



WOMEN in Leadership

UJ Transformation





Women in Leadership

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Women in Leadership

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Foreword

*Ms Nolwazi Mamorare
Chief Financial Officer, University of Johannesburg
& Woman Leader*

In the journey toward gender equity and inclusive leadership, the voices and experiences of women are not only crucial but transformational. Women leaders bring a unique perspective, a blend of empathy, resilience, and strategic thinking that can drive meaningful change within organizations and communities.

As we delve into the pages of this book, exploring the narratives of women leaders, we uncover a wealth of wisdom and insights that can reshape our understanding of leadership. These stories not only celebrate the achievements of women but also highlight the challenges they've overcome and the lessons they've learned along the way.

In today's rapidly changing world, the need for diverse leadership is more pressing than ever. Women leaders have a remarkable ability to navigate complexity, to embrace diversity, and to foster inclusive environments where everyone can thrive. They bring a different set of skills and perspectives to the table, challenging the status quo and inspiring others to do the same.

This book is not just about women in leadership; it's a testament to the power of diversity and inclusion in driving organizational growth and success. It's a call to action for organizations to recognize, nurture, and empower women leaders, not just because it's



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the right thing to do, but because it's essential for their own growth and sustainability.

As you read through these pages, I encourage you to reflect on your own leadership journey and how you can contribute to creating a more inclusive and equitable world. Let these stories inspire you, let them challenge you, and let them empower you to be the change you want to see.

Together, we can build a future where women's voices are heard, their contributions are valued, and their leadership is celebrated.

Word from Prof. Sehaam Khan

As the Deputy Vice-Chancellor: Academic of the University of Johannesburg, I am honoured to introduce this remarkable collection of narratives that celebrates the power, resilience, and leadership of women within our institution and beyond. This book, “Women in Leadership,” serves as a testament to the indomitable spirit of women who have not only broken barriers but also redefined what it means to lead with integrity, compassion, and vision.

At the University of Johannesburg, we believe that true transformation begins with acknowledging and elevating the diverse voices that shape our communities. This publication is more than just a reflection of the journeys of exceptional women; it is a call to action for all of us to continue fostering an environment where gender equity is not just an ideal but a lived reality.

The stories within these pages underscore the importance of mentorship, resilience, and an unwavering commitment to social justice. They highlight the diverse paths to leadership, showing that there is no singular way to lead, but rather a multitude of approaches informed by our experiences, challenges, and aspirations.

I am proud of the progress we have made as an institution in promoting gender equity, but I am also acutely aware that the journey is far from complete. As we continue to strive toward a more inclusive and equitable future, let this book serve as both an inspiration and a guide for the next generation of leaders who will carry forward the legacy of those who have come before them.



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To the women whose stories are shared within these pages, thank you for your courage, leadership, and unwavering dedication to creating spaces where all voices are heard and valued. Your contributions not only enrich our university but also pave the way for a more just and equitable society.

Let us all draw strength from these stories as we continue to champion the cause of gender equity, both within our institution and in the broader world. Together, we can and will make a difference.

Sincerely,

Professor Sehaam Khan
Deputy Vice-Chancellor: Academic
University of Johannesburg

Dr Stella Bvuma

*Director: Applied Information Systems,
University of Johannesburg*

Background

Dr Stella Bvuma who was born and raised in a small town in Limpopo, never felt that the township she came from was truly her home. Her parents came from a village and whenever they had left for the village during school holidays, they would refer to it as going “home”. This made the village feel more like home to her than the township, which was just a place of work for her parents. Dr Bvuma considers herself both a township and a village girl, as both places hold a special place in her heart. She was raised in a spiritual family, with both her parents being leaders in their community. Her father is a pastor, which meant that she was raised in a strict Christian household with strong values and rules. As a result, she was known as the pastor’s child.

After completing high school, she moved to Johannesburg to pursue her studies. Unlike most women, who were expected to study conventional professions such as law, teaching, or nursing, she chose to study Information Technology (IT). She developed a passion for public speaking during her high school days, particularly when she was selected to participate in a school public speaking competition during grade 12. Her speech was aired on local radio, which was her first exposure to the field of Information Technology. She was also drawn to IT because it offered a wide range of job opportunities across different sectors, such as



banking, education, and government departments that require the same set of skills and knowledge.

1. What were the early messages that you were hearing about the girl child? Messages that came from people you look up to and messages that ended up inspiring you in your leadership journey.

During the interview, Dr Bvuma reflected on the messages she received while growing up, but it became apparent that she was more observant to what she saw rather than what she heard. She never imagined that women could have a career in IT because it was never talked about. She believes that observation is a powerful tool, even though it made her realize the lack of opportunities for women in IT. The significance of having role models for girls to look up to was a common message, that applied to her as well. Whether she went to a small village or township, there was always that one woman who she looked up to and wanted to be like. She herself always looked up to successful women in different professions. Her mother in particular is her biggest role model, and even though her mother had no formal education, she always emphasized the importance of education. Dr Bvuma attributes her strength and resilience to the positive messages that her mother reinforced in her. Integrity, honesty and respect were at the centre of the messages reinforced by her mother, and these values have guided her in her own life. This would be a cornerstone of their integrity and leadership style.

