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FIELD GUIDE & WORKBOOK

Your First Year in a New Finance Role

A month-by-month field guide for finance leaders who need to build trust, fix the foundation, and deliver a plan.



FOREWORD

The First Year Sets Your Next Five

A practitioner's guide to the first twelve months, opinionated and built on what actually works.



By Christina Ross
Founder & CEO, Cube

Most of your lasting impressions form in the first ninety days. The CEO decides whether your numbers can be trusted. The department heads decide whether you are a partner or a gatekeeper. Your team decides whether you are worth following. Each of those judgments forms faster than you expect, and each is hard to reverse.

Most new finance leaders arrive with a plan to fix things. The best ones arrive with a plan to learn things first, then fix the three that matter. The company hired you because something needs to change, and what needs to change is rarely what the job description says.

This guide covers the full twelve months. It starts with a thirty-day listening tour, moves through the data and close audit, the early wins, the operating rhythm, and stakeholder communication, then covers the team and tooling decisions, and ends with leading your first full planning cycle. Each chapter closes with actions you can take on Monday.

It applies whether you are a first-time CFO, a new VP of Finance, a controller stepping into FP&A, or a newly promoted analyst leading a team. You are building trust in the numbers, then using that trust to change how the company makes decisions. Do it in that order.

"Trust in the numbers comes first. Influence comes second."

Christina

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CHAPTER 1

Days 1–30: Listen First

Your first month is an intelligence-gathering operation. The people you talk to and the questions you ask set the agenda for the next eleven months.



The first thirty days are the only time you can ask any question in the company without anyone assuming you should already know the answer. Spend that credit on conversations and hold off on changes.

The Shape of Your Year

The year breaks into six stretches, each with a different job. Run them in this order.

THE YEAR AT A GLANCE

DAYS 1–30	DAYS 31–60	DAYS 61–90	MONTHS 4–6	MONTHS 7–9	MONTHS 10–12
Listen	**Audit data**	**Early wins**	**Build rhythm**	**Upgrade team**	**Lead the plan**
Listening tour	Close audit	90-day review	Board cadence	Tooling choice	Plan approved

Resist the Urge to Fix Things

Some of what looks broken is a deliberate tradeoff made by people who knew something you do not know yet. A month of listening tells you which is which.

⚠ WATCH OUT

Changing the close calendar, the chart of accounts, or the reporting package in your first month spends trust you have not earned yet. If a process is producing numbers on time, leave it alone until you understand why it works.

Run the Listening Tour

Book thirty-minute conversations with everyone who produces or consumes financial information. Start with the CEO. Ask the same core questions each time so you can compare the answers.

WHO	WHAT TO ASK	WHAT YOU ARE LISTENING FOR
CEO	Which decision last quarter would you have made differently with better information?	The gap between what finance delivers and what leadership needs
Department heads	Which numbers do you rely on, and which do you keep in your own spreadsheet?	Shadow reporting and the places trust has already broken
Sales and revenue ops	How do bookings, billings, and revenue reconcile, and who owns that?	Definitions that differ between systems and teams
Accounting lead	What breaks every close, and what worries you most?	Manual steps, key-person risk, known control gaps
Auditors	What were last year's findings, and what would you tighten?	Control weaknesses you inherit and can fix early
Your own team	What takes the most time and adds the least value?	Capacity drains and morale

Ask the Question That Reveals the Most

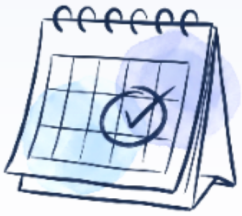
One question outperforms the rest. Ask every person: "If you could change one thing about how finance works with you, what would it be?" After ten or twelve conversations, the same two or three themes surface. Those themes become your year-one agenda.

Monday Morning Actions

- [ ] Block ten thirty-minute conversations on your calendar this week, starting with the CEO.
- [ ] Request the last four quarters of board materials, the current close calendar, and the last audit management letter.
- [ ] List the five numbers leadership quotes most often and write down where each one comes from.

