findingpotential

COMPETENCY-BASED INTERVIEW GUIDE

Financial managers and directors

Management & Leadership framework · Management & leadership level · 5 competencies · approx. 75 minutes

How to use this guide

- Focus on these 5 competencies — the behaviours that matter most for this role — not a chronological career history.
- Ask every candidate the same core questions, then probe. Allow around 15 minutes per competency.
- Ask for real examples and use STAR — the Situation, the Task, the Action they took, and the Result.
- Stay neutral, capture what they say, and judge later. Gather evidence on one competency at a time.
- Rate each competency 1–5 against the positive and negative indicators, and note the evidence.

5 Outstanding **4** Good **3** Acceptable **2** Marginal **1** Poor

1. Making Sound Business Judgements

Makes sound decisions and commits to action based on the evaluation of complex information and consideration of alternative scenarios. Quickly cuts through the detail to identify the real issues, develops contingencies to deal with unexpected issues as they arise

Why this matters for Financial managers and directors: CIMA Strategic Level + ICAEW SBM + ACCA SBL all centre on judgement under uncertainty, risk and control. Finance leadership runs on calls made on imperfect information with material commercial consequences — investment, hedging, going-concern, audit opinions, working capital structuring. Position 1 reflects the core craft.

Describe a decision you made recently for which there was no established protocol.

- How did you go about making the decision? What worked well? Less well?
- How did you know what data was relevant/less relevant?
- How comfortable were you making it? How confident in its quality?
- What would have been the consequence of an incorrect/poor decision?
- How did you manage the risk?

Describe a situation where you had to choose between a number of alternative courses of action.

- Which did you choose? What criteria did you use to make the decision?
- What were the pros and cons of the other options?
- What was the outcome? What was the business impact of the decision?

Tell me about a time when you have challenged the information that you have been presented with.

- What was the source of the information?
- Why did you feel it was necessary to challenge it?
- What were the implications (e.g. how did your challenge impact on the final decision made)?

NEGATIVE INDICATORS	1 · 2 · 3 · 4 · 5	POSITIVE INDICATORS
Limited thinking in novel situations. Fails to utilise all sources and/or effectively filter pertinent information		Seeks relevant information from a variety of sources, recognises what is pertinent
Accepts information at face value		Critically evaluates info. Probes/ challenges the facts

Fails to apply/adapt previous experience to new situations		Applies and adapts previous experience to novel situations
Is reluctant to make decisions in the absence of clear procedures or protocols		Makes and is prepared to stand by decisions in the absence of clear procedures and protocols
Uses the same style of decision making regardless of the situation		Considers the type of problem and how the decision needs to be made (e.g. when to direct, collaborate etc.)
Fails to consider a range of angles or the implications of different courses of action		Considers issues from a range of angles (e.g. cost, risk, impact, benefit, short and long term opportunities).
Approaches problems with interventions at the micro level		Takes a systemic approach to problem solving
Fails to consider the full range of alternatives or to accept that there may be alternative options		Considers a range of alternatives when making decisions
Lacks confidence in decision making when there is ambiguity or limited information		Deals with ambiguity and makes sound decisions on the basis of limited information
Considers the immediate impact of decisions/actions rather than their fit to the wider business agenda		Makes/monitors decisions against the wider organisational goals/strategy
No evidence of contingency/scenario planning in decision making		Makes detailed contingency plans to accommodate changing circumstances and mitigate risk
Fails to appreciate/articulate the risk associated with different courses of action		Understands the risk associated with different courses of action and builds plans to mitigate this

Summary of evidence: ______ **Rating (1–5):** ______

2. Understanding the Commercial Context

Stays informed of trends and changes in the wider market place in which they operate. Identifies commercial business opportunities and takes action to realise these. Considers the longer-term implications of decisions

> **Why this matters for Financial managers and directors:** All chartered finance bodies (ICAEW, CIMA, ACCA) name commercial acumen explicitly. The finance manager translates business strategy into financial implication and back — investment thesis, scenario modelling, P&L sensitivity, capital allocation. Finance leadership without commercial understanding is bookkeeping at scale.

