



# Administrator or leader?

By Simon Hopkins

How often have we heard the term “back office” or been introduced as someone who “works in accounts”? It doesn’t exactly advertise what we do as leadership; rather it brands us as a group which sorts out the paperwork and keeps the records in good order. These are important things but we can be so much more.

I have been pleased to speak on the new leadership programme which has been put together by CFG, Sayer Vincent and Cass CCE. Already over 150 individuals have been on the programme and the next one starts in October 2015. What has struck me is the real appetite to show that Finance can be the foundation for broader organisational – and sector – leadership. In the private sector the CFO role is often seen as the “finishing school” for the CEO position – a recent survey showed that around a quarter of FTSE 100 CEO’s were members of the ICAEW. That’s one accountancy body providing one in four top business leaders. I’m not suggesting that all charity CEOs should be qualified accountants, merely that the notion of the finance person being a broader, strategic leader, is one that works.

## Why lead?

Why do I think this? For a start, there are some big factors that give us a compelling reason to offer wider leadership:

Firstly, the **external environment**. Generating funds is difficult right now. Even if we accept the message that the economy is recovering, we’ve been experiencing a recession that has been deep and harsh. Chances are that any recovery will be very long and gradual and that

there won't be a miraculous bounce back. Supporters have less money and even less confidence, and public funding to charities has been reduced dramatically in some areas. So the sector still needs leadership that can think commercially and can contemplate ways of getting the money to the priority areas and making it work hard when it gets there.

Secondly, as a profession we cover a very **broad spectrum of activity** from transaction processing to strategy and all points in between. This gives us the ability not just to articulate the future but, importantly, to understand how the nuts and bolts will work when we get there. What better combination of skills could anyone have when faced with the need to implement strategic change?

Thirdly, we sit in a position where **we look across the whole organisation** rather than managing just one line of business. This means we can think about the organisation as a whole and act as the trusted counsel to the CEO and trustees, especially when faced with competing interests. And don't forget, these competing interests usually involve money, so we're involved at this level automatically!

## Licence to operate

One thing I hear consistently is the challenge faced by talented finance people in getting their key stakeholders to see them as strategic leaders and not just administrators. I don't think there's a magic bullet to solving this and it's likely that different tactics will work well with different groups. That said, in my experience, some techniques tend to work well in most circumstances:

- **Timing** is key, especially with your CEO. Work out when to hit her or him with strategic insight.
- **Just do it.** Sometimes simply delivering the more transformational output without advertising it in advance can maximise your impact.
- **Find your allies** – somewhere in your trustee board will be someone who wants you to be the transformational leader; someone in your team will be inspired by the prospect of getting out of the back office; somewhere in your peer group is a colleague (very possibly the IT, Legal or HR leader) who shares your aspiration. Find them and hunt as a pack.
- Don't under-estimate the **power of analysis**. Conclusions drawn from rigorous evidence and method are incredibly powerful. If there's one thing we're good at, it's distilling evidence, testing its reliability and using it to synthesise a scenario that people need to take notice of.
- And finally, be prepared to use the ethos of **"we scare because we care"** (with apologies to Pixar). A calm, evidence-based assessment of risk can be a powerful tool. Occasionally making people aware of the implications of a particular course of action, using our analytical strengths (above), can be game changing.

## The plug

I'm working on a discussion document about progressing Finance from being an administrative function to a transformational one. I'm hoping this will be available by the end of the year and would welcome on-going participation in its evolution.

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