people start questioning "why did we do that project?" Time always tells, because project success is based on user adoption, which takes time to measure. Make sure you are prepared to measure. You have to continually monitor adoption, provide training, remove blockers, and ensure continual feedback and improvement.

4 **Celebrate.** The best teams have learned how to celebrate every win, no matter how small. They also celebrate their failures in incredible detail. They review their game footage inch by inch and turn it into macro and micro learning moments. The number one reason people leave jobs is because they don't feel appreciated. Celebrate your wins and always praise people for their efforts!

On paper, these strategies seem like no-brainers. But in practice, many IT initiatives skip these steps because, frankly, they are not sexy or fun, and IT engineers would rather build. If you're going to **MOVING TO OFFENSE**, building your skills requires discipline in motivating people by creating clear visions with urgency and relentlessly communicating your vision through personal interaction.

WHAT CAN I DO IN 2020

The end of 2019 brought not only the end of another year, but a unique end to another decade. This is an excellent time to reflect on your past 1-10 years and develop a new vision and strategy. If you believe **MOVING TO OFFENSE** is the right strategy for you, I suggest the following actions you start now:

☑ **DEVELOP A 3-5 YEAR VISION** – this does not need to be a huge effort. It may even be a 10-page PowerPoint presentation. But, figure out what will move the needle for your organization over the next 3-5 years and what objectives can set. Do a 360 exercise – talk to your CEO and other business leaders, your staff, and even peers outside your company. Ask questions and listen. The answers are most likely already out there. We start with questions like, "what do you believe is holding the company or department back?" or "On a scale of 1-5, how would you rate our service or performance? What would you do to make it a 5?" Your questions have to be thought provoking, create dialog, and get your people to dig deep. Remember, their first answer is never the right answer. You have to lead them deeper.

☑ **IDENTIFY YOUR SQUAD** – you will not be able to execute a **MOVING TO OFFENSE** strategy alone. There is a reason there are SEAL Teams. Because it takes a team to execute. Enlist your team and make sure they are A-Players with a variety of backgrounds, like finance, engineering and customer support. We developed the 12-Attributes of an A-Team, that allow us to highly predict the success of our staff. We also develop psychological profiles of our team positions to ensure we place the right staff with the right attributes into the right positions. If possible, bring one of your customers onto the team. Use your Vision to capture their imagination.

☑ **ASSESS YOUR TOOLS** – When it comes to tools, everyone has "one of everything" and "software sitting on the shelf we don't even use." Tools take a tremendous amount of resources to maintain, including annual licensing and subscriptions, administration, and infrastructures (server and storage). Get your hands around what you have and mostly likely you will unlock all kinds of savings from under-utilized or overlap tools that you can invest in your **MOVING TO OFFENSE** strategy. While this could be an arduous task, there are new technologies available like RedMonocle that can rapidly assess your entire IT/Security tool chain.

☑ **BECOME A FUTURIST** – the defensive challenges are both Macro and Micro related. Make sure you can see the forest beyond the trees. All great leaders know that learning is a constant. You can't fix problems you don't know about, so start by reading analyst research on trends, learn about economic policies or conditions that might impact your organization, and start reading about emotional intelligence in the workplace. Schedule regular meetings with your third-party analysts, like Gartner or Forrester. I regularly read CIO Magazine, InfoWorld, and The Economist. The more your learns and expands their knowledge, the better you can build offensive positions and new plays that negate the impact of macro and micro shifts that would previously derail your strategy.

MOVING TO OFFENSE is a journey, not an event. It takes courage, vision, diligence, and patience. But, when successful, you can make the shift from being a game changer to being a game maker.

GET YOUR TOP PLAYS EVERY MONTH!

Want to stay on top of your game? Join the Winner's Circle and get help from the industry's top movers and shakers. You'll join the ranks of an elite group of industry thought leaders who are leading the IT industry through a time of rapidly accelerating change and digital transformation. Every month you'll receive:

☑ A game winning play from Sean's Fortune 1000 Leadership Playbook

☑ Tips from industry insiders on what's coming and what to do about it

☑ Invites to exclusive regional events and dinners to connect with like-minded peers

Yes! I'd like to join the Winner's Circle →

Who's ready to
MOVE TO OFFENSE?

If you are ready to get off of defense and make the shift to offense for your IT Operations team, there's no better time than now. The rate of acceleration is accelerating and our ability to predict change over the next 2, 3 and 5 years has never been more difficult.

To remain viable we need to increase our agility without compromising our existing infrastructure.
I've created an A-Team with a proven track record for successful digital transformation that is ready for what's ahead. From project inception to completion…we've got you covered.

If you're ready, let's schedule some time to assess your needs and formulate a strategy.

Yes! I'd like a meeting with Sean's A-Team ➤

Sean McDermott is a futurist and serial entrepreneur who has spent more than 30 years empowering IT leaders at hundreds of global clients, the Fortune 1000 and the Federal Government in the design, development, and operation of large-scale IT networks and data centers. His breadth of experience as a practitioner combined with his knowledge of IT infrastructure and design gives him a unique lens and voice that is unprecedented in the industry. In 1997, Sean founded Windward Consulting Group to help CIOs strategically transform IT from a "cost of doing business" into a competitive business differentiator. In 2004, Sean founded RealOps, Inc. the pioneer in enterprise management Run Book Automation solutions, which was acquired by BMC Software and noted as one of the most successful enterprise management software acquisitions of the year. In 2018, Sean founded RedMonocle, a SaaS solution that provides IT leaders the answer to three core questions that are critical for IT tools rationalization, "How many tools do I have? How much do they cost? And how well do they meet our needs?

WINDWARD