What do you do to ensure that you have all of the information you require to perform effectively in your role?

- Where do you get the information from? How does this assist you?
- How do you keep up to date with developments in/outside the business?
- Why is it important to do this?
- What do you see as the key challenges/changes in the industry over the next 5 years?

Describe a situation where you have had to balance strategic goals with short/medium term profit?

- How did you go about doing this? What was the outcome?
- Has there been a time where you have focused on a short term win to the detriment of the long term?

Describe a situation where you have spotted and pursued an opportunity you knew could add value to the business.

- How did you spot the opportunity? What value would it add? Why?
- How did you get support for your plans? Who did you engage?

- How did you quantify the return on investment?
- How did your proposal differentiate your business from the competition?

NEGATIVE INDICATORS	1 · 2 · 3 · 4 · 5	POSITIVE INDICATORS
Limited understanding of the nature of the industry, the market and the competition		Understands the industry, the market and the competition
Fails to keep self up to date with the necessary knowledge to perform in role		Stays abreast of trends/changes in the market place and applies these to their role
Cannot articulate the key challenges/changes facing the business/industry		Demonstrates a sound appreciation of the medium/ long term challenges facing the business
No strong profile/network/reputation in their field or in the industry – has not capitalised on wider networking opportunities		Has built a strong network and profile in the industry – seen as a thought leader
Takes a reactive approach to business issues. Fails to anticipate and take action to prevent these from occurring		Able to spot issues before they arise and presents solutions
Reacts to rather than anticipates and takes action to exceed customer needs and expectations		Able to anticipate and exceed customer expectations
Is overly focused on results at the expense of staff, customer at the expense of commercials etc. – fails to balance all aspects of organisational performance		Considers the impact of their actions on employees, the organisation and its customers/clients
No evidence of spotting new opportunities – ideas are more evolutionary than revolutionary and may not differentiate but rather keep up with the competition		Uses knowledge of the market/industry to spot new business opportunities
Focused on achieving results in the short term rather than longer-term sustainability/profitability		Prepared to sacrifice short term gains for longer term sustainability/profitability
Lacks entrepreneurial spirit/courage to pursue opportunities as a result of the potential cost of failure		Has the courage to pursue commercial opportunities where the potential benefits outweigh the cost of failure.
Narrow focus on improvement. This is limited to within own area, does not consider improvements across business units/areas		Appreciates how all parts of the organisation fit together and ensures activity is aligned
Does not demonstrate an appreciation of costs and profit		Is cost and profit conscious

Summary of evidence: ______ **Rating (1–5):** ______

3. Effectively Executing the Task

Translates strategic goals into clear objectives and plans. Focuses on key priorities and ensures these are clear to others. Delivers high quality outcomes to time and budget. Regularly reviews progress and ensures appropriate risks and controls are in place

> **Why this matters for Financial managers and directors:** Finance management runs on delivery to cycle — monthly close, quarterly board, annual budget, year-end, audit, regulatory filings (RTI, VAT, statutory accounts, SOX where applicable). CMI 'executing operational delivery'. The cycle is non-negotiable and often parallel-streamed.

Even the most organised of us may overlook some of the details when planning an initiative. Tell me about a time when this happened to you.

- What was the situation? What were the consequences of this omission?
- How did you rectify the issue? What was the outcome?
- What have you learned from this?

Describe a situation where you had to translate a broad directive into tangible and specific goals.

- How did you go about doing this – take me through the steps?
- How did you communicate the goals/objectives to others?
- How did you manoeuvre between the detailed plans & the bigger picture?
- How did you manage the risks? What contingencies did you put in place?

We are often faced with conflicting demands on our time. Give an example of when you have had to really prioritise?

