

CFO Insights

Time: Protecting your irrecoverable asset

Deloitte's research and insights from its CFO Transition Lab™ sessions suggest there are three fundamental resources that executives must manage during a transition: time, talent, and relationships. Of the three, however, time is the one irrecoverable resource, one that should be prioritized and guarded during—and after—a transition.

Why? The flood of issues crossing an transitioning finance chief's desk can be overwhelming. As an incoming or newly promoted executive, you need to develop a clear sense of the organization's priorities while keeping the existing engines running. We often hear about 60-to-80-hour workweeks, as incoming CFOs get pulled into meetings and launch their listening tours to get a handle on issues confronting the company. And in this issue of *CFO Insights*, we'll discuss the macro strategies for managing your first six months as well as offer micro strategies for gaining control of your time going forward.



Priorities, possibilities, and progress

Transitions are demanding, even for seasoned executives. To be successful, you generally have to focus on four key areas to garner better control of your time:

- 1. Set a realistic timeframe.** Popular business books may tout the promise of the first 90 or 100 days (see sidebar, “The myth of the first 90 days”). But unless you’re addressing an emergency, this is usually not enough time to drive meaningful results on the important issues. Often, we find incoming executives pulled in one direction—for example a CFO addressing a regulatory matter or renegotiating covenants and refinancing loans—before being able to engage with and frame a broader finance agenda. Count on six months to achieve the tangible results you desire.
- 2. Create relationships with key stakeholders.** Influential and good relationships with key stakeholders make it easier to move your agenda forward. It is critical to spend time establishing personal, one-on-one connections and hearing these stakeholders’ concerns and needs. So, in the initial months, take time to embark on the essential listening tours to create the relationships you need.
- 3. Establish three to five key priorities.** Decide what your top priorities are and make some tangible progress on them in the first six months of your tenure. Make these priorities—and their value—“elevator-pitch ready” by succinctly framing them.
- 4. Audit your progress.** After 30–45 days, take an audit of how your team is spending its time and decide what must be stopped. Kill the unproductive meetings or the less important projects that drain you and your best talent so you can focus more productively on your most important priorities.

Little things matter

Focusing on these areas, however, requires the ability to filter out the noise. Think about it: when you are promoted to a C-level role for the first time, you need time to learn the new aspects of the role and fill in any skill gaps. In the first few months, you will also be pulled into many internal meetings as you try to get a handle on your new responsibilities. Meanwhile, myriad staff members, vendors, and consultants will be knocking on your door wanting to get to know you. And this, of course, is in addition to the barrage of e-mails that will vie for your attention.

Based on our CFO Transition Lab sessions, here are some of the strategies executives use to manage their time and increase their capacity for work:

Screen: After the first 30–45 days, you will have a pretty clear picture of the internal meetings that are unproductive and you no longer want to attend. Unless they are led by the CEO, you can probably find a way to excuse yourself from meetings that do not serve you well. Killing unproductive meetings in your own department may also be a useful way to free up time and win credibility with your staff, who may feel the same way.

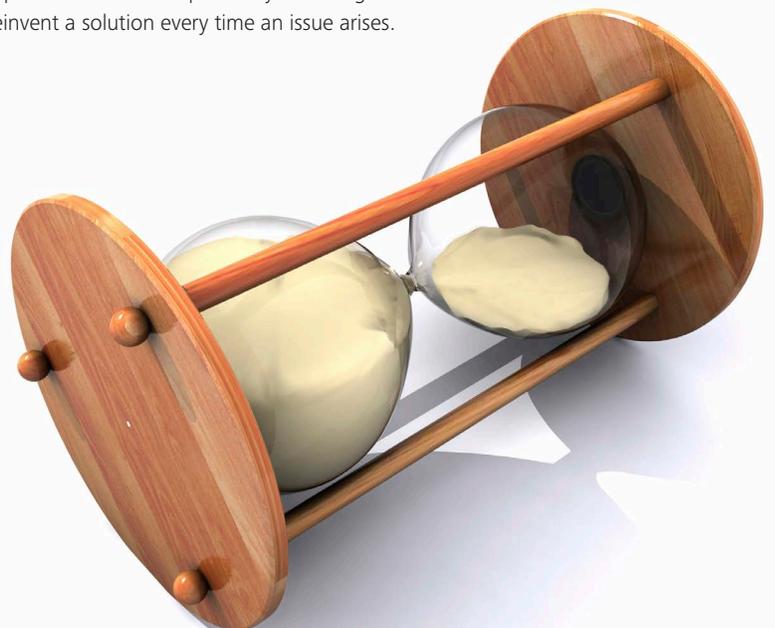
If you have an executive assistant (EA), make sure he or she is a capable guardian of your time. A good EA screens incoming calls and meeting requests, qualifying those requests against specific criteria that you jointly set. To this end, it is important to spend time with your EA early on and set up clear criteria and expectations for how to schedule your time. Ideally, an EA can also assume responsibility for routine administrative matters. While having a strong EA may seem obvious, it is surprising how often executives do not have this resource in place.

