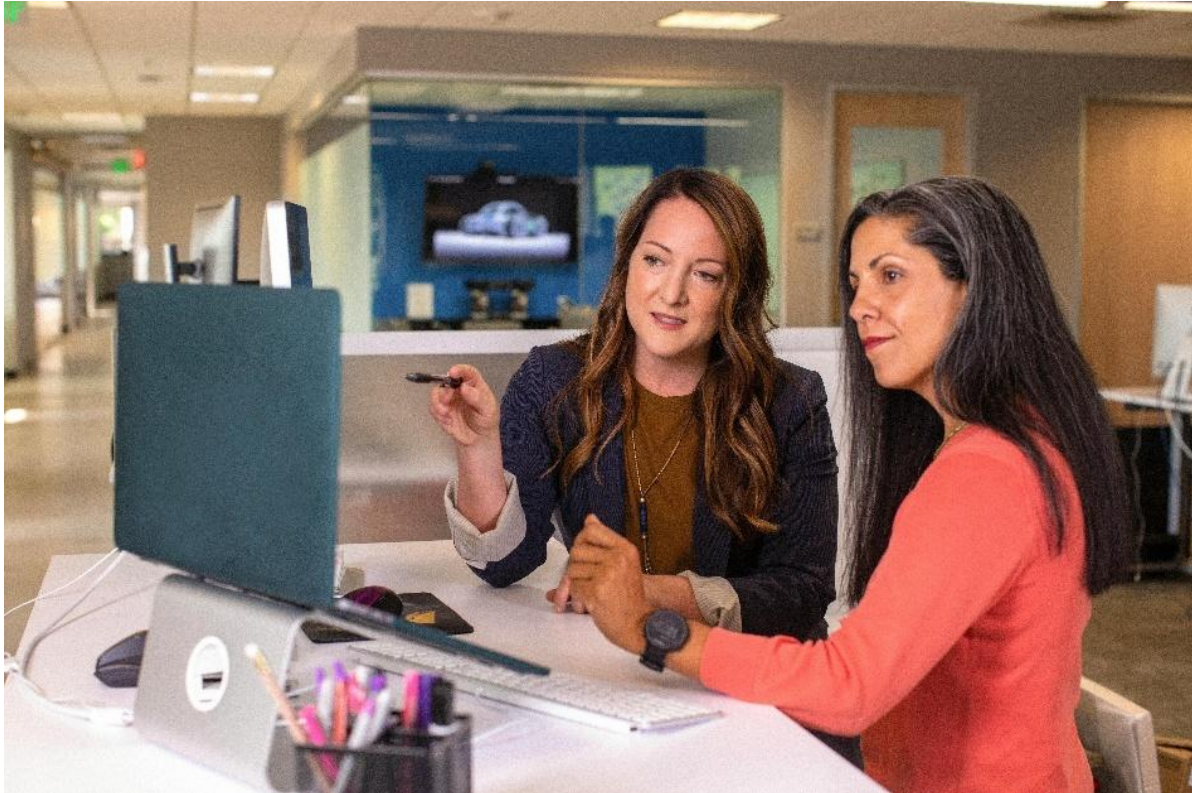


What does being a great Head of FP&A, or great Head of FBP look like?

(1,161 words, 5 minute read)

Being a great Head of FP&A or Head of FBP 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.



Earlier in my career, I’ve loved the FBP and forecasting parts of my role. A few highlights for me were;

- being in a twelve-person project team, building a comprehensive activity-based costing model at national level, for a High Street bank,
- overseeing the construction of a product profitability model for the Faculty of Commerce at an HEI,
- rebuilding a facilities-charging model to charge out central overhead costs to each faculty at Imperial College, London,
- building at group level, a ten year, integrated forecasting model covering; I&E, cashflows and future FTE projections at a UK professional membership body. Of course, I couldn’t assemble the numbers without help – help from a major programme FBP, help from finance colleagues on staff costs, non staff costs and income projections. Luckily, most of them reported directly or indirectly to me, so I could get the necessary inputs, for top level reporting to the Board.

Being the Head of FP&A, or Head of FBP was and is a bit of a lonely ride - not quite being a fully-fledged Executive Director, overseeing just one part of the finance function and not being one of the cool kids like; commercial marketing, memberships or fundraising, where the real money gets generated.

So, as a Head of FP&A, or Head of FBP, what does great look like?

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.

Half the value of business cases is first framing the options available.

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). If integrity regards internal consistency as a virtue, then some budget holders may regard you as bureaucratic – rigid and too keen to stick to the rules & policies, rather than flex them for different situations.



You need to succeed at the core things - running the FP&A or FBP function well. But also finding enough time to design and deliver some innovations and improvements along the journey. On this, the sooner you can productionise most types of reporting, the sooner your team can start to add real value in:

- becoming trusted advisors to key stakeholders,
- providing new insights to inform decision making (did you know...?),
- working with data managers to develop new data fields and exploit AI opportunities (descriptive, predictive and prescriptive analytics),
- routinely generating business cases, to value different options and risks,
- improving the quality of forecasts & budgets, including surfacing the key assumptions, developing scenario plans and providing sensitivity analysis,
- coaching your team to provide the pithy stories behind the numbers,
- monitoring financial performance and providing actionable insights to address variances and protect income streams,

- helping stakeholders move between I&E and cashflow implications,
- linking outward-facing financials to internal treasury and investment management,
- working with the strategy team on the financial planning aspects of the business strategy; including quantifying income and costs associated with M&A, new market growth, organisational restructuring, AI investment and/or building greater business flexibility in the face of environmental uncertainty,
- helping the organisation go on the financial journey from regional to national to international to global,
- building costing models (product profitability or understanding cross-subsidisation)
- benchmarking against good practice.

Back when I joined a small manufacturing firm, as the Company Accountant, I had my first experience leading a finance team. At the time, I found that the hardest thing about being a Head. 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 Head, you have to, at least in the short term, work with the team resources you inherit when you first join the organisation. You'll need to 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 Head of FP&A, or Head of FBP.

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 overseeing 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 it constructively. Help them to also avoid winning the battle with other departments on inefficiency, if it means losing the war on silo working.

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 committees and board, the Executive Directors and from your own finance function?

- 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,
- 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.

Most of all, being a great head is about leadership when it's needed. So, don't be shy. Lead!

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