2. What are some of the glaring obstacles for women to take up leadership positions in in the 21st century?

Dr Bvuma believes that despite several years of democracy and women's struggles worldwide, obstacles that affect women's progress remain universal. Progress is being made but the numbers indicate that it is still not enough. There are still fewer female leaders that serve as role models and mentors for women entering the workforce or looking to

move up the ladder, preventing them from receiving guidance and inspiration. One of such obstacles is gender bias and stereotypes, which often associate leadership with men. Women who exhibit leadership qualities are often labelled as too aggressive or bossy, while men who display the same traits are viewed as strong, courageous, and bold. This double standard remains a big problem.

Dr Bvuma was appointed as the Director of the School of Consumer Intelligence and Information Systems and during her interview, she made it clear that she did not want to be seen as an equity candidate or have her appointment be considered a mere exercise in gender equality. She strongly believes that employers should not be focused on meeting certain affirmative action quotas when hiring. Instead, they should prioritise competence and skill when making appointments. This approach undermines women's abilities and makes people assume that they were appointed because of affirmative action instead of based on their qualifications and experience.

Dr Bvuma praised Dr Mkhize, the director of the Transformation Unit, for her inspiring leadership that has led to the empowerment of many women leaders. Through Dr Mkhize's leadership, the Transformation Unit has established various women leadership programmes to nurture and support women leaders. These initiatives have made significant progress in promoting gender equality and equity.

3. Are female leaders born or made? Please elaborate as you consider the fact that most women have additional roles like childbearing that require them to still focus on.

In Dr Bvuma's view, the question of whether leaders are born or made brought out two potential responses. On one hand, there are individuals who seem to be born with the beneficial characteristics for leadership such as confidence, intelligence, and social skills. She has observed this in the young people she has motivated and inspired who possess such traits. However,

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these innate traits are not exclusive to any gender and do not automatically make someone a good leader. She believes that leadership is also a skill that can be developed and honed over time through experience, education, and mentoring. It is crucial to acknowledge that many women have the potential to be great leaders, despite biological factors.

Dr Bvuma believes that women can become exceptional leaders by acquiring the necessary skills and knowledge through their careers and experiences. An example of this can be seen with female leaders who often juggle the responsibilities of raising children and their careers. This enhances their empathy and interpersonal skills. Child rearing involves nurturing and understanding the emotional needs of others, which can benefit a leader's abilities. Additionally, overcoming personal and professional challenges associated with being a woman and a caregiver can also build resilience. Issues such as discrimination, lack of support or family responsibilities, and limited access to mentorship and networking can impede the rise of female leaders. Nonetheless, there is a growing awareness of the importance of gender diversity in leadership, and efforts are being made to develop leadership qualities in women and men alike.

Dr Bvuma believes that men also face unique challenges and possess strengths that come with their personal circumstances. To address these challenges and strengths positively, investing in leadership development programs and creating supportive workplace policies is necessary. Policies reflect the culture of the workplace and demonstrate whether work-life balance and employee well-being are valued. Leaders are interested in results, but they must also ensure that female leaders have the innate traits and refined life experiences that will enable them to succeed. Given the additional roles that women often have, the path to leadership may be complex.

4. Are women leaders more aggressive than male leaders? What is your view on the statement and kindly unpack it?

“The perception of women in leadership roles as more aggressive than men is a pervasive gender bias.” Dr Stella mentioned. According to her, this notion is a perception, and it stems from societal stereotypes and expectations that women should follow traditional gender norms. Women leaders often face obstacles like “double-bind”, where they are criticized for conforming to feminine stereotypes and labelled as aggressive. Dr Bvuma believes that this bias is not true, and it’s a pervasive agenda.

Dr Bvuma often hears remarks about being the first black female to hold the position of Head of Department. She finds this statement insulting and believes that it puts unnecessary performance pressure on women. In 2024, such statements should not be discussed. Women still face limited opportunities and networking challenges due to the male-dominated culture in boardrooms. Dr Bvuma was fortunate to have a female leader, Professor Roelien Brink when she started in academia. Professor Brink demonstrated a good work-life balance, which made it easier for Dr Bvuma to pursue her career in academia. She believes to address these challenges, institutions and companies should foster an inclusive culture and not just pay lip service to the idea of a work-life balance. They must implement good bias training to ensure that women are given equal opportunities to succeed.

5. What is the most important risk you have had to take in your leadership journey and why?

Dr Bvuma accepted an invitation to serve as a board member of SITA - the State Information Technology Agency of South Africa, which is a government entity. She became the deputy chair of the centre board in South Africa which provided her with a unique opportunity to influence policymaking and contribute to the public good. Dr Bvuma is passionate about making a positive change. She saw her role as a chance to serve

as a role model for young people and women, demonstrating that it is possible to work with the government in a positive way and make a meaningful contribution to society.

Dr Bvuma was concerned about several risks, such as political favouritism, corruption, and public scrutiny. She was worried that even if someone is honest and has strong values, they might still become entangled in these issues. Work-life balance was also a consideration, as Dr Bvuma did not want to serve on the board just to tick a box and prove her qualifications.

6. How do you continue to grow, develop and show up as a leader? Share your recipe for success.

Dr Bvuma believes that leaders, especially women leaders, must continuously empower themselves to meet the public's scrutiny. Consistent leadership requires a blend of self-awareness, adaptability, and dedication to the cause. Education is a lifelong pursuit for her, and she still reads to date. Though she doesn't have a recipe for growth, Dr Bvuma suggests self-assessment as a daily practice and regularly takes stock of her strengths and weaknesses while seeking mentorship to guide her.