Schedule: In our lab sessions, we often hear executives note that it is hard to take “time out to think.” One simple—if trite—answer is to schedule it. Make time on your calendar for yourself that is inviolable by other meetings or interruptions. Some executives, for example, come to the office early to spend a few hours by themselves, thinking through issues and forming the day’s agenda; others budget time on a weekly basis for independent thought and strategizing.

E-mail can also be scheduled. While e-mail in many organizations is today’s “weapon of mass distraction,” scheduling time to deal with it avoids distractions during other meetings and work. Some executives we’ve worked with choose not to do it first thing in the morning, for example, and instead attend to important ones in the middle of the day or lunch, and wrap up others in the evening.

Finally, things that may be difficult to do or are essential to learn can also be scheduled. Suppose you are a treasurer without a CPA background who is appointed to a CFO role. You really want to master key accounting and control issues to increase your confidence as a CFO. To do so, during the transition period you might schedule regular weekly meetings with your controller and chief accountant to brief you on the requisite issues and bring you up to speed.

Routinize: Another way to protect your time is to establish a routine. Executives, for example, often come into an organization and find that key processes are broken. Take the incoming CFO who encounters an ad hoc budgeting process that’s too time-consuming. In that case, perhaps the solution is building business case templates and a consistent process for project evaluation that is transparent across stakeholders. Creating routines and good processes can free up time by removing the need to reinvent a solution every time an issue arises.



The myth of the first 90 days

There is a potentially dangerous assumption being propagated by popular business tomes. From *The First 90 Days* to the slightly more generous *The New Leader's 100-Day Action Plan*, business books are placing perilous time constraints on newly minted members of the C-suite. But there's good news for executives taking the reins: these time constraints are merely a best-selling myth.

Deloitte's research on executive transitions across multiple C-level roles shows that many executives actually frame their initial plans around a longer period—six months, in fact. Why six months? First, having a strong team of direct reports leading effective organizations is vital to your effectiveness, but it takes time to assess them, hold skip-level meetings, recruit new staff, and restructure amid ongoing projects. And six months is generally the minimum amount of time it takes to critically assess your team and, as needed, restructure it. Second, in large organizations, it takes time to decipher how the business really operates. If you are recruited from outside, for example, you need to learn the specific nuances of multiple product divisions and their markets. Third, senior executives are recruited to produce results. Thus, generating meaningful wins in the first 90 days is not easy; it is much more reasonable to garner tangible accomplishments in six months.

So, how should you use your first six months? Consider the following structure:

0–30 days: First, connect with your important stakeholders, direct reports, and perhaps one level down to establish hypotheses about critical issues needing attention and staff capabilities. This should be a period of listening, connecting to stakeholders, and absorbing information.

30–90 days: Define an initial set of signature priorities and build a go-plan to socialize with stakeholders. Where you are uncertain about the capabilities of specific staff, frame assignments to have clear milestones within the next 45–60 days, which enables you to assess them. Ideally, by the end of 90 days, you are ready to frame and execute your organizational model. If there is a burning platform issue or inherited train wrecks, take concrete steps to diagnose and frame the issues. It is also good to use this honeymoon period to decide what initiatives need to be killed or deferred to free resources for more important priorities.

90–180 days: Start delivering a new organizational model, and recruit staff as needed. Garner substantial progress on at least one signature initiative, and establish a communications strategy that reinforces the culture you desire.

Delegate: Delegation is the biggest key to protecting your time. As a CFO, one of your core responsibilities will be to assemble and motivate a team, allowing you to delegate projects and free up time to attend to the important things. But as a C-level executive, you may have another opportunity to directly recruit a manager to assist you. Such a recruit may be a talented young manager within your department who is recruited as a “leadership program fellow,” “chief of staff,” or similar title on a one-to-two-year rotational assignment. The purpose of the assignment can be twofold. First, as part of a leadership development program, he or she can gain leadership skills and exposure to your role as well as your peer leaders'. Second, the individual can handle a number of tasks on your behalf: attending meetings as a listener and as your proxy, preparing PowerPoint presentations and meeting materials, handling less-important e-mails, and managing projects against key milestones. Having an effective young manager to delegate to can dramatically increase your efficiency and free up your time.

Your business is not usual

It is no surprise that CFOs have to work excessive hours during a transition. Given that time is your irrecoverable asset, however, it is important to manage it with care, protect it for your most important priorities, and establish a resource model to best serve you during and after the transition.

Screening, scheduling, routinizing, and delegating are some of the ways new finance chiefs can protect their time and focus on the truly important items. In addition, as a C-level executive, having a strong EA and a high-potential young manager dedicated to you can increase your capacity to attend to priority issues. After all, you were recruited to do more than “business as usual.”

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