Think Like an OWNER!

It may help advance your career.

By Sally Alexander West, CMA, CPA

One of the questions asked most often in interviews and panel discussions is, "What's the best piece of career advice you've ever received?" I'm always intrigued by the responses. As a moderator for a discussion panel of customer care professionals, I recently asked the group that same question. It dawned on me then, however, that I'd never asked that question of myself. In my years in the finance business, I've had some wise mentors, attended some thought-provoking seminars, and read my share of articles on how to have a successful career. I've also received some great training on leadership and career advancement.

But the best advice I ever received came early in my career. Working in the accounting and finance department of a *Fortune* 500 company, I had recently been promoted to supervisor. Eager to see me do well, my boss said, "Just act like you own the place."

At the time, I didn't realize all the implications of my manager's advice, and frankly I'm not sure he did either. I assumed his comment was meant as support and encouragement, and I still believe that's what he intended it to be. I was 25 years old and had recently earned my CPA certification, yet I was being asked to supervise a small department in which every single member was at least 10 years my senior. One woman was almost old enough to be my grandmother. My boss, knowing my inexperience and innate shyness, sensed my need for reassurance. He was, in effect, encouraging me to follow my instincts and to trust my own ability to make the right decisions. His advice helped me gain the courage to speak with conviction even though my direct reports had more career experience than I did.

That recommendation was exactly what I needed to hear. As my career has progressed, that same piece of advice has taken on new shades of meaning beyond my boss's intent at the time. I've come to realize that "act like you own the place" has more implications than merely believing in yourself and behaving as if you have a seat at the head of the table. It means thinking and acting like an owner, truly treating the business as if it were your own.

From that point of view, I noticed that several other attitudes and actions began to emerge. What does it mean to think like an owner? Here's what I've found.

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Owners Are Customer Focused

Knowing they have to prove themselves to every customer, owners strive to make each customer interaction a positive one. The best finance leaders cultivate this same customer-first orientation. Since most finance leaders don't interact with external customers on a daily basis, many may interpret this to mean satisfying internal customers by meeting deadlines, accepting difficult assignments, and delivering what the boss expects. While those endeavors are certainly admirable and necessary, they aren't what I'm referring to as customer focused. The successful business leader transcends the checklist mentality that keeps internal customers happy and looks *beyond* those task-oriented activities to develop a viewpoint that puts the organization's customers first. An often-cited example of a company that has successfully instituted this mind-set throughout the organization is Nordstrom, whose explicit "number one goal is to provide outstanding customer service." For many years, the Nordstrom employee handbook had one rule: *Use best judgment in all situations.* In essence, they're asking their employees to think like owners.

Finance professionals can contribute to this atmosphere by using their analytical training and quantitative orientation to develop, analyze, and report on metrics that are indicators of a satisfying customer experience.

These metrics vary by type of business, but a couple of examples might be (1) fewer product returns and (2) fewer calls to technical support. Similarly, by employing advanced analytics, finance leaders can identify drivers of customer satisfaction (such as on-time installation and repair visits or shorter customer wait times) and can in turn show a positive correlation to increased customer acquisition and retention and to higher profit margins. Spotlighting such metrics and drivers can minimize hunch-based, subjective decisions about customer behavior. By providing this level of guidance, finance leaders can add value through improvements that result in positive experiences for the customer and, consequently, favorable results for the business.

Owners Are Persistent

Starting a business is never easy. It requires owners to have a strong commitment as they face inevitable difficulties, first and foremost of which is persuading lenders or investors that they're supporting viable ideas and sound practices. Many businesses operate at a loss during the start-up and growth phases, and an owner must not only keep the faith through lean times but may also have to convince employees, investors, and sometimes even family members to do the same. Daniel H. Pink, in his latest book, *To Sell Is Human*, labels this quality of persistence "buoyancy," describing it as the ability to "stay afloat amid that ocean of rejection."

Leaders in the finance department (and those in other departments as well) are often required to display the same type of determination. Finance leaders rightly are called on for advice on strategy, cost savings, and investment, and the right answers aren't always apparent. In these cases, persistence is needed to produce sound, data-driven recommendations. When a recommendation runs contrary to the desired answer, however, the finance leader's powers of persuasion and resolve, like those of an owner, have to be summoned in order to steer the organization in the right direction. Often this means sticking to your guns and pursuing a win-win strategy for all.

