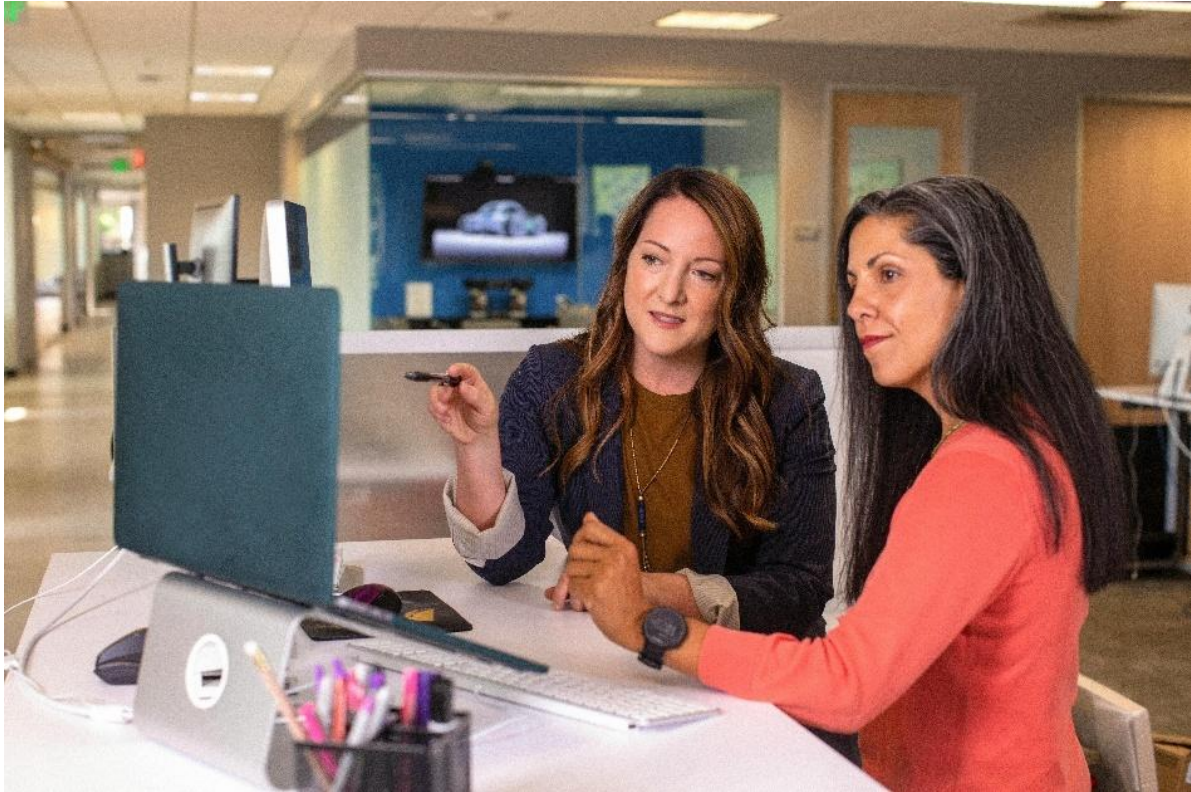


## What does being a great Financial Controller or Head of Financial Accounting look like?

(1,189 words, 5 minute read)

Being a great Financial Controller (FC) or Financial Accounting (FA) Manager has multiple elements to it – success in the core activities, innovation, the enduring challenge of leading a team well and winning people’s respect. Here are some tips on how to do it.



*Management is about converting the obvious skills of your team into process, service or product outputs. Leadership is about leveraging the hidden talents of your team to best advantage.*

In a small, private sector manufacturing firm that I worked in for three years, I was their Company Accountant. I didn’t attend Executive Director meetings, I didn’t line manage any other corporate services functions and I did have a small finance team to manage. In that role, I did get the opportunity to fully implement an ERP solution, alongside my day job. And one day, I found an error in the Annual Report financials, after the auditors had signed them off, which I promptly told them about, in time to reissue a revised version of the Annual Report. It was a lonely ride - not quite being a fully-fledged Executive Director, running a small finance function and not quite one of the cool kids like Manufacturing or Commercial Marketing.

Being a financial accounting expert comes with its downsides too. The Board and the CEO see you as a statutory compliance, tax and internal controls person, not a growth & income generating support person. Most staff in the organisation don’t know what you do. Only that it’s something dry and technical.

