

BUSINESS GUIDE

Upskill Your Finance Team With AI and Soft Skills





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The Lesson I Learned Early in My Career

It was many years ago, and I was in a finance-led meeting. At the time, my manager, a finance director, was presenting important financial information to a cross-functional audience—and nobody was paying attention. Nobody! He was using complex terminology and there was nothing interesting about his presentation! It was clearly a missed opportunity.

It was valuable information but was presented in a very disengaging way. For me, it was a lesson I've never forgotten. Soft skills are MORE important than technical skills for finance professionals.

Having important information without the ability to tell the story is a losing proposition. And now, in an era where artificial intelligence (AI) is gaining significant

traction and will eventually do much of the “hard work” of processing and analyzing data, this lesson matters more than ever. The human edge—storytelling, influencing, inspiring confidence—is what turns data into action.

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CHAPTER 1

The Human Edge: Why Soft Skills Matter More Than Ever

This raises a critical question: if AI will eventually handle much of the heavy lifting of data, what higher-value activities should finance leaders reallocate their time to? The answer is clear: we must double down on soft skills.

Soft skills are becoming the ultimate differentiator for finance leaders. Among these, storytelling and the ability to influence effectively stand out. It is no longer enough to present accurate financials; CFOs and finance professionals must tell compelling stories, persuade stakeholders, align diverse teams, and inspire confidence in their vision in order to turn insights into action.

Let us start with storytelling!



Storytelling: Turning Numbers Into Impact

Data and insights alone are not enough. For the CFO to truly influence business decisions, they must tell the story behind the numbers in a way that resonates.

Here are two practical storytelling frameworks that can help CFOs and their teams become better storytellers. Like any other skill, building confidence and competence starts and ends with deliberate practice:

1. The ACE Framework (Audience, Content, Execution)

- **Audience:** Tailor your message to who is in the room. A CEO may care about growth and strategy, while an operations leader may focus on efficiency. Even at the top, styles differ—some leaders prefer a high-level summary while others want detailed breakdowns.
- **Content:** Deliver insights, not data dumps. Highlight trends, risks, and opportunities. Use compelling and interesting visuals instead of endless walls of numbers. It is also important to keep it simple rather than overcomplicating our content.
- **Execution:** Deliver with presence—voice, body language, and energy even in a virtual meeting. Tools like PowerPoint's embedded Coach or AI-driven presentation skills apps can help finance professionals practice pace, clarity, and filler words.

Example (Topline Miss):

- **Instead of:** "We are 6% below our Q2 revenue forecast."
- **Try:** "Our Q2 topline came in 6% below forecast, driven by weaker sales in the Northeast and slower adoption of our new product line. If we focus efforts on accelerating adoption and targeted promotions, we can still close the year strong."

The difference is moving from a report of failure to a story of opportunity.

2. The What – So What – Now What Framework

Created by Terry Borton in the 1970s, this simple but powerful framework is a game-changer for CFO and finance communication. It is a great way for finance professionals to focus on the future rather than dwelling on the past!

- **What:** Share the key fact.
- **So What:** Explain its implications.
- **Now What:** Recommend clear next steps.

Example (Margin Pressure):

- **What:** "Commodity costs have increased significantly, cutting 2% from gross margin."
- **So What:** "If we don't act, annual EBITDA will fall by \$12M, limiting our ability to reinvest in growth."
- **Now What:** "We should explore selective price increases, accelerate efficiency projects, and review hedging strategies."

The CFO is no longer just delivering bad news—they are enabling informed, constructive action.

Building on storytelling, a key skill for CFOs is the ability to influence stakeholders. Think about significant business propositions like capital investments. Imagine the CFO has a different point of view on an investment than the rest of the C-suite. The ability to skillfully influence while not damaging the relationship is critical for the long-term success of the CFO and his/her team.

A great storyteller is able to effectively influence stakeholders, so let us move on to influencing.

Influencing: Moving People, Not Just Numbers

Just like storytelling, influencing is a skill that we can all develop. Robert Cialdini's phenomenal book *Influence: The Psychology of Persuasion* outlines six principles that CFOs can directly apply:

1. **Reciprocity** – Give value first. Provide tailored insights that support a stakeholder's priorities to build goodwill.
2. **Commitment and Consistency** – Anchor decisions to prior commitments (e.g., margin improvement).
3. **Social Proof** – Show that peers, departments, or competitors have succeeded with the approach you are suggesting.
4. **Authority** – Leverage not just numbers, but external research, benchmarks, and thought leadership.
5. **Liking** – Build rapport and genuine relationships. As Dale Carnegie taught, influence flows more easily when people like and trust you.
6. **Scarcity** – Highlight urgency or the risks of inaction.

Examples in Practice:

- **CFO Example 1: Influencing for Technology Investment**
A CFO wants to implement an AI-driven forecasting tool. The operations team is skeptical about cost and disruption. Instead of leading with numbers alone, the CFO uses social proof by citing how a competitor reduced forecasting cycle time by 40%. They apply reciprocity by showing operations how this tool will reduce fire drills and late-night data crunching. Finally, they reinforce authority by sharing credible research on the ROI of AI forecasting. The combined approach wins buy-in faster than a cost/benefit analysis alone.