CHAPTER 2

Trace Every Number to Its Source



Days 15 to 60. Before you can improve the numbers, you need to know where each one comes from and how many human hands touch it.

Every finance leader eventually hears, “Where did this number come from?” in front of a full room. Audit your data and your close early, so you never answer that question for the first time in a board meeting.

Map the Data Before You Trust It

List every system that feeds a number in your board deck: the general ledger, the billing system, the CRM, the HRIS, the payroll provider, and the spreadsheets that fill the gaps between them. For each, document who owns it, how the data reaches finance, and how often it refreshes. Pay the most attention to the spreadsheets. They are where undocumented logic hides.

Source Systems

The systems of record. Each needs a named owner and a documented definition for every field finance relies on.

Movement

How data gets from source to finance: direct integration, scheduled export, or someone’s copy and paste. Manual movement carries the highest risk.

Logic

The transformations applied along the way. If the logic lives in one person’s spreadsheet, it is a key-person risk.

Audit the Close

The close is the heartbeat of the finance function. Document the current calendar day by day, from the last transaction to the final reviewed financials. Mark every step where a person moves data by hand, every step that waits on another team, and every step that produced a correction or restatement in the last year.

CLOSE CYCLE TIME =

Reviewed, board-ready financials — **Period end**

Count business days. Then count how many of them are spent waiting instead of working.

BEST PRACTICE

Pick one close metric and track it monthly from your first close forward: business days from period end to reviewed financials. It gives you a baseline, and a number that improves is the easiest credibility you will ever earn.

Find the Definitions That Disagree

Sales reports one revenue number. Finance reports another. The board deck shows a third. In most companies the differences trace to definitions, with no error behind them: bookings versus billings versus recognized revenue, headcount with or without contractors, a customer counted at the parent level or the subsidiary level. Collect every metric leadership quotes and write down exactly how each one is calculated.

DATA PRINCIPLE

A metric with two definitions is two metrics. Publish one definition for every number that appears in a board or executive report, name an owner for it, and require every dashboard to use it.

Check the Controls You Inherited

Read the last audit's management letter and any prior-year findings. Confirm who can post journal entries, who approves them, and whether those two groups overlap. Review the reconciliations for cash, revenue, and payroll. A control gap you find in month two is a project. A gap the auditors find in month ten is your finding.

WATCH OUT

If you find a control gap or a material error in the first sixty days, tell the CEO right away and, where appropriate, the audit committee chair. Describe it as inherited, with a plan attached. Silence turns an inherited problem into your problem.

Monday Morning Actions

- [ ] Draw one diagram of every system that feeds a board metric and mark each manual handoff.
- [ ] Write down the close calendar as it actually runs, which may differ from the written policy.
- [ ] Collect the ten metrics leadership quotes most and document how each is calculated.
- [ ] Read the last audit management letter from start to finish.

CHAPTER 3

Days 31–90: Early Wins



Your first visible results should be small, specific, and valuable to people with influence. Pick them from what you heard on the listening tour.

Credibility builds from delivered work, and delivered work has to be visible. By day ninety, three or four people with real influence should be able to name something you changed that made their job easier.

Choose Wins by Value and Effort

The listening tour and the audits will give you a long list. Sort it on two axes: how much the fix matters to a senior stakeholder, and how quickly you can deliver it without new systems or headcount. Start with the high-value, low-effort items. Save the large projects for months four through nine, when you have the credibility to ask for budget.

TYPICAL EARLY WIN	WHO NOTICES	EFFORT
Publish a one-page monthly KPI summary with agreed definitions	CEO and executive team	Low
Remove one manual step from the close and publish the new calendar	Controller and accounting team	Low
Send each department head a budget-versus-actual they can read in five minutes	Department heads	Low to medium
Reconcile bookings to revenue and share the bridge	CEO and sales leadership	Medium
Build a thirteen-week cash forecast	CEO and board	Medium

Deliver Fast, Then Say So

A win nobody hears about does not count. When you ship something, tell the people it helps, tell the executive team what changed, and credit the team members who did the work. Send a short note instead of a presentation. Two sentences covering what changed and what it saves are enough.