Dr Bvuma has recently been considering using formal assessments or electronic tools to identify areas in which she can improve. This is essential for lifelong learning. She attends workshops, enrolls in courses, and explores the world around her to expand her knowledge and skills. She sets clear goals for personal and professional development and applies the Specific Measurable Achievable Relevant and Time-bound (SMART) goal-setting framework. Cultivating emotional intelligence is a key aspect of her leadership style, which helps her navigate interpersonal dynamics. She sees herself and others as spirits, which enhances her awareness, empathy, and relationship management skills.

Dr Bvuma believes that continuous learning should not be just a box-ticking exercise. It's important to have a support network of people who challenge you to grow and

provide diverse perspectives. Diversity shouldn't be feared, as it's helpful to have a robust support network consisting of colleagues, family, friends, and mentors.

7. What does juggling a few balls mean for you?

Dr Bvuma maintains that women leaders face challenges that are similar to those faced by their male counterparts. While managing time and resources effectively is crucial for leaders, maintaining a balance between one's personal and professional life can be challenging for women due to societal pressures and expectations. Women face gender biases and are often judged based on their ability to balance work and life commitments. Dr Bvuma believes that successful leadership is characterized by capability, adaptability, vision, and the ability to inspire and motivate others regardless of gender. Juggling different tasks and responsibilities is critical for leaders, and women have historically been good at this. While men tend to excel at prioritizing delegating and making strategic decisions, they often struggle with maintaining a work-life balance and being present for their families and communities. Women, on the other hand, tend to be successful at juggling multiple responsibilities. Dr Bvuma is an example of a woman who managed to raise two children, complete her PhD, and excel in her academic career while also being present for her family and community.

8. If you could put together a code of practice for women leaders, what would that code be and what would it look like?

Dr Bvuma reckons the code of practice for women leaders would start with integrity. This means committing to the highest standards of professionalism and ethical conduct while making decisions based on merit rather than emotions. Self-awareness helps in distinguishing between the two. Equality and fairness are also crucial factors. The second point would be to embrace diversity and inclusion. It is essential to work towards an inclusive culture where every voice is heard

and respected. Exclusion is a painful experience that no one should go through in an organization. It is therefore important to promote diversity and inclusion within departments or organisations.

The third point is to lead with confidence and humility. It is important to remain open to feedback and the possibility of learning from others while being confident in one's own abilities. Arrogance can be a turn-off, especially when leading a diverse group.

Lastly, it's important to ensure work-life balance. Women leaders should support and develop their team, give them responsibility, and trust their capabilities.

9. Watint' Abafazi, Watint' Imbokodo and Mosadi Otshwara Thipa Ka Bo galeng. These are a few statements that have existed alluding to the strength of a woman. What is your view on them?

These words hold great power for Dr Bvuma. The word "bogaleng" means holding the knife at the sharp end and chopping on the other side. Dr Bvuma interprets this as resilience and empowerment. A capable woman demonstrates resilience, compassion, and adaptability. A woman should be able to maintain and support other women while being visible and vocal about where they stand. Intellectual and emotional depth is also important, particularly when navigating complex situations and managing multiple roles. Persistence and self-determination are the keys to achieving goals.

Women can build a strong supportive network and bridge cultural, generational, and gender gaps while promote collaboration among diverse groups. For Dr Bvuma, these are very powerful words. Intellectual and emotional depth will allow one to navigate complexities, but persistence and self-determination are evident in the pursuit of goals one wants to achieve.

10. What is advice you wish someone had given you at the beginning of your career and why?

As Dr Bvuma started her academic career at a young age, she wished she had been surrounded by mentors who could have guided leadership and career progression. She does not regret starting as a tutor and student in her department as it allowed her to work her way up to becoming a lecturer, HOD, and a director. When it comes to leadership, Dr Bvuma believes that being authentic and bringing “Ubuntu Ness” (humanity and compassion) into the boardroom is essential. She recalls going back to her mother’s advice to be true to herself, vulnerable, and authentic. Dr Bvuma suggests that one should fix anything that needs to be fixed within oneself and bring all the village trades learned along the way.

Prof. Amanda Dempsey

Senior Director : School of Accounting, University of Johannesburg

Background

Professor Amanda Dempsey's journey is a testament to her inspiring and challenging path in overcoming gender-related resistance and societal norms before becoming a Professor and Senior Director at the University of Johannesburg's School of Accounting. Her story showcases the perseverance and determination required to break through barriers. This started with her childhood dream of attending a university away from home.

Financial constraints had not deterred her from pursuing her studies at the Rand Afrikaans University (RAU), now part of UJ. During her articles program, she had expressed her aspiration to work in the Department of Accounting at RAU and demonstrated her commitment to her chosen field. Despite encountering gender-related resistance from the new Head of the Department, she persevered and eventually received an invitation to apply for a position, breaking gender barriers in the Accounting Department.

The irony of being excluded from RAU's pension fund due to her marital status, which restricted participation to married women, added another layer to her journey. Today, as the chair of the UJ pension fund, she not only showcases her professional success but also her ability to overcome personal challenges. Professor Amanda's story serves as an inspiration and emphasises the importance of persistence,



resilience, and breaking societal norms to achieve one's goals. It also showcases the significance of diversity and inclusion in academic and professional settings.

