



CFO one-on-one



George Kapitelli recently left his post as CFO of General Motors Holden after a 27 year career with General Motors around the world. George undertook his first overseas assignment in Thailand in 1996, where he helped initiate the GM Thailand start-up program. His Thailand posting was followed by two subsequent senior Finance positions in GM Europe and GM Indonesia before returning to Holden as Finance Director during the lead up to the Holden VE Commodore launch. George spent six years in China as Finance Director of the Shanghai GM (SGM) JV (2006) and CFO of SAIC GM Wuling Automobile (SGMW) (2009), re-joining Holden as CFO in 2012.

What has been your career highlight?

There have been many highlights but one that stands out occurred during my CFO stint at SGMW in China. I joined in 2009 and immediately developed a 5 year financial business plan model that became our roadmap for future success. The company used this plan to drive the required actions and associated performance that set the company up for future success. It reinforced the positive impact of solid financial planning. When I left in 2012, the company was in great shape, having doubled sales to 1.3 million units and generating operating leverage to drive very strong profit margins.

What things set yourself apart as a CFO?

One of my strengths has been the ability to develop very strong teams. I have always respected my team members, selected well, provided responsibility and developed a positive plan for success. I have always made sure that my team adds value and I devote significant effort to mentoring my staff and as a result many of my team members have gone on to have very successful careers. In the end, the success of my team is always a reflection of my own personal success.

What are the things, if any, that keep you awake at night?

This is very dependent on the circumstances at play. Recently at GM Holden, the key focus was the tough call we had to make to close down the manufacturing and engineering operations in Australia. The process around that decision took a great deal of time but in the end the key consideration was assessing the impact on our 3500 employees and to best communicate the decision and provide support for each employee to be able to best deal with the ramifications. In general terms, as a CFO, you have always got to be thinking about how to drive the business forward whilst anticipating the speed humps that can derail positive progress. CFO's have the risk mitigation responsibility in the business.

Today's CFO must go well beyond simply being a strong financial operator.

What are the top 3 skills CFO's need to have?

The first priority for a CFO, is the ability to apply core financial principles to the business to ensure correct decision making and controls. I am currently CFO at Melbourne Health and a short term priority is to develop strong financial management and reporting tools to enhance the flow of financial information across multiple levels of the organisation. In other words, providing the right financial insight for the business and partnering with the key business stakeholders to drive positive performance.

The second skill is to design the roadmap for future success and then and communicate this strategic direction effectively to ensure buy off and acceptance.



Phil McCann talks
with international CFO
George Kapitelli



CFO one-on-one

Phil McCann talks
with international CFO
George Kapitelli

The CFO is there to drive positive business performance via aligning all key stakeholders to drive towards the agreed goals.

Finally, the ability to anticipate environmental risks and specific industry issues is also very important and requires strong well thought out contingency response plans.

How transferable are CFO skills to new industries?

I have only just changed industries after many years in the automotive game and have realised that you really need to invest the time upfront to learn as much about the new industry and the business environment as possible. Whilst basic financial skills are transferable, the ability to make the correct decision and your overall confidence level to make the right call, can be negatively impacted by a lack of industry knowledge.

One additional comment relates to cultural adaptability. In my career, I have had to quickly adapt to new cultures on a number of occasions. In my experience, the transition should not be a difficult one, if you follow the basic principle to treat your new colleagues in the same manner that you expect to be treated, regardless of culture. For me, this was the case in China, Thailand and Europe; and I managed to be a successful leader in these new environments.

Typically the financial strategies and decisions you work with are ones that improve the bottom line. How do you account for things like sustainability and clean technology (things that may have negative impacts on the bottom line)?

I always have an eye for the future and thinking about how to stay ahead of the curve. Clean technology is the way of the future and in the end, the key to ensuring a long term sustainable business model. It may be treated as an added cost of doing business today, but there are undoubtedly benefits that will ensure in the future. I have always prioritised green solutions even if they came at a higher cost in the short term.

