**JUDITH APHAGO >** Clips from Podcast *(Using the ‘Duplicate REV’)* 28 Jan 2020

Bill Murphy: 00:01 Hello, and you are listening to Bill Murphy's RedZone podcast. I interview leaders who inspire me in the areas of exponential technologies, business innovation, entrepreneurship, thought leadership, enterprise IT security, neuroscience, philosophy, personal development, and more. Welcome to the show.

Bill Murphy: 00:38 Welcome back to the show everyone. This is Bill Murphy, your host of the RedZone podcast. Today my guest is Judith Apshago, who is the Capital CIO of the Year Enterprise ORBIE Award winner, and Judith's leadership talents were recognized in this big way in 2018 when she was chosen from a group of 88 nominees to receive this prestigious award. And in the same year she received the Norma Miller Passionate Philanthropists Award as well. And this ORBIE Award recognizes technology executives for leadership, innovation, and excellence. When she was the vice president and chief information officer of U.S. Silica, a leading producer of performance materials and industrial minerals and last mile logistics. At U.S. Silica, Judith spearheaded IT and digital transformation to support the company's rapid and substantial growth. She led a company-wide technology modernization, shifted IT from a utility provider to a high performing strategic business partner, integrated multiple acquired companies, and collaborated with business leaders on strategic initiatives that enabled scalability, drove business efficiencies, and provided market differentiation.

Bill Murphy: 01:53 So a couple of key things that I want you to know about Judith. Number one is she brought up this concept of a board. She had really achieved quite a bit at U.S. Silica and then decided that she wanted to really continue to expand herself and went to an opportunity that was actually much bigger than where she was at U.S. Silica, and that's Amtrak. And a previous mentor of hers brought her on board at Amtrak when they going through some huge revolutionary changes and they really needed someone of her caliber to be on that team. And so I want you to learn how Judith looks at really tough challenges. She developed a team of mentors and developed a personal board of directors to address career challenges, changes, business challenges that she faced as an IT leader, and I'm a big proponent of this board of directors approach. And you can listen to her talk about that.

Bill Murphy: 02:50 We talked about what she believes is importance of collaboration and understanding people and building relationships and how you communicate your personal vision within the context of the overall organization, how you gain support from the top down, and what were her critical learning moments in her career, and the importance of getting support and having someone that really, really believes in you, how to reduce fear in an organization, how to improve business processes as a focal point within an organization, and not letting perfect be the enemy of good enough, and why you must think like a customer to understand the impact of IT on critical customer facing services.

Bill Murphy: 03:36 So I believe these are some great learning points that you will get, and I think it's important as you have an ambition to do something different or changes you want to make or you just want to be better within your current position that you are, that you get a chance to see how others approach their careers and how they themselves are looking at taking on big challenges and continuing to develop and grow. So with that I want to introduce you to my conversation with Judith Apshago.

Bill Murphy: 04:12 Well Judith, I want to welcome you to the show today.

Judith Apshago: 04:14 Thank you.

Bill Murphy: 04:15 Okay. I am super interested in how you got started in IT. Maybe if you just take us back to, as far back as you'd like. Maybe back to high school or college. Did you know you're going to be in IT from day one or did this morph through college? What was the genesis of you getting into technology?

Judith Apshago: 04:35 I did not know that I would take an IT path. I always knew I wanted to run my own show. At the time I thought it was to run my own business, but I think you can interpret that in a lot of different ways. That's still in the back of my mind. Maybe one day. No, not IT specifically. In my childhood and throughout my education I was always focused on *math and problem solving*.

Judith Apshago: 05:00 In college, I studied math and finance. Then, early in my career, moved into process improvement. This was in the days where technology wasn't nearly as prevalent as it is today. Naturally when you look at improving a process, you look at, okay, how can we make it more efficient? That is what led me into technology.

Bill Murphy: 05:16 Okay. Do you think that process is still paramount? Is that the way your brain works when you look at the macro problem? Are you trying to chunk it into smaller pieces right away?

Judith Apshago: 05:30 I always think of it like a puzzle. I've always loved puzzles. In fact, every holiday, Thanksgiving, that's the tradition. We do a big jigsaw puzzle. Yes. In fact in Ohio this Thanksgiving, that was the big challenge. We had about 20 pieces left. My husband said, "It's time to leave." I said, "No." I had to finish the puzzle. Yes, I always think of it as a puzzle. You have all these pieces. They need to fit together. There's typically one way they fit together best.

Judith Apshago: 05:55 The problem solving and how do we put all these pieces together to achieve what the outcome is or the goal.

Bill Murphy: 06:02 What happens if you jump into something that has already in place or in the midst of, it's the car's moving and you got to change the tires on a moving car. Obviously in business, it's not just the tires because there's just four. There could be a lot of them. How do you approach something that's the ship's already sailed. You're trying to fix it as it's going.

Judith Apshago: 06:24 Yes. That's not unusual, unfortunately. You have to keep the wheels on the bus while we're getting the oil changed. Then doing all the other things to make it run more efficiently. It's always a challenge. I think whenever you're in an IT leadership role, you're balancing the day to day support and operations with now, how do we make things better? How do we improve?

Judith Apshago: 06:44 A lot of it is the communication, the coordination. We talked about process. I think understanding the impact as we're making these changes. What impact will that have on keeping the day to day operations going. Keeping the wheels on the bus. I think just understanding the impact. Communicating. Making sure that you're not making decisions in a vacuum becomes critical.

Bill Murphy: 07:07 You were a math and finance major at a college. Then what was your first job?

Judith Apshago: 07:12 My first real, I'll say real job. I was at a bank for a little bit. My first real job was with the Department of Defense. It was in the Clinton/Gore era. All about reinventing government. I was brought in, straight out of college to look at one particular agency within DOD that provided services to other agencies. What was called a fee-for-service model.We basically charged other agencies to provide them administrative support, and the charter was, make this less costly than private industry.

Judith Apshago: 07:41 For other government agencies to come to us for their IT services, for their HR services, their finance services, we need to be competitive with private industry. We were looking at how do we cut waste? How do we make things more efficient? Actually, I still have a small pewter hammer, which was called The Hammer Award at the time. Which was one of the big Clinton/Gore programs to see how we could cut waste out of government.

Bill Murphy: 08:06 Interesting. You started really in government then. Was it the third party? Was it a separate-

Judith Apshago: 08:11 It was DOD.