1. Early Messages and Inspirations

Professor Amanda Dempsey's journey took an unexpected turn when her father encouraged her to become a teacher, considering it a suitable profession for a woman. Attending Helpmekaar Girls School in Johannesburg, the only Afrikaans-medium girls' school, played a crucial role in shaping her perspective. Reconnecting with former classmates through a WhatsApp group, she realised the strength that came from an all-girls school environment which allowed her and her friends to thrive without intimidation.

Becoming a teacher fulfilled her father's wishes and aligned with her journey into academia, particularly in the Accounting Department. Achieving her dream of becoming a chartered accountant while being involved in teaching, learning, and research at a tertiary level represented a harmonious blend of her aspirations. Professor Amanda's contentment with achieving these goals at a university level underscores the importance she places on education, both as a teacher and a researcher.

3. Glaring Obstacles Women Face in Leadership

Professor Amanda Dempsey candidly addresses the significant challenge she faced during her 11-year tenure as Dean – the issue of time. Societal expectations assumed that, as a woman, she would bear the full responsibility of household management and childcare despite her demanding professional role. Traditional gender roles were still prevalent during her time as Dean, but the burden was somewhat alleviated as her children were reaching adulthood when she assumed the position.

Her exposure to opportunities during her first 20 years at the University of Johannesburg, coupled with support from

Prof Ihron Rensburg, played a pivotal role in her academic journey. The challenges of being a mother, wife, and leader underscored the difficulties of balancing multiple roles. Professor Amanda's story highlights the broader societal expectations and challenges faced by women in leadership roles, emphasising the need for support systems and a reconsideration of traditional gender roles.

4. Female Leaders: Born or Made?

Professor Amanda Dempsey believes all women are born leaders, emphasising the vital roles women play within households. She points to the inherent leadership qualities that women often exhibit in managing households which highlights their role as natural multitaskers. While leadership qualities are not exclusive to any gender, Professor Amanda's viewpoint emphasises the valuable skills that women often bring to different spheres of life.

Recognising and appreciating these inherent traits can contribute towards promoting diversity and inclusivity in various fields, including academia, where Professor Amanda has demonstrated leadership throughout her career.

5. Aggressiveness of Female Leaders

Professor Amanda Dempsey's discussion on diverse leadership styles among women showcases the multifaceted nature of leadership. She acknowledges the existence of both assertive and empathetic leaders and shares insights into her own leadership approach which combines being highly task-oriented while displaying a nurturing attitude.

An example she provided underscored the compassionate side of her leadership which was arranging a temporary substitute for a lecturer facing a family crisis. She emphasised the importance of maintaining professional standards, indicating a balance between empathy and maintaining excellence in academic settings. Her ability to adapt her leadership style, being both strict and gentle

depending on the context, showcases her effectiveness in navigating diverse situations.

6. The Most Important Risk in Leadership

Professor Amanda Dempsey's leadership style reflects a nuanced understanding that encompasses both discipline and empathy. Her ability to adapt to different contexts and prioritise professional standards and the well-being of those under her guidance is a testament to the complexity and effectiveness of her leadership approach.

7. Recipe for Continued Growth and Success

Professor Amanda Dempsey's reflections provide valuable insights into her journey, emphasising the significance of dedication, passion, and seizing opportunities. Her unexpected path from being an aspiring Chartered Accountant to becoming a dean showcases the unpredictability of life and the diverse opportunities that can arise.

Her genuine passion for her work is evident in her commitment to applying her utmost efforts and abilities to every task. Despite not initially envisioning herself as a dean she embraced the challenges and opportunities that came her way and ultimately received recognition for her outstanding academic contribution.

Her emphasis on not allowing opportunities to slip by aligns with the idea of proactive engagement with one's career and life and urges individuals to take action rather than passively observe opportunities.

8. Juggling Multiple Responsibilities

Professor Amanda Dempsey's emphasis on planning and organising as essential skills in managing multiple responsibilities highlights her strategic approach to handling diverse aspects of her life and career. Her ability to seamlessly

integrate planning into her routine reflects a disciplined and structured mindset.

Identifying her greatest strength as agility underscores her adaptability and nimbleness in navigating various aspects of her life and career. The ability to adapt to changing circumstances is a crucial trait, especially in leadership roles and dynamic environments.

9. Code of Practice for Women Leaders

Professor Amanda Dempsey's personal code of practice centres around values such as diligence, continuous effort, adaptability, resilience, and ethics. This code encourages individuals to embrace hard work, dedicate themselves to tasks, strive for daily excellence, maintain agility, confront change without fear, and uphold ethical standards in all situations.

Her personal code of practice not only serves as a guiding framework for her own actions but also offers valuable advice to others navigating their professional journeys. The emphasis on embracing change, maintaining high ethical standards, and consistently striving for excellence reflects a holistic and principled approach to both personal and professional development.

10. Strength of Women

Professor Amanda Dempsey's belief in the inherent strength of women is evident in her admiration for the remarkable women in her department. She acknowledges the diverse ways in which women exhibit strength and resilience in their roles, extending this acknowledgment to both biological mothers and aunts.

Her perspective on womanhood carrying a unique strength aligns with the idea that each person brings her own set of strengths and capabilities to the table. Her commitment to surrounding herself with strong women reflects the importance of building a supportive and empowering network.

11. Advice for the Beginning of a Career

A reflection on Professor Amanda Dempsey's early experiences as a university lecturer provides valuable insights into her personal growth and the impact of meaningful encounters throughout her career.

