FROM LEDGER TO LEADERSHIP: ESSENTIAL TRAITS AND STRATEGIES FOR RISING TO CFO

Adam S. Maclay

CFO – Cyber, Honeywell International

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A CONVERSATION OVER COFFEE...

“YOU’RE AN OPERATIONAL CFO”

ADAM S. MACLAY

CFO – Cyber, Honeywell International

Hewlett Packard Enterprise (9+ years)
- Finance Director, WW Compute Services
- Senior Manager, NA Sales Finance
- Senior Manager, WW Customer Solutions Centers

Alcoa Inc. (12+ years)
- Controller, Alcoa Oil & Gas Inc.
- Analyst, Primary Products
- Analyst, Finance Rotation Program

MBA, McCombs School of Business, University of Texas at Austin
BBA, Duquesne University, Pittsburgh PA



THE CFO JOURNEY - HOW DO WE GET THERE?

- Our journeys will all be different… and that's okay!
- Each journey will have twists, turns, and bumpy roads
- Where we start isn't as important as how we build the milestones on the way

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THREE QUESTIONS WE NEED TO ASK

- How and why has the role of the CFO changed?
- What leadership traits are required to become a CFO?
- What growth strategies can I use to become a CFO?

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THE GAME HAS CHANGED…

Chief Score Keeper

Technology advances

Globalization

Increased competition

Regulatory changes

Chief Future Officer

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HOW THE ROLE HAS CHANGED...

Aspect	In 2002: "Chief Score Keeper"	Today (2025): "Chief Future Officer"
Core Responsibilities	• Primary focus on **financial reporting**, **accounting**, **compliance**, **capital management**, and basic risk assessment • **Supporter** rather than driver of strategy	• **Expanded role in driving growth through M&A, market analysis, and long-term value creation,** while still overseeing traditional finance functions • **Cross-functional collaborator with IT, HR, and operations** on systems and efficiency improvements
Strategic Involvement	• Emerging strategic role due to globalization and competition • **Role largely secondary** to the CEO's vision.	• **Full strategic partnership with the CEO**, influencing company-wide strategy, performance measurement, and innovation
Technology Role	• Utilized **ERP systems** for real-time data and **financial modeling** to improve operational efficiency through basic financial software	• **Leads digital transformation**, adopting AI, data analytics, automation, and real-time forecasting • **Oversees investments** to replace manual processes and ensure data governance
Risk Management	• **Centered on financial risks**, such as capital allocation and basic compliance with emerging regulations	• **Broadened to include operational, regulatory, and cyber risks**. Engaged in advanced contingency planning on data protection and global uncertainties
Skills Required	• Strong in **financial acumen**, **analytical modeling**, international finance, and **regulatory compliance**	• Combines financial expertise with **tech proficiency**, **leadership**, **communication**, and **adaptability** • Need to **build agile teams** with data science and digital skills

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CFO TITLE AND ROLE MAY VARY BY COMPANY

- Size and organizational structure
- Public vs. private ownership vs. not-for-profit
- Use of title vs. its real practical application

Focus: Developing the CFO Mindset

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HOW DO WE DEVELOP THE CFO MINDSET?

- Stack our cumulative experiences as we master the acumen, technical tools, and skills of our trade
- Build on our leadership experiences with consistency in each role
- Foster a growth mindset to address our development gaps and accentuate our strengths
- Build relationships that matter – inside and outside our organization

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LEADERSHIP TRAITS

- Strategic Thinking and Business Acumen
- Effective Communication and Executive Presence
- Adaptability and Forward-Looking Innovation
- Risk Management and Decision-Making Under Pressure
- Leadership and Team Building
- Integrity and Ethical Stewardship

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STRATEGIC THINKING: UNDERSTAND YOUR BUSINESS MODEL AND WHERE IT'S GOING

- How we deliver our product and make money
  - "P vs. Q"
  - What factors could disrupt our demand, revenue, or cost structure?
  - How do we allocate capital effectively to sustain and grow?
- Management by walking around
  - "Put on your boots"
  - Learn your business processes from the people who drive them
  - Understand your customers' and suppliers' perspectives
- Market and operational factors will affect our ability to grow profitably – we need to understand our levers to respond

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EFFECTIVE COMMUNICATION: MASTER THE LANGUAGE OF THE BUSINESS

- Numbers don’t always resonate, but stories do!
  - Most of us finance people aren’t great story tellers
  - Need to help stakeholders understand in simple terms how they impact the scoreboard
  - Our language choices affect our credibility
- Simple, clear messaging
  - “Why does this matter?”
  - Understand the issues from your stakeholders’ perspectives
  - Be authentic – don’t use jargon you don’t fully understand

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ADAPTABILITY AND INNOVATION: ADJUSTING OUR APPROACH TO DELIVER OUTCOMES