Bill Murphy: 08:12 It was DOD. How did you migrate out of government and why? Why did you move?

Judith Apshago: 08:16 I was there about four years and then I was contacted by one of the big consulting firms at the time. Coopers & Lybrand. Before the merger with Price Waterhouse. I had the opportunity to actually do much of the same of what I was doing internally with the government, but do it as a consultant – do it across multiple organizations. I thought that sounded pretty exciting. I was young and didn't mind the travel.

Judith Apshago: 08:41 So, I went to Coopers & Lybrand and survived the merger with Price Waterhouse. I was doing a lot of consulting back to the government as well as private industry around process improvement and around automation.

Bill Murphy: 08:52 Okay. *I'll put this in the intr*o. You're an OBIE Award winner.

Judith Apshago: 08:58 Yes.

Bill Murphy: 08:58 What was the job right before you went to U.S. Silica?

Judith Apshago: 09:03 Yes. I was with the Life Sciences industry. Biotech for a number of years. Actually, I left consulting and went to a Life Sciences Company and was in project management. That led me to IT leadership roles. Prior to U.S. Silica, I was with Sigma-Aldrich. I landed there through multiple acquisitions and divestitures in the life- sciences industry.

Bill Murphy: 09:32 When you're actually in looking at processes, how do you navigate multiple different people and departments and heads that might have been involved in systems for a long time? How do you navigate that? A building of, not necessarily friends, but a building alliances with people you really going to need to be on your side of the fence doing this?

Judith Apshago: 10:04 Yes. I think the relationship building is key. I think it's been probably one of the keys to a lot of the successes throughout my career. What I'm working to do here at my current role is build those relationships. Those alliances of the go-to people that I have trust. Who have faith in what I can do. What I can lead. Also who I can in turn ask to help me. Help champion change. Help me lead and drive. Help me influence others.

Judith Apshago: 10:33 I think those relationships are key. It goes so far to trying to get things accomplished when someone's on your side and help drive as your partner versus trying to pull them along. It's just takes a lot more energy and effort.

Bill Murphy: 10:48 Is there anything that you do that's unique to relationship building? The reason I'm asking is that sometimes in unique abilities, you do it so naturally that people like, "Wow. That's amazing. She has a great relationship building skills." It's hard to articulate it. If there is anything that you do in that process that you do consciously, I'd be curious to know what it is that you do specifically about relationship building. Do you have collaborative dinners? Is it just because you're... What do you think about that?

Judith Apshago: 11:22 Part of it I think just comes naturally. I'm fairly even keeled. I don't get too emotional or excited about too many things. I have pretty thick skin. I'll try take the higher road if I need to. I'm okay to let someone else be in the limelight, if that helps them feel it gives them the attention that helps build that relationship.

Judith Apshago: 11:58 I think a lot of it is around understanding people, understanding what makes them tick, understanding what their kind of key goals and objectives are and making sure whatever you're presenting aligns with that.

Judith Apshago: 11:58 I think the common front, being able to connect on some level. *Whether it's, how do I support you? How do I make you successful? What can I provide to you? Try and find some way to connect with that person or personal connections.* Do we have a common friend? Did we go to the same school? I think trying to find those personal connections first and then trying to parlay that into, "Okay. Now how can I help you?"

Bill Murphy: 12:27 You're not saying, "This is my agenda. We need to make this happen.Line up my way or the highway." You're completely trying to find out what it is their unique wins are and how can you serve them and their needs. They're obviously picking up on that as a major thesis of how you operate.

Judith Apshago: 12:45 Right.

Bill Murphy: 12:46 Okay.

Judith Apshago: 12:47 Because I think if I go to them with what I need, I'm much less likely to get what I need.

Bill Murphy: 12:52 To build that consensus. Okay.

Judith Apshago: [12:53](https://www.rev.com/transcript-editor/Edit?token=CBx5MACg9HjnU-LcgBh41rvYcUybkdR7tzS-saRT7TIQP4ARewYdpnsnAvMReC7ua0ySRThfeOqmLcpxuGTbDgaeE8w&loadFrom=DocumentDeeplink&ts=576.62) Yes. I think it's more... Okay. Or what can we achieve together? You have goals. I have goals. Can we find a common purpose. Can we work together to try and achieve something that's of mutual benefit.

Bill Murphy: 13:05 Okay. How important is it in the success you've had to have a CEO have your back or some senior, either board or somebody that has some... Be on your side? Or have be a sponsor. Is that, that important as you're making these bigger changes?

Judith Apshago: 13:26 Yes. Definitely. Because a lot of these transformational changes have to have support from the top. People need to know that the whole organization is aligned around this. To me the biggest thing is building credibility. I think you get that confidence through delivery and through success. Making sure that, you have to be able to instill confidence. They're not going to support something they don't believe in. I need to be able to convince them that, "Hey, it's the right thing to do. I'm the right person to lead it."

Judith Apshago: 13:52 "We will be successful. Here's what we need to make that success happen. Here's where I need your support." I've been pretty successful being able to do that, once people understand why we're doing it. What we need. They have the confidence that we can achieve what we're looking to do.

Bill Murphy: 14:06 Do you have a unique way of positioning what you're trying to achieve? How do you paint the vision of what the overall goal is? Are you just matching to the organizational goal? The organization is going in this direction and then you're helping to re-interpret that for each business as far as what technology is going to do? How do you approach that?

Judith Apshago: 14:27 I think that you have to find something to connect it to. Obviously IT has to be aligned with the: business. We need to be doing things that support the overall company goals. To be able to make that connection and that link to show here's how this my goal ties to your goal. This is what we're going to enable.

Judith Apshago: 14:44 Now whether it's revenue growth or its efficiencies or it's connecting with the customers better. Improving that experience. Whatever those goals are for the company, mine should really truly align with that. To be able to illustrate that either graphically or. through some type of illustration to show how it's connected. How it's tied together and why it's important. I think that's key.

Bill Murphy: 15:08 Have there been any milestones where you've seen seminal moments of your career so far that... We've talked a little bit before we got started about it's some stepping stones. Is there been any real important inflection points that you can point to saying, "This was a big moment and this was a big moment?"

Judith Apshago: 15:26 Yes. Early in my career, I talked about process improvement. That's been the theme throughout my career. I really started in project management. When I was early in my career, I was given the opportunity, actually a couple of opportunities when I was with DOD and I had just started with them, right out of school. My boss at the time had me presenting to four-star generals.