The influence of a colleague who advocated the philosophy of '*Carpe diem*' played a significant role in shaping her perspective. This philosophy encourages individuals to embrace each day fully, seizing opportunities as they arise. The concept of '*Carpe diem*' aligns with the importance of being proactive, embracing change, and making the most of opportunities in both personal and professional aspects of life.

In summary, her reflections offer valuable life and career advice, emphasising the significance of dedication, passion, and seizing opportunities. Her story serves as an inspiration for others to approach their endeavours with enthusiasm, hard work, and a proactive mindset.

Prof. Maria Frahm–Arp

*Executive Director: Library and Information Centre,
University of Johannesburg*

Background

Prof. Maria Frahm–Arp pursued her undergraduate studies at WITS University after which she continued her educational journey with a master’s degree while concurrently serving as a lecturer in the Department of Religion Studies. The completion of her Master’s in 2020 marked a pivotal moment and lead her to Fordham University in America for a Master’s in humanitarian aid in 2021.

Her academic pursuits continued with a Ph.D. at the University of Warwick in the United Kingdom, delving into the sociology of religion, with a specific focus on young black women in Pentecostal charismatic churches and their journeys in the world of work. Motivated by a desire to contribute to her home country she then embarked on this research to understand how churches either help or don’t help them to become successful in the world of work.

Returning to South Africa with a Melon Foundation fellowship, Prof Maria contributed to post-doctoral work at Wiser before making significant strides at a private university in Johannesburg named Central Gustin. Where, she played a pivotal role in establishing the Theology Department and the marketing department, eventually assuming the role of Registrar of the University. A health setback in 2012 necessitated a break from working, during which she



battled an autoimmune disease and underwent chemotherapy throughout the entire 2013.

Fate led her to the University of Johannesburg (UJ) in 2014, where, despite ongoing health challenges she had taken on a part-time lecturing role in the Religion Studies department. By 2016, she ascended to the position of associate professor, followed by assuming the role of teaching and learning in the Faculty of Humanities in 2017. Notably she had received the VC's Teaching and Learning award at the end of 2016 while concurrently serving as the head of the department.

In 2018, a new chapter unfolded as she transitioned to the library, ultimately becoming the Executive Director. Her commitment to academia remains steadfast, evident in her role as a mentor to nine Ph.D. students, one master's student, and seven academics within the library. Despite her busy schedule, she actively engages in research endeavours and serves as the esteemed editor of a journal. The journey encapsulates not only academic achievements but also resilience, leadership, and an unwavering dedication to the pursuit of knowledge and mentorship.

1. Other early messages that you were hearing about, the girl child messages that came from people you look up to, messages that ended up inspiring your journey to become a leader.

From Prof Maria's earliest memories, she reflects on her innate leadership qualities, vividly recalling moments of orchestrating activities for the group of friends she and her brother gathered during their childhood in Pietermaritzburg. Whether directing Christmas plays or ensuring bike rides-maintained order, her role as a leader was evident. As a school prefect and class representative, her leadership tendencies persisted.

During her course in humanitarian aid, where collaborative efforts were essential, she emerged as the consistent leader of her syndicate. Her ability to encourage

everyone's voice, distribute tasks effectively, and maintain cohesion throughout the project underscored her organizational skills. Such experiences honed her capability to lead without formal authority or the ability to offer financial incentives, an invaluable skill in settings where power and monetary rewards are absent.

Her journey into leadership also intertwined with her commitment to her Christian community, leading her to become a priest. In this role she learned to motivate volunteers within congregations, emphasizing the importance of encouraging others without the leverage of authority or financial compensation. Despite her natural leadership inclination, she faced challenges rooted in societal expectations. Coming from a family and cultural background where women were not traditionally encouraged to assume leadership roles, she encountered resistance, particularly concerning her pursuit of a Ph.D. Her grandparents, adhering to traditional gender norms, were dismayed by her unmarried status in her late 20s, questioning the value of her academic pursuits.

Navigating a school environment that provided limited career guidance for women in the 1980s, she found inspiration from two supportive male lecturers during her studies. Lamenting the absence of strong female role models, she resolved to lead in ways she deemed superior to what she had observed. Her leadership journey is therefore not only a testament to her natural abilities but also a narrative of overcoming societal expectations, fostering collaboration, and shaping her leadership style in the absence of conventional models.

2. What are some of the glaring obstacles for women to take up leadership positions in the 21st Century?

In reflecting on the challenges women face in their professional journeys, Prof Maria highlighted a significant obstacle which is childcare responsibilities. Drawing attention to the unequal distribution of childcare work within her

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broader social circle. She notes that women, particularly those in leadership positions, often grapple with the balance between career demands and the demands of motherhood. Drawing on Malcolm Gladwell's insights from "Outliers," she emphasizes the essential role of investing time to achieve excellence, a luxury that women, in contrast to men, may find challenging due to societal expectations.

Observing appointments to senior director positions within the University of Johannesburg, she notes a pattern where many women in executive leadership, including herself, are those women who are without children and are mostly unmarried. While acknowledging the validity of individual choices, she underscores the difficulties faced by mothers in dedicating the necessary time and focus to their careers, essential for effective leadership.

Prof Maria points out that the demanding nature of management positions, where long hours are expected, poses a challenge globally.

