# Executive summary

Anonymized. The final panel discussion, two pages. No names, companies, or identifying career details.

## THE VERDICT

The CFO who cannot negotiate is written off, not qualified, not a CFO. There is no middle ground because negotiation means combining the numbers with the people: understanding what drives the counterpart and bringing them onto your page. Without a personal relationship with the counterpart, there is no route to a successful negotiation. A CFO who manages only the numbers is not a weaker CFO but is doing a different job. If the CEO is the head, the CFO is the neck that decides how far the head can turn. In some larger companies, the CEO and CFO work as one tandem; in smaller owner-led businesses, the CEO sets the direction and the CFO defines what the resources allow. Either way, a direction without funding does not survive.

## WHERE THEY CONVERGED

- **The hardest room is the smallest one.** A bank meeting can be prepared over two weeks; a direct report raises salary, working conditions or frustration in the corridor with two minutes' notice. A bank rarely withdraws trust without serious cause; a team member can withdraw it in seconds. People more often leave a boss than a salary.
- **Make it safe to bring problems early.** Ask for problems to be raised immediately, ideally with a first attempt at a solution, and respond by helping rather than punishing. A trustful feedback culture, including feedback on personal behavior, is set from the top.
- **Strategy before budget.** Without an agreed and communicated strategy, budgeting becomes a long ordeal, and first-pass department budgets usually exceed in aggregate what the company can afford. Practical levers: stagger new headcount instead of assuming every hire starts on 1 January; front-load sales hires because ramp-up can take three to six months; ask marketing to rank its top ten programmes by return and cut the bottom five. The working relationship determines how long the process takes.
- **Build the internal case on evidence.** Resolving a disruptive, long-tenured team member, where local labor law made dismissal unrealistic, took more than half a year to win the superior's support and a further three months to confirm. The turning point was a factual record of incidents and their effect on the team, not repeated opinion. HR was involved, and the company invested in the person's development.
- **Study the person, not only the file.** Before meeting someone new, review their public professional background, interviews and panels, and find a genuine link for the opening conversation. The risk is the gap between the person you prepared for and the one who walks in. Excessive flattery is often an early sign of manipulation.
- **A shared language is not shared understanding.** Culture, language, and currency all matter across borders, but labor law is the costliest surprise: at-will employment in one market, long notice and severance in another. A commitment in the room is not proof of understanding. Align your own team on the goal before facing the counterpart.

## WHEN THE COUNTERPART SHOUTS

Freezing when someone shouts is a common reaction, and there are three ways out of it. Say nothing and let the other person run out of energy; without a response, the outburst does not escalate. Disengage from the noise, then move straight to "so what will we do?" in a calm voice. When a counterpart goes quiet rather than loud, name what you observe, ask what is causing it, and create a safe environment, because the cause may be your own behavior. Leaving an elephant in the room helps no one. If conflict makes you freeze, find out why and work on it: the pattern also shapes conversations outside negotiation. An owner who shouts in budget meetings may simply be testing for the maximum; "he likes you" can be the real explanation. Before reacting, ask whether the person is afraid, pursuing a purpose, or reacting to something else entirely. Recasting an escalation as a misunderstanding can reopen the discussion on terms almost identical to those that triggered it.

## WIN-WIN: WHY WINNING IS DANGEROUS

Winning every point creates bitterness shortly after signing. If you must keep working with the counterpart, as a vendor or as the leadership of an acquired company, anyone who feels mistreated becomes resentful, and in an acquisition the real work, integration, only starts at signing. The test is whether the counterpart feels the deal is fair. The counterweight is discipline: set a walk-away price before emotion takes over. With a range of 50 to 60 million and no way in below 60, walk away and look for the next opportunity, even when a CEO wants to win at

any cost. Respect is the real objective: it is better to be respected than liked, respect comes from demonstrated competence and reasonableness, and disagreement can be conducted with respect.

### WHAT AI CHANGES, AND WHAT IT DOES NOT

AI is in the first inning of a nine-inning game: a research assistant and personal productivity tool rather than something most companies are ready to roll out enterprise-wide, and only as good as the underlying data. Run a 50-page contract through AI to summaries it, flag non-market terms and propose a redline from your position, and you can save up to a day of work. AI also helps to draft feedback that stresses the non-negotiables, to widen the range of ideas before a negotiation and, by comparing answers across models, to test its own output. Two limits remain: AI does not yet read faces, expressions or what a person really wants, and it does not make the decision; the responsible leader does. The volume of output can also overload concentration.

### WHAT REMAINED UNRESOLVED

Does moving a difficult employee to another department solve the problem or relocate it? People rarely change, yet internal moves retain knowledge and avoid repeated hiring; the case discussed ended in retirement. How deep must the CFO go? Understanding every department end to end strengthens the CFO's position, but specialists will always know more detail, so the decisive skill may be judging whether to trust their recommendation. Will finance teams shrink? Fewer people may be needed within about two years, but those who remain will need more experience, knowledge of processes and data rather than accounting standards alone, and the ability to challenge AI output. Where does de-escalating reframing end and steering begin? And is silence or naming the tension the better response to an outburst? The answer depends on the situation.

### WHAT THEY WOULD TELL A CFO STARTING ON MONDAY

Listen more than you speak, and develop penetrating questions about why things are done the way they are. Unless the company is in crisis, spend the first 90 days listening before acting. Never give up; stay honest and active, because the role is about attitude and the people around you, not the position. Be bold and open, and expect hard work: this is not a nine-to-five job, and you are always on duty. On learning: good courses are hard to find and risk being theoretical, so get into the room where an experienced CFO negotiates, and practice. Recommended reading: Never Split the Difference, written by a former hostage negotiator.

Panel discussion #3, CFO as Negotiator research programme. Synthesis by Jana Zimová, Elev8 Strategic Finance. All contributions anonymized.