Judith Apshago: 15:48 I'm thinking, "Here I am, 22 years old in front of these very intimidating four-star generals. Talking about how we can do things more efficiently." I think that very early in my career, the confidence that she had in me and ability for me to present in that forum.

Judith Apshago: 16:02 That was repeated later. Still quite a while ago with a large project that my boss, when I was in the life sciences with Invitrogen, gave me the opportunity to lead the largest project that company had taken on in the IT arena. It was a global project. 50 countries. Massive infrastructure upgrade. I had never done anything like that before. He brought me in his office and said, "I'd like you to lead this project so I can sleep better at night." I chuckled inside and said, "Okay, I'm not getting any sleep. I'm glad you're sleeping well." It went very well.

Judith Apshago: 16:33 That confidence that he instilled in me, I think gave me the ability. The project went very well. I was recognized by our CIO, who then asked me to go to one of our business units that we had acquired and take on some challenges there to lead another difficult project. Which also led to another stepping stone. She then soon after offered me an IT director role. Which ultimately became the beginning of my career in various active leadership roles. CIO and others.

Judith Apshago: 17:03 I think that confidence that those leaders gave me early in my career that said, "Hey, they have faith that I can do this." It gave me the push, I guess to make sure that I did succeed. I wanted to please them because they had so much confidence in me. I think that ultimately led me to where I am now.

Bill Murphy: 17:22 That's great. Has it always been one success after another or have you, everybody had some... I think sometimes it's, when people look at somebody like you, they're like, "Okay, she's ringing the bell of some big accomplishments." Have there ever been any challenging opportunities where you've had to re-contextualize everything and be leading through a harder times? I'm wondering if you could share with us any stories relative to that. Maybe how you turned things around.

Judith Apshago: [17:47](https://www.rev.com/transcript-editor/Edit?token=3MYn7snPqWflQXy5b8ih7_i94CbeJMs9IdRyR4opynNpsUSnQAPoXAiYhm9fTYtdrd3mBdwXVIZQ1yz80C_YwIumbRY&loadFrom=DocumentDeeplink&ts=891.87) Sure. Actually not that long ago. At my previous company we had a very large transformation project. We had acquired a company that became the fastest growing business unit. U.S. Silica. We were integrating. The company started as a small mom and pop shop and was growing very quickly. Their processes were very quickly being outgrown. We needed to bring them onto our standard enterprise systems and then build some platforms so they could automate a lot of what was being done, either manually, on paper or through spreadsheets.

Judith Apshago: 18:23 This was a major transformation effort that was really going to change this company. There was a lot of pressure to get it done quickly. This was about a yearlong project. Quite costly. We had a vendor on board to help us. We were a couple of weeks away from go-live and feeling that we weren't quite ready - and lots of pressure from the top. Lots of reasons why we needed to push this project along. We got to the go/no-go decision right in the midst of hurricane Harvey.

Bill Murphy: 18:53 Oh, no.

Judith Apshago: 18:53 If you remember the scale of that storm in Houston….

Bill Murphy: 18:54 Yes.

Judith Apshago: 18:57 We had just lost a key team member. Our technical lead from the vendor had actually very unexpectedly passed away. Then we also had, when we went through what issues do we have still open, we have what we called a ‘red issue’. One of our must-fix critical issues.The team felt confident that we could fix it within a week.

Judith Apshago: 19:16 This red issue prevented us from being able to invoice customers. We said, "Okay, we don't invoice until the end of the month. We'll get it done in a week and we'll be fine." We collected the business IT and we made this decision.

Judith Apshago: 19:29 I think the decision at the time was really made based on a lot of pressure. We have to ‘go-live’. We can't wait. People were really focused on family and safety during the middle of the hurricane, but we said, "We're going live." We went live with this large project. Bringing them onto our core ERP platform with integration to various systems. It was a disaster. It was not good. We couldn't invoice customers. The one-week issue turned into three or four weeks. People hadn't been properly trained on processes….

Bill Murphy: 19:55 Wow.

Judith Apshago: 19:56 We had a lot of folks out of the office because they were taking care of their own personal situations. In the end, it was not the right decision. We learned that the hard way. We quickly regrouped and said, "Okay, now how do we get past this?" We put together a recovery plan and we brought in extra bodies to help process things manually until we could get everyone trained and get over the hump. Ultimately we did. It took about two months to really get into steady state and get past that.

Judith Apshago: 20:23 The big lesson learned was, "Hey. Next time let's listen to the experts.If we don't feel we're quite ready, if we have other variables that were unexpected, let's make the tough call." While we may have other pressures, and in this case, in addition to the political pressures, we also had compliance concerns. Because being a public company, we had to be compliant within a year of the acquisition.

Judith Apshago: 20:45 Fast forward about a year, we had another large project. Same business unit, but very strategic. Where we were automating soup to nuts. A lot of different processes and weren't quite ready. We had our go- or no-go, and a lot of things were going well; but we just really weren't quite ready. We made the tough call to delay the project two months. People weren't happy about it. We reminded them. Remember a year ago?

Bill Murphy: 21:13 Lessons learned.

Judith Apshago: 21:13 Lessons learned**.** We delayed the project two months, then we went live. I'd say a month later, nobody remembered that we were two months late. It went very well. People were prepared. All the right things happened. It was the opposite of the prior experience.

Judith Apshago: 21:28 I think those learning moments in an organization, wasn't just IT. I think the whole company learned. Sometimes you do have to make those tough calls. When we do fall, we need to quickly regroup. Put a plan together. Execute that plan. Then move on and apply those lessons next time.

Bill Murphy: 21:45 This is interesting. Because it can generate a lot of fear. I see this a lot with the CIOs that I talk to. They take a hit. Regardless of what size it is, on a scale of zero to ten, it can be a ten hit or one or two - they're taking the one, two and three hits and they're making them tens in their own mind. It makes them gun shy to take risks and to push the envelope. All of a sudden, they lose confidence in taking the shot in a basketball game. They're a great three point shooter and they just lose confidence.

Bill Murphy: 22:17 How do you balance crossing the i's and dotting the t's, with actually taking some project risk?