BEST PRACTICE

Hold a 90-day review with the CEO. Bring three things: what you heard, what you fixed, and what you plan to tackle next. It turns three months of activity into an agreed plan and gives the CEO a chance to redirect you before you invest in the wrong problem.

Build the Relationship With Your CEO and Your Peers

Your working relationship with the CEO determines how much you can accomplish. Agree on the cadence of your one-on-ones, the format of your updates, and how each of you prefers to hear bad news. The most useful standing agreement is simple: you bring problems early, with a recommendation attached.

Treat your peers on the executive team as customers. The heads of sales, product, and operations each run a part of the plan that finance models. Find out which decisions they are about to make and offer to model the tradeoffs before they ask.

⚠ WATCH OUT

Resist presenting your early wins as a transformation. Give people a one-sentence before and after and move on. Overstating a small improvement costs more credibility than the improvement earned.

Monday Morning Actions

- [ ] Rank your list of issues by stakeholder value and delivery effort.
- [ ] Commit to three early wins and put a delivery date next to each.
- [ ] Schedule your 90-day review with the CEO now, so the deadline exists.
- [ ] Ask one department head which finance output they would use every month, and build that first.

CHAPTER 4

Build the Operating Rhythm



Months 4 to 6. A reliable monthly rhythm of close, review, and forecast turns a reactive finance team into a predictable one.

Heroics do not scale. By month four your priority is a calendar that runs the same way every month, so the team's capacity goes to analysis and stops going to rescue missions.

Set the Monthly Cadence

Design a standing monthly calendar that everyone in finance and every budget owner can see. It should show the close deadlines, the date financials are released, the dates of department reviews, and the date the forecast updates. Publish it before the quarter starts and hold to it.

SAMPLE MONTHLY CADENCE, IN BUSINESS DAYS AFTER PERIOD END

	MON	TUE	WED	THU	FRI
CLOSE WEEK	1 BD 1 Subledger close, accruals, and cutoff (BD 1–3) Accounting	2 BD 2	3 BD 3	4 BD 4 Reconciliations complete and journal entries reviewed (BD 4–5) Controller	5 BD 5
REVIEW WEEK	8 BD 6 Preliminary financials released to the finance team Controller	9 BD 7 Variance analysis and commentary from budget owners (BD 7–8) FP&A	10 BD 8	11 BD 9 Executive summary to the CEO Head of Finance	12 BD 10 Department reviews begin FP&A, owners

Write Variance Commentary That Changes Decisions

Most variance commentary restates the table in sentence form. Good commentary answers four questions in order.

THE FOUR-PART VARIANCE



WHAT HAPPENED	WHY	SO WHAT	NOW WHAT
The movement	**The cause**	**Full-year effect**	**The decision** By when

So what states the effect on the full-year outlook. Now what names the decision the budget owner or executive team should make, and by when.

Move From Budget to a Rolling Forecast

If your company runs on an annual budget that goes stale by March, start a rolling forecast in this window. Begin with the five drivers that explain most of the plan. For a subscription company, that might be new bookings, churn, headcount, and the largest vendor commitments. Update only those drivers each month. A simple forecast refreshed on schedule earns more trust than a detailed one refreshed twice a year.

Protect the Team's Time

For one month, ask each team member to estimate how many hours go to collecting data, reconciling it, building reports, and analyzing results. That finding becomes the business case for the investments in Chapter 6.

Monday Morning Actions

- [ ] Publish a monthly calendar with business-day deadlines and a named owner for each.
- [ ] Rewrite last month's top five variances in the four-part format.
- [ ] Pick the five drivers that explain most of your plan and put them in one model.
- [ ] Run the one-month time study across your team.

CHAPTER 5

Communicating Up, Across, and Down



Your numbers carry only as much influence as your ability to explain them to a CEO, a board, and a team waiting to see how you lead.

Finance leaders get promoted for judgment and remembered for communication. The same number lands differently depending on the order you present it in and the decision you attach to it.

Upward: The CEO and the Board

Executives and directors read financial materials with limited time. Lead with the conclusion, then show the evidence.

Performance

How did we do against plan and against the last forecast, and why?