Your FP&A colleagues may see you as a breed apart – Balance Sheet obsessed, back office like the systems accountant. Perhaps regulation-focussed like the data security officer, or health and safety manager.

So, as a Financial Controller, or Head of Financial Accounting, what does great look like? Professionally, you need to maintain a reputation for integrity and pragmatism - not easy if the situation requires one or the other (top tip: let ethical integrity trump pragmatism, or you'll be in trouble with your professional membership body and accounting regulator). That reminds me, I once stepped into a finance role at a UK Not for Profit, immediately following an internal fraud. The recently appointed forensic auditors from one of the large CA firms, had documented 68 internal control weaknesses and the Board, apart from wanting the Chief Executive to resign over the event, were pressuring me to tighten up on all 68 controls and could I do it by the end of the week! I remained both ethical and pragmatic. I broke them down into three lots of actions- those I could fix in the short term, those it would take 6 months and those it would take a year to resolve. I stood my ground and gave good reasons. The forensic auditors backed me up and in time, the problems were resolved and the organisation moved on from the experience. The lesson – sometimes you have to suffer real pain to make the control changes needed and get Board support to make them.

Back to what does great look like? You need to succeed at the core things - running the financial accounting aspects of the finance function well. But also finding enough time to design and deliver some innovations and improvements.

Reach out to CA firm tax advisers for guidance on tax minimisation, no matter which overseas tax jurisdictions you are dealing with. But make sure the tax advisers hear the full facts in order to give you relevant and expert advice.

Years ago, when I joined the small manufacturing company mentioned above, I had my first experience leading a small finance team. I learned that:

- people are complex,
- everyone has their good and bad days at work,
- they have a variety of views about being led,
- that success as a manager is rarely complete.

I also learned the hard way to leave my ego at the front door, when I came to work.



As a Financial Controller or Head of Financial Accounting, you have to, at least in the short term, work with the team resources you inherit. Find ways to motivate and inspire your team, stop wars breaking out within your team (or information hoarding) and reassure them that you remain accessible, if they need some support and guidance. Do that and you'll be well on the way to becoming a great Finance Lead.

It's true what they say about any new team going through a cycle of forming, storming, norming and only then performing. Over the years and having overseen multiple teams across multiple corporate services departments, I've seen that cycle in action many times. Learn to expect it and see yourself as a catalyst to help move the team forward to the next stage in that cycle.

People have their own reasons for wanting to succeed (ambition, fear, curiosity, stubbornness etc). It's your job to play to their strengths, which are sometimes hidden, help them remain professional in all situations and help them build up their confidence to perform, step by step.

It's your job to help your team members handle setbacks, errors and the occasional failure too – all of which are inevitable if your team is being ambitious. Sometimes, you'll have a 'bipolar' employee – they massively celebrate their successes. But are shattered to the core, if they encounter setbacks. Help them to rationalise setbacks and learn from them constructively. Help them avoid winning the battle with other departments, if it means losing the war against irrelevance and inefficiency.

I've worked at FD/CFO level in organisations that had a late tax filing or late sign off from the external auditors. Providing you brief the CEO and Board in advance, have solid reasons for the delays, can show lessons learned and forward progress, it shouldn't be a fatal career experience.



*When you join a new organisation, the sooner you find your head, the sooner you find your feet. And the sooner you find both, the sooner you'll find respect.*

How do you win respect – from other departments, from the Executive Directors and from your own finance team colleagues?

- Try to be right as often as possible (quietly seek out the facts), so that people will respect your judgement,
- Be fair and don't accept poor standards from any team member for too long,
- Try to learn from every mistake, or people's impatience with you will quickly turn into something more serious,
- Show integrity and be inclusive in the workplace,
- Accuracy matters over precision. Understand materiality and make sure you get the big things right, even if a few small things suffer,
- Try to stay humble and give plenty of credit where it's due,
- Thank people repeatedly for their efforts and celebrate their successes,
- With other departments and functions, slightly under-promise and then work hard to over-deliver,
- Tell your team you want their best efforts every day and then help them to work smarter rather than burn out, working ever harder. Show them you're trying to find ways to take the stress out of their working lives.

Being a great FC/Head of FA is most of all about leadership when it's needed. So don't be shy. Lead!

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