Judith Apshago: [22:23](https://www.rev.com/transcript-editor/Edit?token=kOyvoe79oIfayxrdmelwMIGv-YmAhoSXNuvSClPPCuXWO8aq-QT4RcSqEskShuuslF2eZFtYUSuTKnEzfiR7HLRPNXE&loadFrom=DocumentDeeplink&ts=1188.31) It's a very good question. One of my early leaders and mentors in my career said to me, "Don't let the perfect be the enemy of the good enough." That has resonated for my entire career because I'm a perfectionist by nature. I'm also a very analytical by nature. I like to have all the answers.

Bill Murphy: 22:39 In math, right?

Judith Apshago: 22:40 Exactly.

Bill Murphy: 22:41 It’s not like you can get, you're not even an English major. It's, I can potentially get this paragraph right now. We got to get the math right.

Judith Apshago: 22:47 Right.

Bill Murphy: 22:48 There's no two answers.

Judith Apshago: 22:49 One plus one equals two. My tendency is to want to know all the details. To want to know all the answers. To make sure it's perfect. I had to adjust my way of thinking. Actually that was feedback I received later on my career from a manager at the time that I have to get comfortable with making decisions without having all the information. All of the answers. As you move up the chain, you're not going to be able to have all those details. You have to get comfortable.

Bill Murphy: 23:16 Interesting.

Judith Apshago: [23:16](https://www.rev.com/transcript-editor/Edit?token=l8wgcVto5AvzPFztNw4UYTUUPHdCpaY7r3gWdTiKuAWkKxxZv1PHva7DHY5MZz-JT2-ElCfwzcRUNV77UoASKjp6veE&loadFrom=DocumentDeeplink&ts=1242.88) I think the flip side is, that balance of, when do you need the details. What are the critical decisions where you actually do need to dot all those i's and cross the t's. When can you afford to take a little more risk. I think there are times, is it a safety concern? Is it a compliance concern? Or is it just, "Okay. We might not make as much money. We might not be quite as efficient. We might not get quite the satisfaction score." I think somewhere there's a really fine balance. Sometimes it's a little difficult to find.

Bill Murphy: 23:46 This might be something that you just do naturally now. I might not even have asked this question, is there a meter internally that you're using? For example, this decision's going to impact customers. I'm going too slow, pun intended, I'm going to slow this train down a little bit because we're coming up against customers, or is it this is an internal system that might have some upset end users? But I’ve got to make it because it leads to the next... Is there that type of thing that you run through?

Judith Apshago: 24:14 Yes. In fact, even here at Amtrak, soon after starting, I had a decision we had to make around, do we go or not. It was one of those where we needed ideally another few weeks. We were a little bit past the point of no return because of some other decisions that had already been made. We made a calculated decision to say, "Look. There's risk either way. Which is the greater risk? Which is the lesser of the two evils."

Judith Apshago: 24:40 I don't know about that gut meter. I think sometimes you have to rely on the gut meter and sometimes you have to just look at, yes, is this going to impact external facing customers or is this just some inconvenient store internal. Which is still important. Our internal customers are still important. Our external perceptions weigh a little heavier.

Bill Murphy: 24:58 Yes. How important is... It seems some of the decisions you've made have been that one challenge has led to the next challenge, has led to the next challenge. Did you intentionally set out that you're going to... Have you always been up for the challenge in the sense that you wanted that early on? Or was that just something that you just think personal? The growth as a leader, it just invigorates you in the role you're in?

Judith Apshago: 25:19 I think it's a little bit of both. I'd say that my passion really has always been around how do I make things better. Particularly since I got into IT. How do I improve things with technology? How do we enable? How do we leverage technology to make business better? That's been a bit of a driver, I'd say throughout my career. I think it's also a little bit of success breeds success. Opportunities breed opportunities. People see what you can do and say, "Hey. Can you try this?" I'd say it's probably a combination of the two.

Bill Murphy: 25:47 Okay. That's interesting. As we look at mentoring a little bit more. I always find this really fascinating because I say to the folks that are involved in my CIO Innovation group, "Who are your closest peers?" I say, "If your ambition is to handle big projects and to be a XYZ type of a CIO, who is your composite friend group? Is it people just like you, or do you have..." You and I talked a little about mentorship and finding people. And I was wondering if you can give… What's your lens around mentorship and what it's meant to you at different stages of your career?

Judith Apshago: 26:24 Yes. I think looking at that two different ways. One is being mentored and the other is being the mentor to others.

Bill Murphy: 26:28 Okay. Good point.

Judith Apshago: 26:29 I think the first is, and it's interesting because I was recently between roles. My prior company, U.S. Silica moved to Houston. I chose to stay in the DC area. I was looking for my next opportunity. I was talking to someone in my network and he said, "You need your personal board of directors." I never really thought of it that way. It made a lot of sense. He said, "You need this trusted group of people that you can go to when you need, you're making a key life decision like this." Where do I go next? Or you have a particular challenge at work and there's no one there you can talk to about it. Because there's either politics or there's other reasons why you might not be comfortable.

Judith Apshago: 27:08 You need that board of directors. Those trusted people you can go to. I thought about it. I thought, "I actually do have that." I've never thought of it that way. I have this group of folks I've collected over the years that I've built those relationships with. That I know even if I haven't talked to them for a couple of years, I can pick up the phone and call and say, "Hey, what do you think?" They will spend an hour or two or however long it takes to listen and give me that advice. There's different folks on my board of directors that I call for different reasons.

Judith Apshago: 27:35 There's some that I know are really good at large scale ERP implementations. Others that are just really good at strategy and thinking differently or building those operations relationships. I'm very fortunate that I've been able to make a lot of those connections and I’ve had a lot of those mentors throughout my career.

Bill Murphy: 27:55 That's great.

Judith Apshago: 27:55 Then on the flip side, then I think, because I'm so fortunate, I want to pay that forward and be able to mentor others. I'd naturally do that. I think most of us do as leaders through just our relationships with our subordinates. The folks that we're working with every day. I try and help groom and mentor and help them grow. Help them see opportunities.

Judith Apshago: 28:19 Succession planning here is very important. Try and look for who are those potential successors. What gaps do they have? How do I help them fill those gaps? Is this one of their aspirations? Something they want to do? How can I help them get there? I think beyond that, I'm still reaching back to folks I've worked with at my previous company. That are calling me and saying, "Hey, can you be a sounding board? I'm trying to be on the board of directors now for some of those folks who I think could benefit from that.

