

The Road to the Corner Office

By Anne Stuart

There's good news and not-so-good news for finance and accounting specialists interested in moving into overall business-leadership jobs—especially for those shooting for the top spot.

The good news: Industry experts—and executives who have made the leap—say that many smart, talented people with strong accounting and finance backgrounds are ideally positioned to become successful CEOs.

The A&F advantage

“They have access to information in a way that no other budding business leader does,” says V. Rory Jones, a principal in Business Intelligence Associates LLC, a San Francisco, Calif.-based management consulting firm, and author of *The Executive Guide to Boosting Cash Flow and Shareholder Value* (John Wiley & Sons Inc., 2008). “They have insight across the organization, and that's a great information set to develop into business leadership.”

Jeff Petty, who's been president and CEO of Wesley Enhanced Living, a Southampton, Pa.-based chain of nonprofit retirement communities, since 2003, couldn't agree more. “Finance has a seat with a vision of the entire field,” says Petty, a former CFO and financial analyst. “It's unlike any other function. You get to see it all. You're exposed to it all. There's not much of a better position to learn from globally.”

The not-so-good news: Convincing those in power that that's the case sometimes remains a significant challenge.

“As I was coming up in my career, there was an impression that finance people didn't get into general management,” Petty acknowledges. “It was a relatively rare phenomenon for someone to make that move.” Many CEOs rose to the top through sales or operations.

Beware of stereotypes

As Petty's own experience indicates, that attitude is obviously changing. But even today, A & F pros struggle with negative perceptions that may delay or detour the journey to the corner office. Chief among them, Petty says: “Non-finance people tend to lump finance people into a category where they're just bean counters who don't really understand the business.”

Todd Wille, who's been president and CEO of Unify Corp., a Sacramento, Calif.-based business-software company, since 2000, routinely observed another stereotype in his previous years as a CFO, vice president of finance and controller: “The business often views finance and accounting people as the bad guys”—people who say no, slow down projects and treat other employees like criminals. That kind of reputation, even if undeserved, can obviously hinder efforts to move up to a more general leadership role.

Take the right steps

So what can accounting and finance pros—and the companies that employ them—do to hurdle those roadblocks? Those who have done so successfully recommend these strategies:

1. Sidestep the stereotypes: Start to change those negative perceptions by setting a good example in your current role. “Your job is not to be the military police. Your job is to educate and work with people in other departments,” Wille, himself a CPA, says of A & F jobs. “You’ve got to ask questions in the correct way and in the appropriate tone.”

For example, if you spot a large overrun in a particular department’s training budget, have a cordial conversation with the manager involved about the circumstances behind the big expenditure. Says Wille: “If you ask in a truly collaborative way—‘What can I do to help with this?’—you’ll go a lot further” both in terms of resolving the immediate issue and in creating the kind of positive, problem-solving image that’s critical to business leadership. Employers can help A & F pros shed those stereotypes by providing interpersonal training geared to the kinds of confrontations that A & F employees are likely to face.

2. Turn to learning: Employers can help promising young and mid-career professionals by offering classes in management skills. Many forward-thinking companies have established mentoring programs as well. By matching up-and-coming accounting or finance pros with successful business leaders from similar backgrounds, they’re helping create valuable long-term relationships. And their companies may benefit, too.

They’re more likely to retain younger employees who don’t want to leave their mentors; they’re also creating a way for senior executives to choose and groom their successors. Meanwhile, A & F employees should invest the time necessary to participate in management classes and mentoring programs. If their employers don’t offer such options, they should encourage them to do so—or perhaps work out an arrangement in which the employer helps foot the bill for outside education.

3. Look up from the books: Family-owned companies often require the next generation of leaders to spend time working in every department—from sales to marketing to manufacturing to customer service and beyond. That way, they develop a holistic perspective of the overall business that’s likely to come in handy when it’s their turn to be in charge. CEOs who came up through the finance ranks say it’s critical for ambitious A & F pros to adopt a similar approach, learning as much as possible about departments beyond their own.

The most important place to spend time? In Wille’s view, it’s sales. “When you get down to it, ‘CEO’ really stands for ‘Chief Sales Person,’” he says. “Without sales, without revenue, it doesn’t matter what else you’re doing.” While in the CFO role at Unify, he “made an investment in learning about sales” by dropping in on the division and asking question after question. What did he learn?

“You have to lose your black-and-white view of the world when you’re talking about sales because there’s no such thing as black and white,” Wille says. “Flow charts and spread sheets are nice, but as

soon as you enter a factor that you can't control – the customer – a lot of that other stuff goes out the window. Every customer is different and every customer scenario is different.” He calls the knowledge gained through that experience critical to his success as CEO.

Petty, however, recommends focusing on operations. “I view that role as presenting the right info to the right people in the right way so that they're compelled to do the right thing,” he says. “You're helping people make the right decisions. Then it's really easy to transition into a general management and leadership role.”

Employers can help their specialized, and often isolated, A & F pros by creating ways for them to spend “quality time” with key players in other departments. Again, mentoring programs can help match A & F employees with seasoned sales and operations managers who can provide valuable insights into their own specialty areas. And ultimately, a manager who steers a promising candidate toward such opportunities may well benefit years later, when that former accountant or auditor or analyst sports a new title: CEO.