Outlook

Where do we expect to land, with what range, and which assumptions matter most?

Decisions

What do we need from the board or the executive team, and by when?

Prepare for Your First Board Meeting

Call every director before your first meeting. Ask what they want from finance and which metrics they check first. Walk the audit committee chair through your 90-day findings.

WATCH OUT

Never let a director find a problem in your materials before you tell them about it. Surface the issue in the pre-read, state what you know and what you do not know yet, and say when you will follow up.

Across: Department Heads and Peers

Department heads treat finance as a gatekeeper until finance proves it is a partner. The shift happens when you arrive at their budget review with analysis of their business, instead of a list of their overages. Know their drivers, bring one insight they did not have, and offer a way to reallocate when the answer would otherwise be no.

Down: Your Own Team

Your team is watching how you handle your first mistake, your first disagreement with the CEO, and your first request that arrives on short notice. Tell them in your first week how you want to hear about problems, how decisions get made, and where they have latitude. Then hold weekly one-on-ones where your team does most of the talking.

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Cube's The Business Partner FP&Agent supports board decks, investor narratives, and cross-functional financial communication from governed data, so your team spends its time on judgment calls and less on formatting slides.

Monday Morning Actions

- [ ] Call each board member and ask what they most want from finance.
- [ ] Restructure your next executive report to open with decisions and risks.
- [ ] Assign a finance partner to each department head.
- [ ] Schedule recurring one-on-ones with every direct report.

CHAPTER 6

Months 6–9: Team and Stack



With credibility established and a rhythm running, you have earned the right to ask for headcount, tooling, and budget. Ask for the right things.

Month six is when your first real request lands on the CEO's desk. The strongest requests connect a specific problem you have already documented to a cost the company already pays.

Assess the Team Against the Work Ahead

Map your team's skills against the work the business needs over the next eighteen months. Identify where you have capacity, where you have a skills gap, and where a single departure would stall the function. Decide what to hire, what to develop, and what to automate before you open a requisition.

GAP YOU FIND	LIKELY RESPONSE	SIGNAL YOU ARE RIGHT
Strong accountants, thin analysis	Hire or develop an FP&A lead who can partner with the business	Commentary is descriptive and department heads still keep their own spreadsheets
One person holds critical logic	Document it, cross-train, and move it into a governed model	A vacation by that person delays the close
Capacity consumed by data work	Automate collection and reconciliation	The time study shows more hours on collection than on analysis
Strong analysts, weak commercial context	Embed finance partners with the business units they support	Analysis arrives accurate and nobody acts on it

Use the Hierarchy of Needs

Finance work stacks in layers. Each layer depends on the one beneath it, and skipping a layer produces strategic advice that nobody trusts. Use the Strategic Finance Hierarchy of Needs to decide where the next investment goes.



New leaders are often asked to operate at the top of the pyramid on day one, while the base is still unfinished. Your job is to deliver enough at the top to stay credible while you build the layers below.

Choose Tools for the Data Layer First

When you evaluate technology, start with the layer your time study and close audit flagged. If data collection is the problem, a better forecasting model will not solve it. Hold every vendor to the same four questions.

- [ ] **Connectivity.** How does it connect to the ledger, billing system, HRIS, and CRM, and who maintains those connections?
- [ ] **Governance.** Who can change a definition, and is there an audit trail?
- [ ] **Flexibility.** Can your team keep working in the spreadsheets they know while the data stays controlled?
- [ ] **Traceability.** Does every figure map back to the general ledger?

AI INSIGHT

Finance-grade AI starts with governed data. When every insight maps back to the general ledger, the reviewer can verify an answer in seconds. When it does not, every output needs a second check and the time savings disappear.

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Cube is the Agentic Finance Layer. It connects your source systems through bi-directional connectivity and deploys FP&Agents (The Data Manager, The Analyst, The Planner, and The Business Partner) on top of the same governed data.

Make the Business Case in the CEO's Language

Frame the request around outcomes the CEO already cares about: a faster close, earlier visibility into cash, fewer surprises at the board, and fewer hours spent assembling reports. Attach the baselines from your close audit and time study. A request that says "the close takes X business days and the team spends Y hours a month on collection" is far harder to decline than one that says "we need better tools."