Bill Murphy: 28:47 It's interesting. I think in today's day and age, to take on some of the bigger challenges, some people think, "Well, I need a mentor." This aspect of them and not really sure I like this aspect of them. I'm not really sure. It's not they dislike it, it's just it doesn't match to where you want to go either personally. Maybe they don't do something with their kids the way you would do something with their kids.

Bill Murphy: 29:08 My whole lens of finding element of what they do. We're multifaceted human beings. Find something that you find is extraordinary. It doesn't have to be the whole, every aspect of their life. Just find something that you can say, "That's something that I can shoot for down the road." When you are actually facing a big problem, the reason I formed my board of directors is I wanted to do some bigger things and I pulled people that had done very big things. Then I can pawn them for finance.

Bill Murphy: 29:34 I can pull on someone for it. Who was the ex-CIO. She's the ex-CIO of Johnson and Johnson. She was the CIO of a 100 CIOs. Every one of those CIOs ran a billion dollar business unit. I can pull Karen into a conversation about strategy and about technology. There's different elements of mentorship that cover all aspects of us as human beings. I think that's really powerful when you're taking on new positions to be able to have this... You surround yourself with this virtual team.

Judith Apshago: 30:05 Yes, I agree. I think it's so important because sometimes I think, going back to the fear comment you made earlier. I think sometimes we're also afraid to admit we don't know something or afraid to show that we don't know something.

Judith Apshago: 30:16 To have those trusted advisors who I might be in a position here where I'm being asked to do something I haven't done before or bigger than... We talked about scale before the interview - about just the size and scale of this role compared to some of my prior roles and not having done some of these things. Who can I pick up the phone and call and say, "Hey, how have you handled this in the past? What did you do? Or, I have this particular challenge. How would you suggest I handle that?"

Bill Murphy: 30:42 That's great.

Judith Apshago: 30:43 In fact, one of my mentors, who is still very much in my group-

Bill Murphy: 30:48 In the pool.

Judith Apshago: 30:48 In the pool. She gave me great advice when I was amidst career, trying to decide where to go next. She was a consultant with a large firm, and now, she's actually back to being a CIO. I knew that she had seen a lot of different organizations and how they do things. It's not just her experience I can pool from. I could call her and say, "Hey, what have you seen done elsewhere?" She had just so much to offer.

Bill Murphy: 31:13 Yes. It's really interesting because some CIOs are just super amazing at transforming process. Some are just really good on the technology side. Very few, some are really good at finance. It's when you go into where identifying where your soft spots and your weaknesses are. I think sometimes we think we can just go out and just go take a class and learn it.

Bill Murphy: 31:36 I think the faster way to do it is to actually go find someone who's done it before and model. Really inquire. Because they're actually looking for the same thing in reverse. It's interesting. I think we can shorten our learning curve by actually finding really high performing people in the gaps that we think that we have in our experience.

Judith Apshago: 31:53 Yes. I would agree with that. My previous boss was our chief operating officer. Operations folks, they think a little differently I think, than commercial for sure. One of the challenges we always had was trying to - operations versus commercial, and how do we get the same level of attention? Because the commercial folks are bringing in the revenue.

 Really, they can't do what they're doing when the delivery is happening on our operation side. It's that challenge of how do I... I would call him a lot and say, "Okay. How do we get the same level of attention for the things we're doing for your group, so we can get the funding?" It's part of the challenge here too.

Judith Apshago: 32:11 The commercial side tends to get a lot of the funding - a lot of the attention. Where the operation side really needs the investments to be able to deliver. I pick up the phone and call him and say, "How do we balance that? How do I get the attention that these unsupported groups need in order to get the funding and what we need to be able to help grow the company." Different perspective than I would call someone who is heavy on the finance side or someone who knows how to build or paint a nice picture on the vision and the strategy.

Judith Apshago: [33:02](https://www.rev.com/transcript-editor/Edit?token=tRhNNi1talYjR7oUbw7DdjE78wocIBe2O_HnY6vRX-x-mO7nOTviXUHyNpt6M-kHaFQfihsSs1NIIF87nc8LZyx0Wtw&loadFrom=DocumentDeeplink&ts=1869.64) That's when I would call my consultant friends and say, "Hey, I know you do a lot of PowerPoints and you're always selling concepts. How do I put my IT strategy on a page so it's going to resonate?”

Bill Murphy: [31:13](https://www.rev.com/transcript-editor/Edit?token=aS_eRbYWRVYhSJVmPkUg64iFaO5aIwTbi0TIDaTKM5MASAvohmJloaqQMHw1j_fgpXBFQgezvATwLaynn4WDCE42dQM&loadFrom=DocumentDeeplink&ts=1873.71) Right. It's amazing. Because that's not, I find that's not a strength. It's presenting. If you only have a couple minutes to present, really thinking through that approach. Is this going to be a visual impact? Am I going to visual with a primary visual powerful image within a supporting, more tech tactical support of that? That is a big topic. I often talk about 10X Thinking. Why not? It doesn't have to be 10X, revenue always or profits. How do I 10X improve this process? My roommate out of college (I went to Penn State and my roommate was a basketball player, I was a track guy), we were always really competitive.

Bill Murphy: 33:47 He got into the technology field about four years after I formed RedZone Technologies. RedZone is 18 years old. He got started around 14 years ago. They were literally 10 times bigger than we are - 10 times. I'm like, "What are you doing? What are you doing David?" We share and collaborate. He's in Atlanta and I'm up here. We're doing a lot of similar things. It's really tough, pernicious challenges. A lot of times it's centered around human beings. How are you solving this? How are you being a better leader?

Bill Murphy: 34:17 I learned quite a bit from him. I'm doing some things that he wishes he were doing. That's the interesting thing. We think we're always pulling from others, but they're actually pulling from you a little bit as well. Because there's something you're doing that is appealing to them. There’s something about you.

Bill Murphy: 34:34 I love this topic because I'm in this exponential world we're in. It's like, we're only faced with these big challenges.

Bill Murphy: 34:43 Let's talk about what you're taking on right now and the difference. Let's talk about the scale of the issues you're challenging with now versus where you were just a couple months ago.

Judith Apshago: 34:50 Okay. Sure. With Amtrak, my role here is I'm responsible for corporate and operations technologies. Which are largely the inward facing technologies. We're running trains and it's a fairly complex operation.