The discourse extends to a comparison with previous generations, citing her grandfather's work routine, which was 7 am to 4pm, which contrasts sharply with the current trend of extended working hours. Her family's conversation highlights a collective realization that the relentless pursuit of work has become a defining characteristic of the contemporary professional landscape, impacting individuals globally. In essence, Prof Maria addresses the multifaceted challenges women encounter in balancing career aspirations with familial responsibilities, shedding light on the broader implications of an increasingly demanding work culture that affects individuals across different parts of the world.

3. Are female leaders born or made? Please elaborate as you consider the fact that most women have additional roles like childbearing and childrearing that still require them to focus on.

Prof Maria offers a nuanced perspective on the nature of female leadership, challenging the dichotomy of whether leaders are born or made. While acknowledging that some individuals may possess an inherent disposition for leadership, she contends that the majority of people in leadership positions acquire their skills through education, coaching, and learning. The emphasis is on the belief that effective leadership is a cultivated trait, and individuals, regardless of gender, need guidance to excel in these roles.

She delves into the societal dynamics that hinder the development of female leaders, pointing out the challenges posed by societal structures that make it difficult for women to assume executive leadership positions. Prof Maria underscores the impact of time constraints, especially in roles that demand extensive hours, on the emergence of female leaders. She questions why, despite rhetoric and support for women in middle management, the representation of women in boardrooms and executive positions remains disproportionately low.

The discussion touches on the conflicting priorities faced by women, where the demands of executive roles often clash with the desire to allocate time for family responsibilities. Prof Maria suggests that the choice to prioritize family over pursuing executive roles is a factor contributing to the underrepresentation of women at higher leadership levels. She acknowledges the exceptional women who can balance extensive work hours and family commitments but highlights that such a feat is not feasible for the majority.

In essence, Prof Maria advocates for a more comprehensive understanding of leadership development, emphasizing the need for supportive structures that address the time constraints and societal barriers preventing more women from ascending to executive leadership positions.

4. “Female leaders are more aggressive than male leaders”, What is your view on the statement?

Prof Maria challenges the notion that leadership traits are inherently gender-specific, asserting that certain environments tend to favour individuals with assertive qualities for leadership positions. Disputing stereotypes about gender roles, she contends that both men and women can excel in mentoring and developing others. However, she observes that societal challenges faced by women can lead them to adopt more assertive behaviours in response to the difficulties they encounter.

Anticipating a shift in societal norms for the next generation, she suggested that raising boys might be more challenging than raising girls at present. She shares her personal experience, being 6 feet tall and confident, highlighting the confidence advantage men traditionally enjoyed. Reflecting on her dyslexia and public speaking skills, she acknowledges that confidence plays a crucial role in leadership, but she cautions against mistaking aggression for confidence.

Prof Maria emphasizes that effective leadership is not about knowing everything or being the most liked but rather enabling others to unlock their potential. She critiques the societal value placed on aggression, viewing it as a sign of insecurity rather than confidence. She advocates for leaders who are self-aware, understand their limitations, and prioritize collaboration.

Navigating the complexities of leadership, Prof Maria acknowledges the challenge of making decisions that not everyone may comprehend due to confidentiality or strategic foresight. She stresses the importance of communication, valuing diverse voices, and making everyone feel heard to avoid resorting to aggressive leadership styles.

In the context of an academic environment with limited resources, she anticipates a rise in territorial and resource-related aggressiveness. She calls for a shift in the prevailing

aggressive approach, urging for collaborative ways to share resources for the greater good. Prof Maria challenges the prevailing mindset that praises aggression, proposing a more inclusive and collaborative approach to decision-making in meetings.

5. What is the most important risk you have had to take in your leadership journey and why?

Prof Maria shares insights into her leadership experiences and emphasizes the inherent risks associated with embracing technology and implementing innovative approaches in various educational settings. She recounted instances of taking risks both at Gustin College, within the Faculty of Humanities, and now in the library.

In the realm of education, Prof Maria took the risk of reevaluating traditional teaching methods in religion studies. Instead of solely relying on essays, she introduced a novel approach by having students create two-minute videos to explain different concepts. This innovative method not only required students to develop video-making skills but also encouraged peer-to-peer teaching. Prof Maria underscores the risk involved in trusting students to take ownership of their learning, acknowledging the unpredictable outcomes that can arise. Despite the uncertainty she emphasizes the importance of trust in the learning process.

Transitioning to the UJ library, Prof Maria describes a myriad of technologies and changes implemented involving a shift in job roles to ensure future readiness. This strategic move, although risky, aimed at making the library operate differently from traditional models of libraries in South Africa. Prof Maria expresses gratitude for colleagues who embraced the vision and highlighted the collective effort in navigating this transformative journey.

The positive outcome of these risks is highlighted by the library's ability to avoid layoffs, a trend seen in many academic libraries globally. Prof Maria emphasized the importance of aligning jobs with future needs and fostering a culture where

individuals are encouraged to evolve and move in different directions. By repurposing positions and ensuring that every job is deemed critical, the library has successfully adapted to change without compromising job security.

Prof Maria advocates for taking calculated risks in educational and organizational settings while trusting the potential of individuals to adapt and innovate. Their experiences showcase the successful implementation of transformative measures, resulting in a future-ready library and a workforce that remains essential and secure.

6. How do you continue to grow, develop, and show up as a leader? Share your recipe for success.

Prof Maria underscores the importance of continuous learning and self-reflection in the realm of leadership. She advocates for a multifaceted approach that involves reading extensively on leadership, consuming various media formats such as videos, attending conferences, and actively engaging in conversations with others. This commitment to ongoing education is seen as instrumental in honing leadership skills.

