



AN OVERLOOKED LEADERSHIP PIPELINE

Conventional wisdom does not associate the finance department with strategic leaders. That is a mistake.

By Marie-Caroline Chauvet

CEOs are on the hunt for visionary deputies who can manage change brilliantly. Given long-standing stereotypes associated with corporate controllers, it is understandable if chief executives do not immediately turn to the finance department in search of strategic leaders. Surely number-crunchers lack the chops to think creatively and courageously—right?

Wrong. The best companies treat their finance teams as forward-looking, big-picture business partners. I saw that up close during my 15 years in corporate finance at one of the world's largest cosmetics companies. With the right culture and people in place, finance professionals can bring leap-of-faith ideas to life while ensuring a healthy bottom line. Here are three reasons why finance professionals often excel:

1. We possess excellent business acumen.

To be effective, any leader must first deeply understand a company's business model. What better way to gain that expertise than by spending time engrossed in profit-and-loss statements and shareholder calls?

2. We know how to look to the future.

Top companies expect finance teams to offer deep analysis and decision-making support. My title during the years I spent as a business unit controller was "financial adviser." I was not a number-cruncher, but a partner who explained how future sales would impact our business and knew what needed to change to meet goals.

3. We're smart—and want new challenges.

Many young, talented people take a financial or accounting role at major companies. But once they have mastered the basics, they're generally eager to do much more. Helping future finance

executives stretch their strategic muscles will not only reward your business, it will ensure that you retain great talent.

So how do you identify the talented financial professionals who can take your company to new heights?

First, do not settle for run-of-the-mill résumés. Decades ago I spent six months backpacking across Asia after graduating from a top business school. To many, this gap might have appeared as a red flag. But because my employer valued big-picture thinking, my travel experience was viewed as a major plus. The journey taught me how to navigate diverse personalities and cultures with ease—a skill that helped me gain the trust and respect of senior leaders while I was still in my 20s.

Next, offer extensive career development and training for high-performing finance professionals. I left my final senior corporate finance role to join Insigniam because I felt stagnant: Though I oversaw dozens of people, I lacked the power to really change my company's path. Moving into a consultant role allowed me to tackle clients' thorny business problems while using my financial expertise as a foundation.

Smart leaders cast aside stereotypes and get serious about retaining top talent. They see the finance department for what it should be: a pipeline of future visionaries who can mold a company's future. **IQ**

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