Bill Murphy: 35:00 Okay, I love trains.

Judith Apshago: 35:00 Well, until I started working here, I didn't know there was so much happening behind the scenes to make the trains run – ‘on time’ sometimes. Really more importantly safely and with all the coordination that needs to happen. It's just amazing the behind the scenes operation, which I'm still learning. I'm fascinated by how much it takes to really run this organization - with 500 stations around the country, thousands of trips a day, millions of passengers a year - it's a very large scale organization. That was only part of why I came here because my previous company, U.S. Silica, when I started was about half a billion dollars, sorry, revenues, and when I left it was about $1.6.

Bill Murphy: 35:38 $1.6?

Judith Apshago: 35:39 I was there about five and a half years. I grew with the company. It was a fairly large company. In some ways operated still as a smaller company. Other ways was growing and maturing with its scale. I had the opportunity to grow with the company. Which I find is different than coming in to a new organization that is much larger in scale and trying to navigate and figuring out, ‘who do I call’?. Growing with the company, you know who to call for everything. How the processes work. The ins and outs. Then, you come somewhere where my previous company had 3,000 employees. Here it's 20,000. Just the processes.

Bill Murphy: 36:17 That's scale.

Judith Apshago: 36:18 It's scale. The dollars. My budget here is four times what it was previously. My team is multiples of what it was previously. It's just a much larger. Everything is bigger. I had to get my head around that because there were projects that I had implemented at previous companies and we're trying to tackle similar projects, and my previous ways of thinking, my assumptions, my, "Well, it didn't cost that much or take that long. Why is it so complex here?" You really have to sometimes take your judging hat off, and try and understand, "Okay, maybe there's more to it and maybe there's not. Maybe we're making it complicated."

Judith Apshago: 36:57 You can't jump to those conclusions. You really have to understand the business and the operation and what it's all about, and why we do things the way we do. Then say, "Okay, now I can make an informed decision." I've found I've had to abandon some of my old assumptions and I make quick perceptions on things and say, "Okay, let me take a little time to really learn and understand before I jump to these conclusions."

Bill Murphy: 37:23 Do you know that entrenched businesses don't change by typically the internal current thinking or they would already have changed.

Judith Apshago: 37:30 Right.

Bill Murphy: 37:32 It's a stagnant pond in the middle of the woods. It needs a fresh stream in it to reinvigorate. I'm just curious though. As you learn, do you think that your models of thinking you've been able to apply previously for the growth, do you think some of those models were quite successful models? That you'd be able to, even though the scale is bigger, essentially the same fundamental thinking you can apply?

Judith Apshago: 37:54 I do. Actually, I think that's why I was brought here. We talked earlier about one of my mentors, the one who gave me that opportunity. The big project with the 50 countries and all that.

Bill Murphy: 38:04 Sleep better at night.

Judith Apshago: 38:04 Sleep better at night. He actually called me and said, "Hey, there might be an opportunity." He's now my boss here at Amtrak. I think it's that confidence he had earlier and the delivery that I had before. Then we've kept in touch over the years and he knows the things I've done. I think that's why he and some of the leadership team here were interested in bringing some of that. Say, "Hey, we do want some outside thinking. We want someone to challenge the assumptions."

Judith Apshago: 38:31 There's a lot of leaders here as well. The leadership has changed quite a bit over the last couple of years. A new CEO came in a couple of years ago. Richard Anderson. He's really changing the culture. Changing the perceptions. Really driving break-even operations. I think the whole premise behind a lot of that is, let's bring in new ways of thinking. Let's challenge the norms.

Judith Apshago: 38:53 The company is open to it. The good news is, I do see that top-down leadership that is ready for change and has actually been doing this since his arrival. There have been a lot of good changes. I think there's still an appetite for a lot more and a recognition that there can be a lot to be gained by challenging the norm and the way we've done things in the past.

Bill Murphy: 39:17 I love that. So culture. You mentioned the word culture, which is a mysterious topic, but it's coming up a lot in my CIO lunches. That, in the last lunches has been collaboration, culture. It's interesting. I just cut off an interview just a couple of hours ago and he said, "The Nobel prizes currently used to be..." Not currently. "In the past used to be handed out to individuals. Now a big chunk of them are handed to teams of individuals." You've got to wonder why.

Bill Murphy: 39:42 I think I know why. It's interesting that trend for the super high performing breakthroughs that are getting the prizes, it's not the Einsteins necessarily, it's a team. They're assigning that Nobel prize to two, three, four person teams. To get those really big breakthroughs move forward, do you think that it's going to have to be, the leadership of the future is going to have a culture of teams and collaboration?

Judith Apshago: 40:10 Definitely. The whole idea of collaboration is huge. I'd say if you go back to, what's one of the key success criteria for a lot of these big change initiatives? You have to have a collaboration. For IT in the business, we really need to be joined at the hip. Have that partnership. The team really has to be on board. I completely agree. I don't think an individual can... Certainly can't do things alone.

Judith Apshago: 40:31 You can't do things if you don't have a good team behind you. That's true both on the business side and the IT side. Yes, it's tough because it's interesting here because I see people who've been here 35, 40 years. If you think about it, in that time, how much change they've seen in the organization. How many different cultures have they gone through trying to change that.

Judith Apshago: 40:56 Some of those folks are very open to change. They’ve just gotten used to ‘change is the norm’. Then you have folks who just recently started. I think blending all of that and finding the right mix. When we think about the team, you want that mix. You want the people who really have the tribal knowledge and know where all the bones are buried. Then you want the folks who've seen it done differently elsewhere and might come in with those new ideas. I think if you get that, those synergies and everyone's operating together, you just have so much more probability of success.

Bill Murphy: 41:25 How critical is it the team leaders that you recruit for your team. Either that you're pulling up within the entrenched folks that are within an organization. Not just here but your previous as well. How often do you just really, you want to pull in, like someone pulled you in fresh off. You know what, we need some fresh leadership here. How do you make go through that thinking process?

Judith Apshago: 41:48 Well, I think it's a mix. I think as opportunities present themselves, if I happen to... If I know there are gaps. If I look at the current organization and I say, "Okay, there's a gap here. We don't have someone who does X." Or, "I know someone who's really good at that and could really do well here." That's where I might think to bring new folks in. Carefully because just like me, I was sensitive to knowing. Being, I don't want to be the person who came in because you know someone. I think you want to be viewed as, okay, we can learn a lot. Who are those new folks we can bring in, who can fill gaps that we have in the organization because maybe we need a different way of thinking. Or we need someone who has done different things in different industries and has seen multiple ways. Could come in and say, "Hey. I think this is probably what would work here."

