

# Never Cease to Learn

A leader is also a learner, explains Chandrasekar Thyagarajan as he shares some of the many lessons he has learnt over his career

If there is something that Chandrasekar Thyagarajan cherishes most in a career that has spanned over 28 years, it is 'learning'. According to him, there is a lesson in almost everything that one encounters in life. When Mr Chandrasekar started out on his journey to become a finance professional, he faced several challenges that, in hindsight, helped prepare him for his future. Today, as the VP Finance and CFO for India/South Asia at IBM, one of the world's largest multinational technology companies, he continues to learn. A diplomatic leader, he is regarded and valued for the way he coaches and encourages his team members. As part of the India leadership team, he plays the role of a trusted business advisor, working with the executive team to achieve IBM vision, and contributing greatly in every sphere towards the business objectives.

## The advantages of a diverse experience, and learning from every turn

My team and I are responsible for the company's overall financial management, including recording and reporting, regulatory compliance, risk management, cash management, planning, pricing and taxation. In addition, I oversee the procurement, CIO, real estate and facility management functions as well. As a part of the India leadership team, I am fortunate to be playing the role of a trusted business advisor, and that entails working closely with the IBM executive team to achieve the company's vision, short and long-term business objectives. Over the

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last 28 years, I have seen the role of the CFO, particularly my role, expand beyond managing financial affairs to being one which entails financial management - critical to driving sustained business/financial growth. As the role of a CFO keeps evolving, today, he or she is also a corporate brand custodian. This,



**Chandrasekar Thyagarajan**  
VP Finance and CFO, India/South Asia, IBM

combined with my experience in small, medium and large enterprises in various capacities, has immensely helped me in my current role. It is helping me in bringing in a diverse perspective to the table, deal with people of varied backgrounds and with different situations with confidence.

## The proudest moment in my career...

There have been several career highlights, so it would be difficult to single out one instance. But I would like to put it a bit differently. For me, what counts most is the recognition of one's good work, especially from the business leadership. About a decade ago, I received recognition for outstanding contribution to the business by my team. This was a special moment for me, given the innovative initiatives undertaken by the team under my leadership through many challenging circumstances. Also, it gave me and my team renewed energy to continue to innovate and find new ways to add value to the business.

## Motivating my team beyond the finance function

I am a firm believer that a positive work climate drives results. Employees enjoy working with managers who try to understand them, their families and their economic and emotional needs. I invest a significant amount of my time meeting my team members on a one-to-one basis. I also mentor them and provide shadowing opportunities that allow them to learn from real-life examples. I make sure to provide opportunities to high-performing team members to

# PEOPLE

take lateral and larger roles within and outside my team. My team members are my best friends and I believe that I am open and honest in every interaction with them. I continue to stay in touch with my past team members too, and they call on me whenever they require some guidance. This leadership approach has helped minimize attrition and brings the best out of the team.

## Continuous lesson – drawing from every aspect of a long career

Learning is one of the most treasured values in my life. I had a few assignments in the early years of my career that were not very successful. However, as I look back, I realise that those setbacks helped me gain real perspectives. I took up assignments that were far more complex than I could handle then. Much as they were testing or stressful times, they were great learning experiences. I learned to identify my strengths and encash on them when I am addressing immediate or short-term challenges, while continuing to work on my weaknesses. Also, I learned the art of managing people with different personalities and strengths to ensure positive business outcomes.

## A long stint at IBM, and a story of growth and achievement...

Almost always, the growth of the organisation determines the growth of its employees. I have been fortunate to have the right opportunities at the right time, and I do believe I have utilised most of those opportunities. Working at IBM has also provided a steep learning curve as it is the only organisation globally that has transformed itself time and again to remain relevant. It is also one of the few companies that provides employees with a plethora of career enhancement opportunities, given the depth and breadth of the IBM company and its commitment to 'Innovation

## Career Highlights

In a career spanning over 28 years, Chandrasekar Thyagarajan has plunged deep into areas like financial planning, statutory and management accounting, costing of products and services, business controls, financial risk management, procurement, administration, resource and capacity management, and strategy. Currently the VP Finance and CFO India/South Asia at IBM, Mr Chandrasekar started his career, after completing his Chartered Accountancy

course, in 1989 with the Pentafour Group, where he learned the basics of accounting and finance functions. After that, he moved on to various organisations, including Automac Madras, Royal Enfield, Karvy Consultants, and Kumaran Systems, serving in different capacities. In 2000, he joined IBM as Finance Manager, Global Delivery India, and since then, his own growth story has beautifully intertwined with that of his organisation.

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that matters’.

During my tenure at IBM, I have made great friends at all levels in the organisation, learned from my multiple roles across various business units and locations, and grown to the current position. I do aspire to take up a larger finance role in IBM at the global level.

## When finance helps make the business more agile

The CFO is a business enabler. His role requires him to ensure that the financial systems allow for quick decision-making, quick response to customer requests, speed in procure-to-pay and order-to-cash processes, high levels of control and compliance, so business does not slow down at any point, and informed risk-taking. He must identify, on a continuous basis, processes or process steps that can

be eliminated so that speed can be improved. Also, the CFO should encourage his team to take calculated risks, try new ideas, fail early, make quick course corrections and help enhance support to business. In summary, the new-age CFO must be an integral partner in building and enhancing business value to shape the corporate strategy.

## The CFO as risk manager

Risk management is not only an essential part of the CFO’s responsibilities, but is also a very interesting area to work on. Financial risk management entails a continuous scanning of the environment and the ‘happenings’ across the world, as well as in the industry the organisation belongs to. It also means identifying emerging risks that could impact the business, and working to mitigate those risks.

## The path to continuous improvement

I am a big believer in the power of experiential learning and continuous improvement. I am not afraid of taking risks and to sign up for new roles and projects to enhance my learning curve. I do a lot of research online, seeking new information on the industry, the function, and how my peers in the industry manage their businesses. I actively participate in industry events and conferences, which are great platforms to learn and network. Mentoring and one-on-one sessions with my team members also help me learn and gather different points of view and experiences. ■