Executive summary

Ninety-minute discussion, one page. No names, companies or dates attributed.

THE VERDICT

Negotiation is part of CFO leadership, not an optional addition to technical competence. The failure is visible when a CFO agrees in the meeting but raises objections only in the corridor, leaving the CEO's assumptions unchallenged. The panel also qualified the claim: some organizations deliberately assign the CFO a narrower control role and place negotiations elsewhere. Negotiation can be learned at any age; confidence and seniority do not substitute for practice. The central requirement is to combine financial discipline with the ability to understand, challenge and influence people.

WHERE THEY CONVERGED

- **Listening, attention and reading the room reinforce each other.** Understand the other position before preparing your reply. The discussion resisted treating these as competing techniques: attention makes listening possible, and listening reveals the audience.
- **Explain the implications, not just the figures.** A table on a screen is not an explanation. The CFO must make clear what the numbers mean for the business and the decision, combining technical method with empathy and judgement.
- **Attention requires delegation.** Protect preparation time, separate responsibilities and trust colleagues to work differently. Being present in the negotiation is a practical expression of respect, not something multitasking delivers.
- **Culture changes what the same behavior means.** Directness, timing, titles, and relationship-building cannot follow one universal script. Prepare for the counterpart's expectations; an efficient opening in one setting can undermine trust in another.
- **Consensus does not remove decision ownership.** Build allies and hear colleagues before the formal meeting. Agree who makes the final call: consultation must eventually become a decision for which someone accepts responsibility.
- **Prepare boundaries, not a rigid script.** Know your objective, walk-away position and the other side's likely deal-breakers. Remain open to a better solution; if the discussion becomes unacceptable, pause, reassess, and return rather than force agreement.

WIN-WIN, DISMANTLED AND REBUILT

Win-win does not mean fifty-fifty, and it is not guaranteed. Define an acceptable range and identify concessions that matter to the other side. One proposed test for an unequal outcome was risk allocation: receiving less may be fair if the counterpart bears more risk but may signal weak preparation if you ran out of options. Respect, being heard, and the long-term relationship also matter. The warning was consistent: feeling that you won everything may mean you overlooked something.

WHAT AI CHANGES, AND WHAT IT DOES NOT

The panel described AI as useful for revealing blind spots, exploring scenarios and rehearsing difficult conversations. Challenge the tool rather than accept flattering agreement. More information can improve preparation but also add complexity. An audience question challenged whether wider access to analysis weakens finance's negotiating position. The strongest response placed the CFO's contribution in resource allocation, strategic choices, and decisions under uncertainty, not control of historical data. Human responsibility for those choices remained central to the discussion.

TRANSPARENCY WITH BOUNDARIES

Truthfulness is not unrestricted disclosure. A supplier can be told its terms are uncompetitive without revealing its ranking or the exact concession required. Conversely, early openness with authorities can build credibility before an issue escalates. Prepare what must be disclosed, what may be shared and what must remain confidential. A divestment example exposed the internal difficulty: securing team cooperation without being free to reveal the transaction. On compliance, distinguish empathy from leniency: establish remediation and escalation first, then adapt how the message is delivered.

WHAT REMAINED UNRESOLVED

How much negotiating advantage disappears as AI improves interpretation and forecasting? The discussion offered a strategic answer, not a settled forecast. Nor did it establish a universal disclosure rule: trust, confidentiality, and bargaining position remain context-dependent. Observations about younger managers were qualified by geography and experience; greater confidence and clearer demands were not treated as proof of stronger negotiation capability.

WHAT THEY WOULD TELL A CFO STARTING ON MONDAY

Meet people beyond your direct reports. Map where decisions really happen, including informal conversations. Build credibility by solving one tangible problem before attempting a major reorganization. Understand the culture before making significant changes where circumstances allow. Match people to their strengths rather than assume a poor role fit means they must leave; integrity is a separate boundary. Keep learning: your negotiation plan is only one side's plan.

Panel discussion #2, CFO as Negotiator research programme. Synthesis by Jana Zimová, Elev8 Strategic Finance. All contributions anonymized.