- How do you know you what to prioritise/that you were effective?
- How could you have increased your effectiveness?
- How did you ensure that others remained focused on the right things?

NEGATIVE INDICATORS	1 · 2 · 3 · 4 · 5	POSITIVE INDICATORS
Fails to appreciate the importance of planning and review to task delivery		Creates comprehensive plans to support the delivery of the wider goal – is clear on the why, what and how
No evidence of contingency planning for changing circumstances/unforeseen issues or managing risk		Includes detailed contingency plans for delivery. Anticipates and mitigates risk to plans
Limited ability/willingness to flax/deviate from plan in the light of new information and/or changing circumstances		Rethinks plans in the light of new information
Fails to communicate changes to others in a timely manner. Leaves individuals without clarity on the plan		Keeps others informed and involved with necessary changes to plans so objectives remain clear and relevant
Struggles to translate strategic goals/broader directives into tangible and workable operational plans		Translates strategic goals into operational plans and objectives
Is more inclined to focus on the bigger picture or the detail of the plans – struggles to move between the two		Able to manoeuvre between the bigger picture and the detailed plans
Fails to manage conflicting demands– lets priorities slips or becomes overloaded/ can't see the wood for the trees		Able to (re)prioritise and juggle priorities on the basis of new information/changing circumstances
Promotes relentless activity with no means of ascertaining the value of tasks		Establishes clear measures to ensure that self (team) are focused on value adding activity
Fails to manage self/use of own time		Manages self and own time effectively
Fails to communicate changes in priorities to others		Communicates changes in priorities for others
No processes evident for managing progress/ measuring performance to time, budget and quality		Puts clear structures and processes in place for monitoring and managing progress/performance
Loses cool when things do not progress as expected – increases effort without tackling the source of the issue or checking the expected return on the increase in effort		Responds calmly when things go off track. Creates time to take stock and review when feeling under pressure to respond and deliver

Summary of evidence: ______ **Rating (1–5):** ______

4. Leading the Way for Others

Creates a clear and compelling vision of the future, devolving accountability for delivery to the right level whilst offering appropriate levels of support. Drives performance through regular, honest feedback and by building a climate of openness and trust

> **Why this matters for Financial managers and directors:** Finance team leadership — devolving accountability through controllers, qualified accountants, FP&A, treasury, internal audit. Named across CMI / CIMA management content / Senior Leader Standard. Finance teams are technically deep and require leadership that combines authority with development support.

How have you ensured that your team feel equipped to deliver the business plans in your area?

- How do you keep the team focused on the business goals/ensure they understand the link between their work and the wider company goals?
- How do you ensure your team feel empowered but not overloaded?
- How do you keep the vision real so it resonates with the team?

Give me an example of a time when you had to lead a de-motivated team or a team who were less enthusiastic/ committed to the task in hand.

- What did you do to keep spirits up and people focused on objectives?
- How were you sure that you had overcome the difficulties?
- What factors did you consider? What lessons did you learn?

Can you give me an example where, with the power of hindsight, you feel you may have pushed an individual or team too hard?

- What feedback did you receive from the individual/team at the time?
- What was the outcome? What might you have done differently?

NEGATIVE INDICATORS	1 · 2 · 3 · 4 · 5	POSITIVE INDICATORS
Fails to engage others in the “why” or the longer term goal and get buy in and commitment		Communicates a compelling vision/picture of the future to generate motivation/enthusiasm in others
No clear mechanisms for monitoring and reporting to track progress to goals		Keeps the team focused on the goals through establishing clear mechanisms for monitoring and reporting
Keeps hold of too much themselves (fails to empower the team) and/or micromanages the process		Devolves accountability to the right level and offers appropriate levels of support without micromanaging
Rewards and recognises others in the same way, irrespective of their personal performance/ contribution		Provides differential recognition to others on the basis of objective measures of performance
No evidence of checking that the team see personal relevance of the change/direction and their contribution		Ensures the team understand the need for change/ the direction and that this resonates personally with them
Fails to provide the right balance of support and challenge		Provides an appropriate balance of support and challenge
No evidence of seeking feedback from the team re the suitability/effectiveness of their management/ leadership		Checks with the team to ensure that they are feeling appropriately supported and challenged