She also places a particular emphasis on the significance of reflection, delving into the reasons behind both successes and failures, understanding why certain approaches work for some individuals but not for others, and comprehending the varied reactions of people in different situations. The act of reflection is presented as a key practice to gain insights into the dynamics of leadership and interpersonal relationships.

Additionally, Prof Maria highlights the importance of grounding oneself in personal identity to avoid reacting solely from a place of ego. This involves cultivating self-awareness and maintaining honesty with oneself. By being attuned to one's core values and principles, leaders can navigate challenges and interactions with a more grounded and authentic perspective.

In essence, Prof Maria approach to effective leadership involves a continuous cycle of learning, reflection, and

self-awareness. This multifaceted strategy is presented as essential for staying adaptable, understanding the nuances of leadership dynamics, and fostering genuine and effective connections with others.

7. What does juggling a few balls mean for you?

For Prof Maria, effective leadership involves creativity, forward-looking vision, and a problem-solving mindset. Juggling different roles and responsibilities requires the ability to address challenges and prevent potential issues from derailing progress. The analogy of juggling different balls is used to illustrate the need for leaders to maintain balance and problem-solve, ensuring that nothing crucial falls through the cracks.

Prof Maria emphasizes her role as a leader in removing roadblocks for her colleagues, facilitating their ability to fulfil her responsibilities. This, in turn, involves constant problem-solving and the management of various expectations—both internal and external. Prof Maria acknowledges that juggling these expectations while maintaining a realistic framework is a critical aspect of effective leadership.

In essence, “juggling a few balls” for Prof Maria encompasses the dynamic and multifaceted nature of leadership, where problem-solving, balancing responsibilities, and managing expectations are key components of navigating the complexities inherent in leadership roles.

8. If you were to put together a code of practice for women leaders, what would that code be and what would it look like?

Prof Maria discusses the characteristics she believes are essential in a leadership code of conduct, emphasizing that these qualities are not specific to any gender but are universally applicable to anyone in a leadership role. They highlight the following key attributes:

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- **Listening and Reflection:** The candidate underscores the importance of actively listening and reflecting with honesty as crucial elements of effective leadership.
- **Good Communication:** Clear and effective communication is identified as a fundamental aspect of a leadership code of conduct.
- **Agility:** The candidate emphasizes the need for leaders to be agile, adaptable, and responsive to changing circumstances.
- **Ethical Behaviour:** The significance of ethical behaviour is highlighted, with an emphasis on leaders holding themselves to the same ethical standards expected from others.
- **Grounding Oneself:** Leaders are encouraged to find ways to ground themselves, fostering confidence based on reality and truth rather than ego-driven confidence.
- **Forward-Looking Vision:** Having a forward-looking vision and clarity about the future is identified as an essential trait for effective leadership.
- **Decision-Making and Direction:** The candidate stresses the importance of making decisions and providing clear direction for the team to prevent fragmentation.
- **Creativity and Tolerance for Failure:** The code of conduct promotes creativity and acknowledges the inevitability of failure in the creative process. Leaders are urged to allow individuals to fail, emphasizing the importance of learning and moving forward.
- **Symbolic Gesture:** The candidate shares a symbolic gesture from Prof Maria, who provided executive leaders with pens featuring erasers, symbolizing the idea that mistakes are natural and correctable. This gesture encourages a culture of experimentation and learning from failures.

In summary, Prof Maria envisions a leadership code of conduct that encompasses a holistic set of principles promoting ethical behaviour, effective communication, adaptability, creativity, and a forward-looking vision, with an emphasis on

learning from failures and fostering a positive and innovative work culture.

9. “Watinta Abafazi, Watint’Imbokodo” “Mosadi o tshwara thipa ka bo galeng”, these are but a few statements that have existed, alluding to the strength of a woman, what is your view on them?

Prof Maria expressed reservations about statements celebrating the strength of women, cautioning against using such statements to overlook societal demands. While acknowledging the historical context of women’s strength, particularly in the South African migrant working system, she raised concerns about the unintended consequences on family structures.

The celebration of women’s strength, according to Prof Maria, might inadvertently undermine the family unit, not limited to the nuclear family but encompassing diverse family structures that once functioned effectively. She questioned the societal expectations that have placed a disproportionate burden on women to be strong, especially in raising children alone.

Prof Maria expressed discomfort with the idea that celebrating women’s strength might let men off the hook, leading to a lack of accountability for men in supporting their families. She posed critical questions about the prevalence of gender-based violence, juxtaposing the acknowledgment of women’s strength with the troubling reality of abuse against them.

The concern voiced by Prof Maria revolves around the potential misuse of statements about women’s strength as justifications for men not adequately supporting women in society. She called for a broader celebration of both men and women showing up for their families and each other and emphasized the need for shared responsibilities without relying on gendered expectations.

In summary, Prof Maria's perspective challenges the conventional celebration of women's strength, prompting a deeper examination of societal dynamics and the need for shared responsibilities within families, irrespective of gender.

10. What advice you wish someone had given you at the beginning of your career and why?

Prof Maria expresses a wish for having had a good mentor throughout her career, someone who could have provided guidance on where to focus their energy, what to prioritize, and what areas to avoid. Despite the existence of leadership programs at UJ, the candidate notes that her personal experience with such programs was not particularly helpful, and she did not receive any formal mentoring during her journey at UJ.