- How do we evolve our approach in the face of constraints we can't control?
  - Changing market conditions demand more timely insights and recommendations in the face of growing constraints
  - We can't control the conditions, but we can control how we respond
  - An effective, timely response will impact the health of our business and the livelihoods of our employees
- We need to consistently adopt our finance processes to solve business problems
  - Engage the right people
  - Understand the business process risk and the financial impact
  - Identify the right tool / approach to drive the right outcome

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RISK MANAGEMENT AND DECISION-MAKING UNDER PRESSURE

- Need to foster decisiveness with less than perfect data
  - Need to support the goals of the business, but still maintain an independent perspective
  - Speak as the conscience of the business
  - Assessing the need for speed or a pause
- Need to understand the landscape and embrace the moment
  - Leverage our past experiences and frameworks for guidance
  - Use deep, probing questions to develop our understanding and uncover deeper issues
  - Seek mutually beneficial outcomes that benefit the business while operating ethically

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LEADERSHIP: BUILDING HIGH PERFORMING TEAMS

- Own it all, but empower your team
  - We need to set clear objectives and goals to deliver on our mission
  - Fostering collaboration builds engagement through the hard times
  - Developing top talent helps build our team and our talent pipeline
- Making this a daily practice
  - “Thank you’s are inexpensive, but costly if you don’t use them.”
  - “Be a human!”
  - Set high standards and keep coaching for better
  - Fostering continues improvement for everyone – including yourself

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THE MARKS OF A HIGH PERFORMING TEAM

- Psychological safety
- Crystal clear goals and role
- Dependability
- Meaning and impact
- Strong, healthy conflict
- Radical transparency and feedback
- Shared accountability
- Low ego / high humility
- Relentless focus on results
- Cohesive relationships

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INTEGRITY AND ETHICAL STEWARDSHIP

- We are the moral compass for our organization
- We need to do the right thing from a governance and compliance perspective
- We need to be able to make the right decision in the face of pressure
- We need to be able to guide the business toward optimal decisions within the rules

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GROWTH STRATEGIES

- Build Diverse Experiences
- Invest in Continuous Learning
- Network and Seek Mentorship
- Develop Soft Skills Intentionally
- Map Career Milestones
- Overcoming Barriers

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BUILD DIVERSE EXPERIENCES: FORMING A UNIQUE PERSPECTIVE

- Find learning opportunities in places others won't go
- Experience working in different business models and functional areas
- Learn your financial levers through collaboration with your business team
- Connecting the dots from your accumulated experiences

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INVEST IN CONTINUOUS LEARNING: FOSTERING INTELLECTUAL CURIOSITY

- Become a lifelong student to expand your horizons
  - Best practices and technology
  - Within your industry and company
  - Emerging business, industry and technology trends
- Traditional and non-traditional opportunities
  - Certifications and graduate degrees are great, but not for everyone
  - Fostering cross training and other applied experiences
- Consistent investment in your team
  - Coaching and experiential learning

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EXPANDING YOUR HORIZONS: A CASE STUDY

- **Site History of Alcoa's Rockdale, TX Operations**
  - **1952 – Alcoa establishes site in Rockdale, Texas for energy and aluminum production**
  - **2008 – aluminum production curtailed during Great Financial Crisis**
  - **2018 – aluminum plant permanently**
  - **2019 – site acquired by Riot Platforms**
  - **2020 – start of site development**
  - **2023 – opening North America's largest Bitcoin mining operation**
- **If a 73-year-old aluminum plant can transform, so can we!**

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NETWORK AND SEEK MENTORSHIP: BUILDING A FAN BASE

- Build genuine relationships within your network
- Give generously – professionally and personally
  - Corporate mentoring programs
  - Networking circles
  - Community groups
- Learn everything you can from your boss – good and bad – to develop your leadership style

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DEVELOP SOFT SKILLS INTENTIONALLY: BE A HUMAN

- Need to embrace our humanness
  - Relationship drives action and progress
  - Business is done person-to-person
  - “People won’t necessarily buy into your ‘what’, but it’s hard for them to question your ‘why.’
- How we show up affects the engagement of those around us
  - Communications skills and executive presence
  - Active listening and asking insightful questions
  - Appreciation
  - Humility and empathy in the face of challenges

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MAP CAREER MILESTONES: WALKING THE CROOKED PATH

- Building your business experience to build your finance acumen
- Building exposure across other finance functions
- Measuring success in terms of learnings and accomplishments instead of roles
  - Rotations, lateral moves, and projects

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OVERCOMING BARRIERS

- What's your "Why?"
- How do your personal and life experiences shape your "why?"
- How does your "why" impact your career aspirations?

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CALL TO ACTION

- **What is one key leadership trait where I excel today? Which one is my biggest opportunity for improvement?**
- **Which growth strategies am I using today? Which ones to I need to lean into further?**
- **Who can I connect with today to help guide my career journey? Who could benefit today from my support?**

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PARTING SHOT

THANK YOU

Contact me at:

Adam.Maclay@pm.me

linkedin.com/in/adamsmaclay