How CFOs can accelerate value creation: five lessons in leadership, metrics and talent

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Chief financial officers (CFOs) are under growing pressure to deliver more. They are increasingly expected to unlock enterprise value by guiding investment in emerging technologies, building the capabilities the business needs and developing highly adaptable, tech-savvy talent. However, as revealed by the EY 2026 Global DNA of the CFO survey, a persistent gap remains between ambition and action.

Since 2010, this survey has explored how CFOs can harness finance as an engine for value creation. The 2026 edition, which polled 1,600 CFOs and senior finance executives worldwide, highlights that closing the gap will require deliberate choices about leadership, measurement and capabilities.

The research shows that while many CFOs recognize their role in shaping enterprise value, this ambition is not yet consistently reflected in practice, particularly in leading investment decisions where returns are uncertain, redefining how value is measured and embedding transformation across the organization. CFOs also report challenges in capturing the impact of emerging technologies such as AI, often relying on traditional metrics that do not fully reflect long-term or intangible value. At the same time, gaps in adaptability, skills and leadership development continue to limit finance's ability to translate transformation into sustained outcomes, underscoring the need to align mindset, skill set and toolset to unlock enterprise value.

The findings point to five critical lessons for CFOs looking to move from ambition to execution and accelerate value creation.

1 Value creation takes leadership and a long-term view

CFOs increasingly believe they should play a central role in defining how the business creates value, but many are not yet doing so in practice. The survey reveals a clear disconnect: while 60% of CFOs say they should define and shape value creation, only 25% lead investment decisions where returns are uncertain, indirect or long-term.

This matters because investments often do not fit neatly into short-term financial logic. If finance remains reactive, it risks judging value too late rather than helping shape it early.

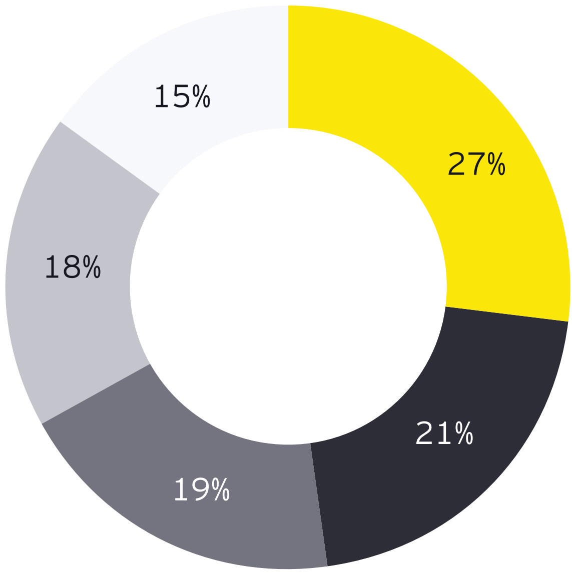
Structural barriers reinforce this challenge. Only 27% of CFOs say the finance function is widely seen as a strategic partner in value creation, with many still perceived primarily as a control or operational function (Figure 1).

At the same time, CFOs report that nearly 47% of finance capacity is absorbed by core activities such as reporting, compliance and controls. These demands can restrict the time available for insight generation and strategic decision support, increasing the risk that value-shaping decisions are led elsewhere in the business. Overcoming these constraints will require CFOs to redesign operating models and rebalance capacity toward higher-value activities.

- The lesson: Creating enterprise value requires a more proactive role for finance earlier in the decision cycle. CFOs should use their position, data and enterprise-wide visibility to guide decisions where value is still emerging and where confidence across the business is still being built.

Figure 1: Few CFOs believe that the finance function is viewed as a strategic partner in value creation.

Q: How would you say the finance function is most commonly perceived across your business today?



- A strategic partner in value creation: Actively involved in shaping business strategy, investment decisions and enterprise-wide value
- A data and insight function: Providing analysis and insight to inform decisions and improve performance
- An operational enablement function: Supporting day-to-day operations, transactions and business continuity
- A risk and resilience advisor: Identifying, assessing and managing financial and enterprise risks
- A stewardship and control function: Focused on regulatory compliance and cost discipline

Source: Will the future of finance be shaped by talent or technology? EY Global DNA of the CFO Survey, EY, June 2026.

2 Better metrics drive better performance

If CFOs want investments to create value, they need more effective ways to measure it. Traditional financial metrics often struggle to capture the benefits of new technologies, new roles and new ways of working, especially when the payoff is indirect or long-term. Further, it's often a challenge to define the anticipated benefits in the first place (Figure 2).

The survey shows that CFOs understand the urgency of change. More than two-thirds (67%) of CFOs say they need to re-evaluate how enterprise value is measured, while 71% say traditional metrics are not enough to assess initiatives that combine people and technology.