Take, for example, something that happened to me several years ago. Employees in one of our retail centers wanted to let customers know of a new product we were offering. Conscious of the budget, their idea was to create their own in-store displays. When we learned of the plan, we thanked them for their initiative but knew there was considerable upside to having a professional handle the marketing. Although the cost was higher, the return on investment (ROI) and the image conveyed to the customer justified the expenditure. As I discovered in this situation, the finance leader who remains open and persists in researching the best alternative often finds that the option with the strongest ROI costs more but exceeds the desires and expectations of other departments. Persistence is then required to advocate to owners and investors for the best solutions—creative ones that allow stakeholders to reach their goals while achieving the financial objectives of the organization.

Owners Take the Long View

Successful owners invest in activities that pay off over time. They're interested in building something great, something lasting, whether it's a faster microprocessor or a tire that grips the road better. A recent example is Michael Dell, who in September 2013 marshaled shareholder support to take his company, Dell Inc., private. In a subsequent article in *Forbes*, he was quoted saying, "We need to be looking not just at the quarter ahead, but at the decade ahead and investing to create value for customers as long-term relationships with a long-term vision." Similarly, the best finance professionals also favor long-term success over short-term gains. Taking the long view obviously requires patience, but it may also require courage when managing investor expectations and guarding against pressures to achieve quick profits at the expense of the ongoing health of the enterprise.

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As finance professionals, we can create a vision of sustained growth and set a tone for the rest of the organization that reinforces that vision. This means establishing a productive planning process to design strategies that guide future activities and that ensure adequate funding is available for them. To promote continued growth and stability, we as financial leaders must help establish appropriate performance benchmarks and reward employees for behaviors that contribute to the long-term success of the company. When the organization takes the long view, decision making can be greatly simplified. Leaders can cut quickly to the crux of the matter by asking the same question an owner would ask: "Does this activity contribute to the organization's long-term success?"

Owners Are Responsible for the End Result

While an owner may not be an expert in marketing, finance, technology, or manufacturing, the best ones are keenly aware of, and exert tremendous influence on, those departments' activities. Similarly, finance leaders increase their effectiveness by gaining an understanding of the issues that other departments face. They maintain a cross-functional awareness of all organizational initiatives, increasing their ability to partner with other groups and contribute valuable insights across the company.

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The most valued leaders hold themselves and their organizations accountable for the success of the entire enterprise. Several years ago, my previous employer's customers experienced a loss of service that lasted much too long because of a lack of coordination between departments. Each group felt it had done its part, but somehow the ball had been dropped and fingers were pointed in all directions. After service had been restored and we were trying to understand how to prevent it from happening again, our vice president coached us with one sentence that summed it all up: "When you see a problem, you own it all the way to resolution." A mark of a true leader is taking responsibility for the end result even when the activities aren't within his or her assigned scope of responsibility. I learned a lot about strong leadership that day.

Owners Share the Vision

Successful owners understand that their business can't survive without great employees. To develop and retain exceptional talent, owners must inspire commitment to the organization's mission and objectives. This means articulating a vision for the company and painting a picture of shared future success for employees, who can help make that vision a reality. In a 2007-2008 survey of 146 "C-level" executives (CEOs, CFOs, CIOs, and the like), the Center for Creative Leadership found that 75% considered "developing and communicating a strong and compelling vision" to be critical to their success. According to the survey, vision was ranked higher than strong financial performance and an effective top-management team.

Finance leaders face a similar challenge with their own teams, and the smart ones realize they can't do it all alone. By communicating aspirations for the team, the leader sets a framework that reduces the need to manage minor aspects of the workflow and allows team members to develop a sense of pride and ownership. A vision for the organization as a whole elevates the role of finance and accounting from one of routine maintenance and reporting to that of a true business partner. Employees who catch that vision lead the way to find new solutions to existing problems and develop reports, processes, systems, and recommendations that move the enterprise forward in a lasting and meaningful way.

Over the years, I've watched some employees advance quickly to leadership roles and others remain near entry-level. The distinction, in my opinion, is that those who progress have learned the art of thinking and acting like an owner. Many believe this just means speaking with authority and confidence, and that certainly helps. But true ownership means focusing first on the customer, displaying persistence, leading from a long-term strategic view, taking responsibility for the results of the enterprise, and sharing the vision. When these traits are evident, a new supervisor's age or lack of experience will quickly become a nonissue for the team.

It's through these activities that finance professionals earn the right to speak with authority and confidence. That's what it truly means to act like you own the place. **SF**

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