Emi Olsson

Vice President, Distinguished Engineer and Chief Technology Officer, Global Technology Services, North America Financial Services Sector

In her 23 years with IBM, Emi Olsson has reinvented herself numerous times—working as a system administrator, as a software coder, with research, as a consultant and as an IT architect. In her current role with Global Technology Services, she serves as the chief technology officer overseeing IBM's work with financial services clients in North America.

Each time, Emi's personal remit has been to transform herself and grow her skills while helping clients reinvent themselves for the age of cloud and AI. "You have to start with a vision, communicate that vision, empower and listen to your stakeholders, and lead by example to demonstrate how transformation works," she says.

Emi's inspirations for reinvention, long before she got to IBM, were her parents—especially her father, whose life in Japan was upended by war. "My father's education was disrupted by World War II, and so he never completed high school," Emi says. "After the war, he worked cleaning animal cages at a U.S. Naval Base research lab, and eventually followed the researcher he worked for when that scientist moved to Yale University."

While making the most of his circumstances and supporting his family, Emi's father remained intellectually curious. An autodidact, he absorbed volumes of knowledge about biological research, and in retirement was accepted to medical school in Japan. At age 66, he was the oldest incoming student in the school's history. "My father lost his battle with cancer before he could complete his medical degree," Emi recounts, "but even in his final days when he was confined to a wheelchair, his colleagues wheeled him to class."

Emi continues the tradition of her father's intellectual openness and competitive drive. "When I talk about having a vision for a client engagement, it's not about having an off-the-shelf objective," she says. "You have to pull back so you can see the bigger picture—at first with less specificity, and then with a clear focus on the end user. To make that work, you have to give your team buy-in so that they become stakeholders. Then you have to allow them to think, and trust them to be innovative and accountable."

Leading by Example

To guide her clients in their transitions to the IBM Cloud, Emi often relies on a Design Thinking Stakeholder map, which helps her identify project stakeholders, their expectations and their relationships. Critical components of navigating that map include "repetitive communication of the project vision, so partners and teams can overcome any fears of the unknown," she says. Also important: listening, a willingness to make leadership changes to remove obstructions to transformation, and "always leading by example."

For many large organizations, Emi notes, it can be a challenge to dismantle the walls between siloed groups. In addition, new technologies and new ways of thinking often lead to the creation of industry jargon that confuses the conversation instead of contributing to it. "It is important to avoid platitudes," Emi says. "Allowing for inclusiveness helps everyone achieve a level of understanding that enables them to communicate clearly and achieve results for our clients."

Sometimes, gamification and activities such as hackathons can get partners and teams thinking in the same direction. “For one large client, we discovered that the mainframe team had not been brought into the discussion about how to migrate the enterprise to the cloud,” Emi recounts. “This had the potential to become a significant problem because no transition to the cloud can occur without the mainframe. Running a hackathon brought them into the mix and gave everybody a sense of ownership of the project.”

Emi credits her mentors—especially those who are IBM Fellows and Distinguished Engineers—with “helping me learn about building relationships and understand the importance of establishing a career plan for myself.”

“I’ve also been fortunate to have a husband who fully supports my career, and children whose pursuits have helped broaden my creative perspective,” Emi says. Her daughter, age 16, aspires to be a systems engineer using quantum technologies. Her son, 11, wants to pursue his interest in science through the lens of creative writing. It would seem that both intellectual curiosity and the drive to reinvent run in the family.

→ ***Emi Olsson on Linkedin***

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