Provides only developmental feedback rather than praise and motivation to build confidence		Recognises and rewards good behaviour and performance
Has less flexibility in leadership style (e.g. struggles to take a directive stance or to collaborate/facilitate)		Adapts leadership style to suit the needs of the team and the circumstances
Fails to coach – does the job for others. As such may not get (sustainable) performance improvements from others		Coaches others to help them perform. Raises awareness and generates responsibility for action in others
Creates a command/fear climate where teams are less comfortable expressing their views or trying new things		Builds a climate of trust and openness where people are comfortable expressing their views and trying new things

Summary of evidence: ____________________ **Rating (1–5):** ________

5. Handling Pressure

Remains calm and in control under pressure, staying focused on delivering results. Stands their ground when challenged and maintains a positive outlook when faced with setbacks.

> **Why this matters for Financial managers and directors:** Year-end, audit cycles, regulatory deadlines (HMRC, FRC, FCA where applicable), board pressure, FD personal liability for signing accounts. Sustained pressure is a defining feature of senior finance roles and is amplified at FD/CFO level.

Describe a situation where you felt that unreasonable pressures/demands were being placed on you/your team.

- What did you do to help manage the pressure and demands?
- How successful were you? How do you know (feedback)?
- How did you minimise negative impact on performance?
- With hindsight what have you done differently when faced with demanding/pressurised situations?

Tell me about a crisis (at work) you have handled recently.

- What caused it? What did you do to resolve it?
- How were you feeling at the time? How did you manage your emotions?
- How did you ensure yourself/others coped through it?
- How did you know they were coping?

Sometimes our values and beliefs can be called into question by business decisions and we need to take a stand. Describe a time when this has happened to you.

- Why was it important for you to take a stand and stand your ground?
- How comfortable did you feel doing this? How successful were you?
- What made you successful? What got in the way of success?
- What have you learned about yourself from this experience?

NEGATIVE INDICATORS	1 · 2 · 3 · 4 · 5	POSITIVE INDICATORS
Becomes ruffled or emotional when under pressure – loses control when under stress		Remains calm and collected in difficult circumstances. Keeps control in stressful situations
Takes eye off the ball and becomes distracted/ preoccupied when under pressure		Maintains performance under pressure
Uses a limited range of coping strategies or maladaptive coping strategies when under pressure (e.g. diet, exercise, sleep)		Adopts a range of effective coping strategies to deal with pressure (e.g. manages symptoms, re-frames, tackles the source)

Fails to spot signs of pressure in self and others		Recognises signs of stress/pressure in self and others
Focuses on self when under pressure. Does not consider how to support others through pressure situations		Looks to ensure that others are equipped to deal with and supported through pressurised situations
Responds disproportionately/inappropriately to challenge or when values and beliefs are called into question		Responds constructively to challenge or when beliefs and values are called into questions
Does not stand ground or fails to challenge constructively		Prepared to stand ground in the face of opposition
Gives up easily – lacks tenacity when faced with setbacks		Persists with a course of action despite setbacks – shows tenacity in the pursuit of goals
Tends to dwell on disappointments or setbacks which can interfere with focus and performance		Remains a positive outlook in the face of setbacks and disappointments – sees them as an inevitable part of the process but learns and moves on
Loses focus when under pressure		Maintains focus when under pressure
Focuses on the wrong things – gets caught up in distractions and loses focus/attention		Manages distractions in the working environment and keeps self focused on performance goals

Summary of evidence: ______ **Rating (1–5):** ______