- **CFO Example 2: Influencing During Cost-Cutting**
During a downturn, a CFO must enforce budget cuts across departments. Instead of simply mandating reductions, they first apply liking and rapport-building, meeting with each leader individually to understand their pressures. They use commitment and consistency by reminding them of the executive team's shared goal of protecting margins and jobs. They then highlight scarcity, warning that if costs are not reduced now, deeper cuts may be forced later. By combining empathy with influence techniques, the CFO ensures smoother adoption of tough measures.
- **CFO Example 3: Influencing the Board**
In a board meeting, the CFO presents a plan to expand into a new market. To influence effectively, they lead with authority (market research and financial modeling), reinforce with social proof (competitors already seeing success in the region), and close with scarcity ("Regulatory windows to enter this market are limited to 18 months"). This blend of rational and psychological persuasion increases approval odds.

These techniques move decisions forward by appealing to both reason and psychology and can help any CFO or finance professional.

Now let us talk about how we can combine these soft skills with AI which is progressing at a game-changing pace.

The CFO at the Cutting Edge of AI



If soft skills like storytelling amplify influence, AI accelerates insight. Together, they are a powerful and unstoppable combination.

In today's business environment, CFOs must position themselves at the forefront of AI. The most effective approach is to begin with a clear AI strategy—one that identifies areas to drive both efficiency and effectiveness while staying aligned with corporate governance and compliance standards.

For example, automating transactional processes (such as invoice processing, reconciliations, and routine reporting) allows finance teams to reduce manual work and reallocate their time to higher-value

activities. Beyond automation, CFOs can leverage AI for advanced analysis. Imagine using AI to sift through quarterly reports and public filings of competitors. In minutes, the CFO's team can generate insights on industry benchmarks, competitor strategies, and market shifts—insights that once took weeks to compile. When I was a finance executive, this type of external intelligence would consume weeks if not months. Today, AI compresses that time dramatically, freeing finance to add strategic value.

When CFOs embrace AI in this way, they elevate their role from financial steward to strategic partner—providing data-driven foresight that helps the organization navigate change with confidence.

How CFOs Can Leverage AI

Here are some practical examples of how CFOs can apply AI today.

- **Forecasting and Scenario Planning.** AI can analyze historical financials, sales orders, and market data to improve cash flow, P&L, and balance sheet forecasts. Instead of static budgets, CFOs can run “what-if” scenarios in real time (e.g., impact of a 5% raw material increase on gross margin).
- **Automated Close and Reconciliation.** AI can match transactions, identify anomalies, and reduce manual reconciliations. This reduces close time and frees up accountants to focus on insights.
- **Spend and Expense Optimization.** AI can scan procurement and T&E data to flag outliers, duplicate invoices, or unusual spending patterns. It can also benchmark supplier pricing against market norms.
- **Cash Flow and Working Capital.** AI models can predict customer payment behavior (DSO), helping finance leaders optimize collections and working capital. Vendor payment schedules can be adjusted dynamically.
- **Narrative Reporting and Insights.** Instead of raw reports, AI can generate executive-ready commentary (e.g., “Revenue increased 8% driven by higher subscription renewals in EMEA. COGS rose 6% due to FX headwinds.”). Note that this commentary is just a starting point and needs to be refined and brought into context by the finance team.

Bringing AI Into ERP Systems (NetSuite Example)

But how can we start leveraging AI effectively? What if we already have an ERP system or a complex web of systems?

AI can be layered on top of existing systems through APIs or embedded solutions. For example, we can use NetSuite’s approach:

- **Data Source:** NetSuite AR & AP sub-ledgers, sales orders, payroll, and bank feeds.
- **AI Application:** Oracle AI, Azure OpenAI, or fintech AI partners integrated via SuiteTalk API.
- **Output:** Rolling 13-week cash flow forecast with variance explanations.
 - “Top 10% of overdue AR is concentrated in three construction clients.”
 - “Payroll increase in Q4 is due to seasonal hiring.”
- **Actionability:** AI recommends collection strategies, early payment discounts, or DPO extensions.

Quick Wins CFOs Could Pilot

One way to gain momentum with AI is finding quick wins! Here are some examples:

- Automated variance analysis.
- AI-powered ERP chat (“What’s driving gross margin variance this month?”).
- Dynamic pricing recommendations.

In practice, CFOs do not need to rip and replace systems—AI can sit on top, enhancing existing ERP backbones like NetSuite via SuiteAnalytics and partner integrations.

Closing Thought

That finance meeting years ago taught me a lesson that still guides my career: having the data is not enough—it is how you deliver it that drives impact.

Today, AI is reshaping finance at lightning speed, but it does not replace the need for human connection. In fact, it makes it more essential. The CFO's true edge lies in combining the efficiency and foresight of AI with the storytelling, influence, and leadership of soft skills.

It is a powerful and unstoppable combination.

Practical Takeaways for CFOs

- **Balance AI and EQ:** Use AI to process the data but use soft skills to move people.
- **Apply Influence Systematically:** Do not default to numbers—embed persuasion principles into every conversation.
- **Invest in Relationships:** Influence flows faster when trust already exists.
- **Practice Scenario-Based Communication:** Just as you stress-test financials, practice how you would frame tough conversations with different stakeholders.





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