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Kate Sayer: Don't call me beancounter...

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Think about how you describe what you do and you will find you get taken more seriously in your organisation, writes our columnist



Kate Sayer

If I introduce myself "Hi, I'm Kate from accounts", it's likely that people will think I spend all my time doing numbers. If you are an accountant and want greater involvement in management, you need to think about how you describe what you do.

Making coffee in the kitchen recently at a client's office where I have been working frequently, I got chatting about the weather and so on with someone I don't directly work with. He asked me what I do. "Financial strategy," I answered promptly. It happened to be what I was working on at that point, and it's true. The two-word answer turned out to be a lot better than my usual explanation that I'm a qualified accountant, but I really do lots of other things as well, honestly.

"I've never heard those two words together," my colleague announced, as he repeated them slowly. We then had a short, interesting chat about how organisations need to turn strategies into plans and financial plans, pausing on the way to establish the principles underpinning those plans. "That all makes perfect sense," he declared and went back to his desk. I

dropped by his desk another day to find out more about what he did. Five minutes – that's all it took.

Build your knowledge of the organisation

To be taken seriously as a full member of the senior team, you need to get "buy-in" from other managers before you start speaking up at meetings about areas they might consider to be on their patch. A good place to start is to ask them for feedback on the finance service or aspects of your work. The best way to get feedback is to ask people for something they appreciate and that they see could be even better, so ask for suggestions for improvements. When you receive feedback, just say thank you. Do not start to explain why you have done things or try to justify past actions – just listen, make notes and thank the person.

Attend team meetings of other teams, such as operations, fundraising or service delivery, so you can understand more about their activities and plans. *Take a tip from Martin Edwards – take home-bakes with you.* In order to contribute effectively to the business, you need to understand it. Once you have attended a couple of meetings and just listened, you might find you do have something to contribute, such as producing some new information or changing the coding to make reports more intelligible to managers.

The best way to start your journey from accountant to financial leader is to listen. You need to find out what is happening first so you can work on the contribution you can make. You also need to make sure you have the basics right and do the day-to-day things well. In terms of making a wider organisational impact, start small – you need to build your confidence, so try out small ways of making a contribution to the rest of the organisation.

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