



Greater Washington CFO Network  
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## CFO Spotlight: Dawn Orr, CFO of Wealth Engine

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### **1. What are the three most important characteristics of a company culture?**

I am a true believer that a company's team and culture are incredibly important components of its overall success. Management drives culture by demonstrating acceptable and desired behavior every day. I've heard some executives talk about "making" a culture by "declaring" it. I equate that notion to me telling my children how to behave. If my actions show them something different than what I've said, what I've told them is meaningless.

#### **i) Mutual respect among all employees**

- There should be an overall view that the contribution of every person is critical to the success of the organization, regardless of title, or role. Every employee should know that he or she plays a significant role in moving the company toward the achievement of its goals.
- Common unhealthy signs that I've seen revolve around the notion that certain people are easily replaceable and therefore inherently not worth as much, or that certain people or departments are right just because of who they are.

#### **ii) True collaborative spirit**

- People are not afraid to express themselves constructively and do so regularly.
- Empowering people in your company to make the right decisions and follow them through to execution is key when creating an environment that allows the business to scale as it should.

#### **iii) Leadership that possesses as much humility as it has charisma**

- Humility helps us listen to what our employees are telling us.
- It also helps us be decisive and fact based in our decision making vs. motivated politically.
- Leadership with a sense of humility cultivates a collaborative environment and one that fosters the spirit of us all being in this together.





My early experiences in public accounting and then five years later a large, yet still very entrepreneurial, software company highlighted the importance of these points and the impact they have on a work environment.

**2. What opportunities/ experiences did you have that best prepared you to be a CFO?**

My public accounting and early software experience with Legent prepared me well for the basic business fundamentals as well as instilling discipline by working in very demanding, fast-paced environments.

My SAGA Software experience taught me about the public markets and allowed me to develop the skills to communicate effectively with both buy-side and sell-side analysts as well as develop the overall message. We were a \$200M profitable software company, had just completed a leveraged buyout from our German parent, went public and were launching our own US product. The public markets had little appreciation for us yet we were able to increase valuation from less than \$200M to well over \$1B in less than two years. This is also where I learned to be a translator between the public markets and our management team. There were not many days before our new product launch that anyone was satisfied with valuation.

**3. A CFO is typically a confidante of the CEO, how do you gain their trust?**

- First, ensure you're aligned around key goals, strategies, and major messages that will be conveyed publicly.
- Second, earn your CEO's trust through providing relevant data that facilitates critical decision making and helps him/her lead the company. Relevant data in my case includes my instinct and opinion on a multitude of issues, and often these are not necessarily easily measured in numbers.
- Third, demonstrate respect publicly by following your CEO's lead.
- Finally, take good notes and privately address those areas where there may be misalignment. Having candid, private conversations regularly regarding subject matter that is not easily discussed publicly is necessary to growing this relationship. That alignment is necessary to drive the company to achieve its goals.

**4. How do you balance the demands from work with those of family?**

- No guilt
- Supportive network





- Don't sacrifice self
- Set limits that are realistic for you and your family and adhere to them

Over the years I think I've become better at this, primarily because of my attitude toward each situation and a true assessment of its criticality in the priority stack. I have a tendency to sacrifice family and personal life before work which is not healthy short term or long. My saving grace has been a very supportive family. Having two sons in their twenties now, raised and living independently, reassures me that there were things they learned growing up that led them easily to this independence. Much of what they learned was because they had two working parents. When they were young I didn't have this perspective and routinely worried about what I wasn't doing for them. I took time off after my second software company exit and decided to teach Math full time at my sons' private school. My youngest child, a daughter, is 11 now. She was born 12 years after my oldest. My daughter was born the fall after my third year teaching. Having the time to pursue something I longed to do personally, on a full time basis, helped me put things in perspective as it relates to my career and continues to help me have perspective on life lived from a few different angles.

**5. What characteristics do you value most when hiring new finance talent for your team?**

- Problem Solvers/ Intelligent/ Intuitive
- Hard working/ committed to getting the job done right
- Collaborative in nature/ good listeners
- Strong sense for customer service/ great communicators
  - If we are committed to being an invaluable partner to our business leaders we must possess a friendly disposition and carry that attitude with us as we serve the needs of those we work with.

I tend to gravitate to those that are able to communicate and present themselves professionally, have a pleasant disposition and also have a history that demonstrates their ability to get the job done exceptionally.

