

The Myth of the Open Door

Encouraging your finance staff to talk with you about problems or new ideas is one thing, but being accessible isn't the same as being approachable.

Bud Kulesza

Almost everyone, it seems, is pulled in many directions at work these days, but none more so than CFOs, who are left with little room for building much-needed relationships with their staff. We tend to spend significant time with other C-suiters, especially the CEO, as we strive to make certain they have what they need from our team in order to meet ever-changing business needs.

We rely upon our team to seek us out when it needs us, and assume that, with our "open door" policy, our staff will willingly and readily bring issues to our attention. So we are accessible — but are we approachable? The dictionary tells us the two words are practically synonymous, but from my personal experience I can only say is not the case with regard to how finance teams operate in reality.

Is Your Open Door Really a Brick Wall?

There are many organizations where finance staffers are reluctant to discuss issues with the CFO, avoiding so until there is no choice because the risk is growing that the CFO will find out about the issues from outside the finance organization. Why? It's simply because, while their doors are theoretically open, many CFOs have not shown themselves to be open to discussion. They often react negatively when issues arise and have a reputation for "killing the messenger." They are simply not approachable.

I remember one organization where the staff referred to the CFO, behind his back, as Jabba the Hutt (from *Star Wars* fame). Google Jabba, and you will find him described as repulsive and self-centered, among other negative qualities. Just having an open-door policy doesn't invite staff to overlook the true characteristics of the person inside the room.

Best-in-class finance organizations have solid working relationships that are built on trust and communication, led by CFOs who are both accessible and approachable. They are eager to discuss issues before they become larger problems. They spend time developing relationships with team members that go beyond the occasional office visit. They lead by getting out of their office and proactively speaking with staff about numerous topics, both professional and personal. They show

concern for the well-being of their staff and, in doing so, create a sense of esprit de corps within the team.

Stop Being an Office Legend

A CFO who grows more visible is also more approachable, until the popular image of the finance chief becomes fact-based rather than legend. If needed, CFOs can change, like anyone else. Here's how.

Having a reputation for demanding excellence and possessing a booming voice, I was often portrayed as one tough CFO. I became most aware of that perception when my administrative assistant had my office door installed with a device that allowed her to close the door from her desk. I had encouraged intense conversations to create a richer dialogue, but she said my voice carried too well and the discussions were often misinterpreted by those who heard. The ones who didn't know me well didn't know how to react.

So I began to make a conscious effort to wander around more — engaging in conversation, being visible, and genuinely showing interest in knowing my team members better. I made myself more approachable as they learned that the voice behind the door was a person interested in hearing from them and about the challenges they faced. Over time, my reputation was toned down to "his bark is worse than his bite," which was a considerable improvement. Barking dogs are clearly more approachable than biting dogs, but it can be difficult to tell which is which.

As I saw first hand, combining accessibility with approachability can really "open doors" for your finance team to excel. Go for it. You will be amazed at how well your staff will respond and how much you can learn about yourself at the same time.

Bud Kulesza, CMA, CFM, is dean emeritus of the IMA Leadership Academy and former chairman of the IMA. He is also the former chairman of ITT Industries Canada and CFO of ITT Automotive, a multibillion-dollar company.

<http://www.budkulesza.com>

Copyright © Bud Kulesza – All Rights Reserved.