Judith Apshago: 42:42 Yes. I think it has to be a balance. I was fortunate in the U.S. Silica because we were growing so fast and I had so many gaps and holes to fill. I was able to pull from a lot of people I'd worked with in the past and said, "Well that person's a great project manager. This person really knows infrastructure. I have somebody who just is great at process. We have a ton of processes to fix."

Judith Apshago: 41:57 I was able to go pull all those key people in and build an organization. I think when you come into an established organization, you don't have as many opportunities. You have to look at what are the strengths you have. How do you capitalize on those? Then where do we have gaps and how do I strategically fill those? Being a little conscious that you don't want to make too much change all at once.

Bill Murphy: 43:26 How do you communicate from a cultural perspective? How do you communicate your personal vision within the context of the overall organization? Is there anything you do that helps build a collaborative nature or a culture of teamwork? It's something that, when I talk to people and they do a little mini video podcast where they take their cell phone and they deliver a message of the week or a message of the day. I always find that really interesting because, again, it's somebody who does it really naturally because it's them. The CIO does it because they want to scale that message into the organization. It's not like the CEO's directive, it's more just keeping everybody on the IT team aware of what's going on. Is there anything that you do that's unique to you that is your special sauce?

Judith Apshago: 44:14 I don't do selfie videos. Yes, it's a good question. I don't know if there's anything unique or special. I think it's just consistency. It's trying to make sure that I'm always conveying the consistent message - tying back to the same themes, and making sure that everything we do resonates. To me business partnerships are the big important part. Making sure that we're putting our business hat on. We're thinking like our customer. Whenever I have those opportunities, as I'm working with my team or with others in the organization…. a lot of times will come up when you have a difficult situation and emotions tend to get involved.

Judith Apshago: 44:54 This is, again, recent example with a challenging ‘go-live’. You have folks who are taking… just getting emotional about what's going on and forgetting to step out of your own zone for a minute and think about your customer and what impact this is having on them. Put their hat on. Then maybe that helps us think about things.. we’re not so IT-centric and we think about it a little differently. I think whenever those opportunities arise, just trying to reinforce the same theme and coming back to, think like your partner. Think like your customer. I’ll have to think about this -

Bill Murphy: 45:22 Its interesting that you say that. Because you're thinking like your customer. Your internal customer. This is the previous story I just mentioned with the CIO of a large pharmaceutical company. She said, "I used to envision the bandages that were placed on the patients of this particular unit. How our decisions were actually impacting the bandage delivery of the burn victims." This particular business made bandages for burn victims. I thought, "Wow, that's a pretty powerful." It's not. It's the same thing, which you're... It's similar to what you're saying is that, what is this impact going to be for your internal customer. Putting yourself in their shoes and what's the impact there? It's a very empathetic. Not pathetic., but an empathetic approach to it. There's no doubt that it oozes. There's a vibe to that. It's very powerful.

Judith Apshago: 46:13 Well, I hear that. Even this morning, I hear comments like, "IT doesn't understand - we have trains to run. If our systems are down, trains don't run." In fact, it’s funny that just this morning I said, "Well, we support marketing systems as well, the website, the mobile app… If those are down, they have to be up 24/7, they're critical." The response I got from this person in operations was, "Yes, but if those are down, trains still run." I thought, "Oh, that's a very good point."

Bill Murphy: 46:44 Interesting.

Judith Apshago: 46:44 You have to really put yourself in their shoes. This was coming on the heels of some reorganization that we've done where we're pulling some folks in from the business who were in IT roles into my organization. Saying, “If you’re doing IT-type things, you need to be in IT."

Judith Apshago: 46:59 The concern is, do we really understand the impact of systems not being up 24/7 - not running all the time. Because in the operations world, they're around the clock. Things have to be perfect or trains don’t run. When trains don't run, passengers get unhappy and it disrupts the whole system. It was just a different way of thinking. Again, I found myself saying, "Okay, I need to put that hat on and reinforce that within the broader IT organization”, because it goes back to the culture. Are we thinking of ourselves and the company, with the ‘company hat’ on? Or are we just thinking about, the IT-Centric view of the world?

Bill Murphy: 47:40 It's really interesting. Because you also mentioned marketing and it's an interesting stories around marketing. It’s like each constituent within your organization has a different need in many respects. The marketing has a different set of deliverables and a different set of importance values to them. Imagine you have to put on multiple hats between looking at those systems versus and then still coming across empathetically, the fact that you’ve got trains and millions of passengers. Then I'm in trying to influence millions of passengers at the same time. That culture is interesting the way you framed it.

Judith Apshago: 48:16 Yes. You have to serve both needs. So, it's that fine line you’re always walking.

Bill Murphy: 48:22 What questions you were hoping desperately that I ask you? Something that you were hoping I'd get to and that I haven't so far, or that you think would be important for other CIOs or potential CIOs listening? Something that is important to you?

Judith Apshago: 48:39 One thing I thought about after we talked last time is around, how do you make these large transformation projects successful? Actually since we last met, I heard a speaker. I don't know if you're familiar with James Dallas. He was CIO with Medtronic and with Georgia-Pacific. He was recently a speaker at the Capitol CIO ORBIE Awards. Very fascinating to listen to. He talked a lot about the challenges of CIOs these days. One of the aspects he talked about was with this transformation and what we talked about. How do you get people on board? He used a statistic that really surprised me. He said only 16% of business transformations are successful.

Bill Murphy: 49:18 17% ?

Judith Apshago: 49:19 16%.

Judith Apshago: 49:20 Which is not a very good success rate. Right? He talked about this common definition of success. Making sure you have a shared vision and you have that buy-in and support from the top-down. He also said you've got to be truthful and transparent with people. I think a lot of times when we're doing these transformation projects, the reason we don't get the business participation or enthusiasm for it, because they're fearful that it means job loss.

Judith Apshago: 49:49 He was saying, "Just be upfront. Yes, we're going to eliminate 80% of these roles, but you can be a part of the change. There's these other opportunities." You offset it. It's not to ignore that this is going to have a major impact, but just be upfront. Get their ideas. Get them engaged. Start that transformation, that change management early and don't underestimate the importance of it. The transparency and the truthfulness was the part that struck me.