Finance cannot rely on conventional ROI calculations alone. Instead, a new framework is required that integrates traditional financial KPIs with such non-financial metrics as AI-enabled decision quality, resilience and customer outcomes. For AI in particular, value may appear in such activities as better forecasting, stronger pricing decisions or more effective risk identification.

- The lesson: Value creation requires a broader measurement framework. CFOs should incorporate qualitative and forward-looking indicators to assess initiatives where impact is indirect, long-term or shaped by people and technology.

Figure 2: CFOs cite difficulties in defining ROI and overreliance on traditional metrics as barriers to measuring value.

Q: What are the biggest barriers your finance team faces today when measuring value creation, such as the value created by emerging technologies and new roles or ways of working?

Note: Percentages indicate those that selected each as a top three barrier.

Source: Will the future of finance be shaped by talent or technology? EY Global DNA of the CFO Survey, EY, June 2026

3 CFO leadership is critical to technology transformation

One area that often takes time to yield its full value is technology transformation. This is an effort where the CFO can directly influence success. Cultivating adaptability within the finance team is a key differentiator: Among CFOs who describe their teams as highly adaptable, 42% report that transformation outcomes exceeded expectations, compared with 16% for generally adaptable teams and 3% for teams that adjust only with support. Unfortunately, adaptability is also in short supply, as only 11% of CFOs describe their teams as highly adaptable.

Transformation also requires close attention to culture. More than two-thirds (68%) of CFOs say new skills and leadership styles are required for a successful transformation, yet people and culture leadership only ranks sixth in development priorities. That mismatch creates risk because transformation depends on whether teams trust new tools, work across boundaries and feel equipped to adapt. When people investment lags technology investment, transformation efforts often stall before value is fully realized.

- The lesson: CFOs should treat adaptability and culture as operating requirements rather than as high-level expectations. Building strength in these areas means reinforcing continuous learning, encouraging teams to work across boundaries and creating an environment where people feel safe to question assumptions and adopt new ways of working.

4 Unlocking AI's value will take a mindset shift

For many companies, "technology transformation" is synonymous with AI transformation. Here, most CFOs face challenges. Fifty-three percent of survey respondents rated their preparedness to use AI to create enterprise value as only developing, early-stage or limited. Another 27% described themselves as "functional" — possessing the appropriate data, tools and personnel, but with work to do to optimize AI's value.

The difficulty is often as much a mindset issue as a technology one. The 21% of CFOs who described their preparedness as leading or advanced are much more likely to recognize AI's potential. For example, of this group, 71% see strong potential in growth forecasting as compared with 44% of those still developing capabilities and 30% of those with limited progress. Meanwhile, those who lag behind tend to approach AI primarily as a defensive tool, using it to primarily manage risk or improve efficiency.

- The lesson: The more confident finance becomes in AI, the more likely it is to apply the technology to growth. CFOs should therefore move AI from experimentation to execution by focusing on high-value use cases where insight can improve forecasting, pricing and market expansion.

5 Sustaining value depends on preparing future leaders

As the CFO role expands, the leadership pipeline beneath it is struggling to keep pace. More than one-third (36%) of CFOs say their finance leadership teams (excluding the CFO) are strong in core technical work but not ready for broader strategic and enterprise-facing demands. And half say faster leadership development is needed to avoid succession risk.

This is more than a talent management issue. It is a strategic risk for finance functions that need leaders who can navigate technology change, partner across the business and make sound judgments in unfamiliar situations. CFOs should therefore build more structured development pathways that include stretch assignments, cross-functional rotations and time-bound transformation roles that give future leaders experience beyond traditional finance responsibilities.

- The lesson: Treat leadership development as a core lever of value creation, not a downstream human resources priority. CFOs must actively develop leaders who can think, act and decide beyond the finance function.

From ambition to action: unlocking value and driving sustainable growth

Translating intent into sustained impact depends on how consistently finance embeds value creation into everyday practice. Many CFOs remain constrained by operating models designed for control rather than insight, as well as limited capacity for strategic work. To address this, the finance function must be restructured to support faster, more integrated decision-making and closer collaboration with the business. CFOs must actively lead both as the finance function's leader and as a strategist across the enterprise, shaping decisions early, redefining how value is measured and cultivating adaptable, confident and strategically focused finance teams in parallel with technology investments. With the five lessons from the survey, CFOs have a clear roadmap to close the execution gap and deliver sustained enterprise value.

Note: All statistics in this article are drawn from Will the future of finance be shaped by talent or technology? EY Global DNA of the CFO Survey, EY, June 2026.

Summary

CFOs are under increasing pressure to turn strategic ambition into measurable outcomes. To drive value creation, finance leaders must take a more proactive role in decision-making, evolve how performance is measured and strengthen their approach to technology transformation. This includes adopting broader metrics, building adaptable teams and prioritizing leadership development. By aligning people, processes and technology, CFOs can close the gap between intent and execution and position the finance function as a catalyst for sustained growth.

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