

your move

When companies undergo a major change, CFOs should lead the charge. In the first of a series of opinion articles, **Blythe McGarvie** explains how

Agents of change

Throughout my career in finance, I had always considered myself to be a change agent—targeting operations for downsizing or elimination, redirecting company funds into new initiatives, acquiring complementary businesses, or managing costs with an eye to shareholder interests. Yet, while I'd been instrumental in proposing and planning such changes, I had little if any real input in the wider business transitions that they precipitated.

My old situation certainly wasn't unique. CFOs and their staff are frequently called upon to take the lead in planning and implementing corporate change—but it's often easiest to remain within the strict parameters of finance. As I was to discover at a new CFO post, leading a corporate change is a huge challenge that requires finance chiefs to assume multi-faceted roles as teacher, counsellor and sales person, while uniting the interests of all stakeholders, not just a few.

BROADER HORIZONS

Shortly after I arrived at my new company, I met with my boss, the CEO, and we discussed how I could become more actively involved in implementing financial strategies—selling, explaining and rationalising financial strategies to investors, managers and line employees. That's when I began to see how I could push the boundaries of finance and expand how I brought value to other parts of the company through various transformational projects.

I put the ideas that we had discussed at that meeting into practice when the firm began rolling out new enterprise-wide software, which would replace an antiquated general ledger system that was over ten years old, but seemed older. A big part of the old system's problem was that during its installation a decade previously, everyone shied away from

making any radical change. The result? The company was let down and for years, we had to make do without important features, ranging from user-friendly interfaces to a group-wide chart of accounts.

That wasn't going to happen this time round. We were going to build an environment that would allow the new system to thrive, one that would focus on people.

As Mary Ann Bailey of Bailey & Associates Coaching, a Seattle-based firm, explains, any major corporate change involves a shift of attitudes among staff, requiring “a psychological process...to let go of an old identity and become reoriented to a new one.” Put another way, the operational changes are usually simple compared to the psychological ones that must precede them.

Our first step was to win the support of the management team for the new ERP system. We did this via a series of presentations to explain how the system would allow the entire company to understand and respond quickly to the financial results of our business. I then put together a task force drawn from finance and operations staff to evaluate the alternatives. Soon after, the rollout team decided that we, at corporate headquarters, would lead the adoption phase and be the first site to install the software on the intranet.

But the battle was just beginning. The aim was to be able to upload and download monthly financial reports used across all departments via our company intranet so that information would be available quickly and easily to everyone who needed it. The changes we wanted to drive through—the transition from paper-based to electronic information—was going to be difficult for some individuals.

So we looked for ways to help. For



example, a group of senior executives requested and received larger computer screens so that they could see all the information they needed without having to scroll up and down. The benefits came rapidly. Within weeks of the installation, the accounting department no longer needed to mail our monthly reports to over 200 parts of the company.

After the first few months, the new system was well accepted and continues to be the foundation of other important internal information reports. Each department head became empowered to respond quickly and with positive benefits to improving our operations for our customers.

The lesson in this? Grab the initiative. As Cathy Higgins of Chicago-based coaching firm, Higgins, Kriescher & Associates, says, you should “make the change before it's done to you.” Recognise and articulate what you want, and why you want it for the company. That'll give you the confidence to move ahead to assume the role of leader in the difficult process of change. ✱

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