

Lean in, listen and lead

CFO VISION 5 MINUTE READ

Based on an in-person discussion on 6 November 2024



In conversation with Bhavesh Mistry, current CFO of British Land and soon-to-be CFO of Kingfisher. Bhavesh has extensive finance experience gained in senior roles across a range of listed businesses, including Tesco, Whitbread, Virgin Media and Anheuser-Busch InBev. He spoke with Salima Nazarali, Finance Transformation Director at Deloitte and CFO Vision Dean.

■ Could you share some of the most significant moments on your journey to CFO?

Some of the most defining moments were when I took a risk. For example, when I moved to Tesco, I had one camp saying, 'great business, great role. It will give you the type of experience you don't have'. And another camp of people saying, 'are you sure, Tesco? It's an aggressive culture'.

I took an educated risk. I did my due diligence. I made sure I met lots of people at Tesco before I joined and it felt like a good fit, and I was right. I found it a very enjoyable and supportive business. So, I formed my own judgements and, in hindsight, those were some of the best decisions I've made – when I've taken an educated risk.

■ How have you built your own brand and stayed authentic?

I got advice from a coach very early on – be yourself and be self-aware. Know what you're good at, know your weaknesses. You could then choose to fix those weaknesses, or know what your strengths are and play to those. I've always tried to play to my strengths. People will see through you if you try to be something you're not. And I think that comes across particularly as you progress in your career. If you're genuine, honest and open, I think people warm to you and are willing to work with you and support you. When I joined British Land, Tesco and

Kingfisher, early on, I spent more time on the 'soft' issues. What's the culture like? How will I get on with the CEO? What's the Board like? How are they making you feel through this whole recruitment process? Because that gives you a real clue as to the soul of the organisation, and tells you if it's where you want to work.

■ How have you leaned in to help shape British Land?

Anyone familiar with real estate knows interest rates and real estate either work very well or they don't. When I joined in July 2021, the base rate was at 1%, and now it's 5%. So, I've lived through three very challenging years in real estate. How do I navigate this? By keeping sight of our longer-term strategy, looking around the corner, looking ahead and running scenarios. And for

me, as a CFO, taking some defensive steps, which means explaining to the organisation why I'm saying no or "not now" to some decisions.

This year, we started to shift to a more offensive stance. Rates are peaking and they're likely to come down, so should we start to think in terms of growth? A month ago, we raised £300 million to buy some retail parks. That was a proactive step, as the time to buy is when others are still apprehensive. It's knowing when to take a defensive posture and an offensive one. And sometimes that can be lonely, as a CFO, when you've got to hold your ground.

■ How do you ensure you're looking at the longer-term picture and it's not just a short-term reactive response?

It's hard. I try not to lose sight of the strategy. Maybe we defer a decision, maybe we choose not to acquire an asset, even though it might help my short-term metrics. Our CEO often says sometimes the best thing is to do nothing and just ride it out. Otherwise, you may live to regret some short-termist or reactive decisions you've made.

“Know what you're good at, know your weaknesses. You could then choose to fix those weaknesses, or know what your strengths are and play to those.”

“I formed my own judgements and, in hindsight, those were some of the best decisions I’ve made.”

■ How do you listen to perspectives from your key stakeholders?

Be approachable; people can sometimes be intimidated by the CFO. I invest time in 121’s, and you’ll be amazed at what people will tell you. If you ask an open question and meet enough people, you start to put things together. You get the same consistent message. It’s about showing genuine interest, asking good questions and then being consistent. I think that’s really important. Really creating trust in that relationship to start with. The hard bit is sustaining those relationships. Once you get into the job, you get pulled in a million directions. As a CFO, people will tell you what they want you to hear, not what you need to hear. And so, often, I will speak to people in my team and other parts of the business, at all levels. You run into someone at the coffee machine and ask a couple of questions. And that helps you validate that what you’re being told is consistent with what you’re hearing.

■ How do you manage the demands of your role with your personal time?

I don’t believe in work/life balance, I believe in work/life boundaries. I try and set those boundaries. It doesn’t always work, but I try to control my diary and manage my energy and not my time. I can’t magic up new hours in the day, but I can manage my energy by exercising, watching what I eat and making sure I get sufficient sleep. It’s the ability to run a marathon, not a sprint, that’s important.

■ How would you describe your own personal leadership style?

I try to be consistent. The worst thing you can do is flip-flop all over the place. So, consistency, giving high support and high challenge. I always say to my team, I’ll

back you up, but you need to be straight. If something isn’t working, tell me. We’ll work together, but I don’t want surprises. I need the right people around me, and that means sometimes making difficult choices with your team. Replacing individuals who aren’t performing, promoting, bringing people from outside or empowering people and treating them like adults.

“I don’t believe in work/life balance, I believe in work/life boundaries.”

■ What are you most excited about in your upcoming role as CFO at Kingfisher?

I’m excited to get back into a consumer-facing business, into retail. Kingfisher has some great growth opportunities across its business and a very good culture. Getting to know my team, their backgrounds, their aspirations.

“Be open, curious and aware of what’s happening in the landscape around you and how it can benefit your business.”

■ What do you wish you’d known before becoming a CFO?

To use advisors – they’re there to help you. And use your Board effectively. They’re a good sounding board, and getting their perspectives ahead of time is really helpful. You don’t need to always show up with the final answer.

■ You talk about investing time with the Board and other key stakeholders. How do you do this?

Don’t try and build a relationship with all of them at once. Let it evolve over time. For me, I prioritised the Chair and the Audit Chair. Then, as you get to know other board colleagues, if there’s a relevant topic or issue, draw them in. I’d also call certain Board members to discuss a specific area they focus on.

■ What is the most critical pillar to being a successful CFO?

I think resiliency. You get a lot thrown at you and you need to be able to just calmly work your way through that and not be too reactive.

■ What specific skills do you see as critical for finance professionals?

Be open, curious and aware of what’s happening in the landscape around you and how it can benefit your business. Also, the softer people skills. You get your work done through others, so make sure you have the right team around you and that you’re getting the best out of them.

■ What one piece of advice would you give your younger self?

The world’s grey, not black and white. I was very black and white when I was younger, and that’s just not how the world works.