Judith Apshago: 50:19 I just thought about that in terms of... The fortunate thing is here, there's so many other things. Once you have efficiencies, there's so many other things that you can take those resources and apply them to go work on. I don't think there's a fear that trying to be more efficient means we're going to lose our jobs. I know in a lot of places, that's the case. I thought that was an interesting take away from that speech.

Judith Apshago: 50:46 I was just trying to think of, what is the most important leadership trait that you need when you're trying to transform organizations. I just thought about that. It's about making those connections. Goes back to the relationships being transparent.

Bill Murphy: 51:03 The thing that sticks out with you, when I talked to you. Then I've seen a pattern emerging is it's, do you notice we haven't talked about all the cool technologies? Your success, I'm sure if we went into the technology, you could tell me about some stuff that gets you excited about the tech part of it. I don't want to put that off limits, but-

Bill Murphy: 51:22 When you and I were prepping for this, it's about transformation of the process. Of the business. The folks I feel had the longevity and that real impact within their organizations from the digital tech leadership perspective. They have that focus and the technologies… Because I feel we're Merlins. We have the technology is so powerful at these days. It's just a matter of how we deploy those technologies. It's the second question. The first question is how is the business operating and how can I improve the business? Where from efficiency and then I deploy the technology. It sounds very academic. We've heard this before. I think we have to be reminded of it.

Judith Apshago: 52:02 Yes. I think because I started my career on process improvement, I always look there first. Technology to me, you can't just throw technology at a bad process. You really have to look at how do we improve the process and then optimize it with technology. Make it even better. There are times where it's appropriate to say, "Let the technology drive the process."

Bill Murphy: 52:25 Sure. Okay. I see that. Sure.

Judith Apshago: 52:26 I see where it's standard. Everybody-

Bill Murphy: 52:28 Because the technology is too well thought through. You can slot your process into it and clean it up at the same time.

Judith Apshago: 52:32 Yes. If you look at it, there's nothing unique to our company in the way we do, say payroll. Payroll systems are mature. They're well established. They're prevalent everywhere. A lot of time they can dictate the process, just as an example. Where it's our secret source and something unique to our company, you really have to understand the process. Optimize the process. Then look at, okay. Is there a technology that can make it more efficient?

Judith Apshago: 52:59 With AI and sensors and IOT and all these technologies that are coming up. Are actually been around. Are becoming more prevalent. That's where I think you can get a lot of process efficiencies. If you're just collecting information and you don't know what you're going to do with it. What decisions you're trying to make? How you're going to process that? Who's going to make those decisions? What's important? You really have to look at the process. Understand the process. Then look at what is the appropriate technology rather than saying, "Hey, it's cool new gadget. Now, how do I force that into my organization so that I can play with a new tool?"

Bill Murphy: 53:39 I also think the thing that sticks out for you is that courage. That resonates to me because I think having the courage to step into process means you stepping into issues with people. You've had that multiple times. I think that is something because the IT leadership position is not an old, not very old. It's still 1995 was the first browser. The first time we could actually use a real internet was 95. It's not that old. Not that long ago.

Bill Murphy: 54:02 The CFO, COO, CEO functions are ancient. They go back - maybe to Babylon. It's a relatively new position. Courage I think is one of the things that I think has resonates with me as far as what you've taken on.

Judith Apshago: 54:16 Yes. I do agree. It's funny because it goes back to the fear comment earlier. A fear of failure and being willing to-

Bill Murphy: 54:23 Cross the i's and dot the t's. How willing we are willing... How deep you go?

Judith Apshago: 54:29 Yes. You're right. I've heard it said in a lot of IT experiences. "If it wasn't for our customers, we'd be just fine. If it wasn't for our end users, we wouldn't have any issues." Right? Now we have people who are a big part of the process. People process technology probably in that order. Right? I think we have to get the people, right? Yet we didn't talk much about talent but that's another key. You have to have the right people. I guess we talked about, how do you fill gaps within the organization? Do you bring new folks in or develop those that you already have? I think just in general, recognizing that... These days, at least in this area, good talent is hard to find. It's so competitive. Trying to-

Bill Murphy: 55:08 One thing I didn't ask you, I think it's really important is, how long do you... This is a tougher question. It was where I was going with the last question. Is how long would you wait before you identify this is the wrong town, or the wrong position. No matter what, it has to be replaced.

Bill Murphy: 55:19 Or I have to put that person in an area that's not going to negatively impact what I'm trying to do because their skills are more aligned with this area. How long do you wait? That's a hard question to ask. What's your gut instinct saying. How long you wait for that? Or is it just case by case?

Judith Apshago: 55:39 I'll give the, it depends. Right? I think it depends. Do I have budget to go out and get new resources? What's the impact? Do I have someone who is so critical to the organization, bit just not the right fit. I can't afford at this time given other things that are going on to make a change. Unfortunately, I think it really does depend on the situation. I guess the answer is, it depends, but not too long.

Bill Murphy: 56:03 Yes, that’s right. That's good. Okay. Because I think people get paralyzed. Back to being paralyzed about the i's and the t's and the dots. Just, "I'm going to make this... I'm searching for a good leader." You. Let's say, you. I, as an A-caliber leader, am going to make this C+ person a B+, just by the force of my will.

Bill Murphy: 56:20 As I get older and older, I'm like, "You know what? I can't fix everybody." I'm wondering, do you try to fix people for a certain amount of time and then just see does that water rise. That water level rise. Or do you just say, "You know what, I'm not going to be perfect with a team. I'm going to try to get everybody to B. Hopefully a couple of B pluses rise up.

Judith Apshago: 56:36 I was going to say, I think the reality is, you just can't. It's very difficult to build a team of all A players. There's also some danger in that. Because A players want to be at the next level. Then you get suddenly all everyone's competing to move up. You need some steady at ease. You need some people who just come in every day. Get it done. You can rely on them. I think a good mix. Then you have to recognize that people who aren't quite there or just aren't the right fit. Then, Yes. To what extent do you develop them? I think again, it depends on how confident I am that they can get there? How big are the gaps? Do I have an urgent need to get that gap filled?

Bill Murphy: 57:14 Sure. Imperative of leadership, right?