Monday Morning Actions

- [ ] Map team skills against the next eighteen months of work.
- [ ] Use your time study to name the layer of the hierarchy that needs investment first.
- [ ] Draft a one-page business case with your baseline close time and hours spent.
- [ ] Write down your four evaluation criteria before you meet any vendor.

CHAPTER 7

Months 10–12: Lead the Plan



Your first full planning cycle tests everything you have built, and shows the company how finance will operate from here on.

The annual plan is the one document every executive reads, argues about, and holds you accountable to. By month ten you have the credibility, the data, and the rhythm to run it well.

Start the Planning Cycle Early

Begin planning conversations at least ninety days before the fiscal year ends. Publish the calendar, the templates, and the assumptions in advance.

Top-Down Targets

The CEO and board set growth, margin, and cash targets. Finance turns them into constraints.

Bottom-Up Plans

Department heads build plans from their own drivers. Finance tests the assumptions.

Reconcile and Approve

Finance closes the gap, presents the tradeoffs, and takes the plan to the board.

Plan in Scenarios

Present a base case and at least two alternatives, built from the same drivers. Show which decisions you would trigger if early indicators point to the downside. A plan with a range gives leaders something to act on when reality diverges from the base case.

Run Your Year-One Retrospective

At month eleven, do for yourself what you did for the company in month one. Revisit the listening tour and ask the same people the same questions. Then score yourself against your baselines.

YEAR-ONE SCORECARD	MONTH 1 BASELINE	MONTH 12 TARGET	
Close cycle time	Business days at your first close	Fewer days, with a documented reason	
Forecast accuracy	Accuracy of the forecast you inherited	Improved on the five main drivers	
Hours on data collection	Result of the one-month time study	A smaller share of team time	
Metric definitions	Count of metrics with competing definitions	One definition per board metric	
Stakeholder confidence	Answers from the listening tour	Same questions, better answers	Repeat the conversations

Set the Agenda for Year Two

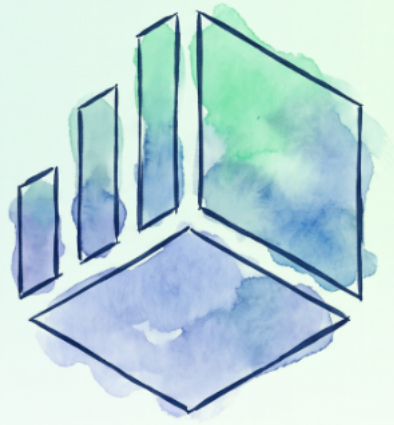
Bring the scorecard and the year-two plan to the CEO and the board. Year two should shift your time from fixing the foundation to using it. That means more scenario work, more partnership with business units, and more time on capital allocation.

Monday Morning Actions

- [ ] Publish the planning calendar and templates at least ninety days before year-end.
- [ ] Repeat your listening tour questions with the original group.
- [ ] Draft the year-two agenda and book time with the CEO to review it.

Decision-ready data, everywhere you work.

Built by a CFO for finance teams



Founded by Christina Ross, a three-time CFO, Cube was built on a simple conviction: finance professionals are too capable to spend most of their time pulling data.

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We believe the future of business is finance-driven. Cube connects your business data into one governed model and brings it everywhere decisions happen.

How finance teams use Cube

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Multi-entity rollups and a faster month-end.

Budgeting and planning

Budgets, headcount, and revenue plans.

Forecasting and scenarios

Rolling forecasts and what-ifs in minutes.

Reporting and board decks

Packs in Excel, Sheets, and slides.

Variance analysis

Drivers explained and traced to the GL.

KPIs and performance

One set of metrics for the business.

AI Agents: Your Always-On Digital Finance Team

Charlie, the superagent, routes work to four FP&Agent teams. People stay in control.

The Data Managers
Integrate and reconcile

The Analysts
Analyze and report

The Planners
Forecast and model

The Business Partners
Shape decisions