Reflecting on their own path at UJ, Prof Maria describes a journey of stepping out independently, being creative, making things happen, and learning on the job. She highlights the lack of mentorship, support, or encouragement throughout this process.

This personal experience has fuelled Prof Maria's passion for mentoring younger academics. She emphasizes the potential impact of having good mentors who can provide guidance on strategic focus, navigating the academic landscape, and making informed decisions. Prof Maria underscores the importance of basic guidance, such as focusing on a coherent research area for optimal impact and understanding the nuances of the academic system.

In essence, Prof Maria's perspective underscores the value of mentoring in providing crucial guidance, support, and practical advice that can significantly impact an individual's academic and professional journey.

Prof. Ylva Rodny-Gumede

Senior Director: Global Engagement, University of Johannesburg

Background

Professor Rodny-Gumede has been affiliated with the University of Johannesburg (UJ) since 2009 and has been bringing a wealth of experience and knowledge to her role. Before joining UJ she had a notable tenure at The University of South Africa (UNISA), as an educator. Her academic journey also led her to undertake studies at The University of Witwatersrand. In 2019 she furthered her expertise by pursuing a management course which added a valuable dimension to her skill set.

Her teaching voyage started at UNISA where she laid the foundation for a successful career in academia. The pinnacle of her educational pursuits was marked by the completion of a PhD program in London, a testament to her dedication and intellectual curiosity. Before venturing into academia, she forged a path in journalism and gained insights into the world of media.

Professor Rodny-Gumede believes that we can empower, particularly young female students, by providing them with mentorship on their career paths. She firmly believes in guiding these budding scholars along their chosen career trajectories. Her vision centres around providing essential assistance to help young women comprehend the art of structuring their careers and making well-informed decisions about their professional journeys.



Through mentorship, she aspires to equip these individuals with the tools they need to thrive in their chosen fields and contribute meaningfully to society.

1. What were the early messages that you heard about the girl child? Messages that came from people you looked up to which ended up inspiring you on your leadership journey.

She states that she had the privilege of growing up in an environment that shielded her from perceiving gender distinctions during her formative years. In her upbringing, equality stood as a prevailing principle, and every individual was treated with impartiality and respect. It wasn't until her teenage years that the veil of gender disparities started to reveal itself.

Throughout her career as a journalist, she gained a profound awareness of the challenges that women often confront. Through her work, she had the opportunity to amplify the stories of women from various walks of life, shedding light on their experiences and struggles.

Her life was enriched by the presence of formidable women, both within and beyond her immediate family circle. Her mother-in-law notably emerged as a beacon of resilience and strength which left an indelible impact on her character and values. The lessons and examples set by these influential women played a pivotal role in shaping the person she has become today.

2. What are some of the glaring obstacles facing women in leadership positions in the 21st century?

She acknowledges the undeniable truth that the pursuit of equality continues to pose as a substantial challenge. Amidst this reality, she takes note of the strides made in fostering open discussions about gender-related issues. Yet, she says, her discerning eye recognises the extensive journey that lies ahead. Of particular concern to her are the persistent

disparities in pay scales and the prevailing dominance of male-centric spaces in numerous spheres.

While optimism persists, she remains grounded in the understanding that considerable work remains. The imperative for sustained consciousness and united endeavours resonates deeply with her. She believes these facets are pivotal in instigating enduring and transformative change.

3. Are female leaders born or made? Please elaborate as you consider the fact that most women have additional roles like childbearing and childrearing that society still expects them to focus on.

Professor Rodny-Gumede says there is undoubtedly individuals who inherently exhibit leadership qualities, demonstrating exceptional prowess even in the face of adversity. She emphasises the significance of recognising that proficient leaders frequently undergo intentional preparation and growth. She believes that real-world encounters and individual trials substantially contribute to the refinement of one's leadership skills. In her perspective, these experiences are wellsprings of invaluable insights, cultivating resilience, and nurturing empathy—qualities that hold immense value in steering others and arriving at well-informed decisions as a leader. Her view underscores the holistic development that contributes to effective leadership.

4. Women leaders are more aggressive than male leaders. What is your view on this statement? Kindly unpack it.

She acknowledges the accuracy of the assertion. In her perspective, the essence of leadership transcends gender boundaries. As societal stereotypes continue to evolve, she underscores that leadership is fundamentally rooted in individual personality traits and aptitudes, rather than being constrained by preconceived gender norms. With an understanding that women often exhibit nurturing qualities,

she holds the belief that effective leadership is not confined by gender. She ardently asserts that anyone, irrespective of their gender, can manifest proficient leadership skills by leveraging their distinctive strengths and attributes. For her, it is imperative to surpass the confines of gender-based presumptions and instead, to embrace a perspective that views leadership as a multifaceted and all-encompassing quality.

5. What is the most important risk you have had to take on your leadership journey and why?

Certainly, she firmly believes that assuming accountability for one's actions and acknowledging errors is indicative of both integrity and leadership. She considers the equitable and considerate treatment of all individuals as a defining trait of commendable character. From her standpoint, gleaning lessons from various encounters and endeavouring to surpass past achievements form the crux of personal development and accomplishments.

6. How do you continue to grow, develop, and show up as a leader? Share your recipe for success.

For her, upholding a positive demeanour, perpetually seeking knowledge, and welcoming avenues of personal advancement stand as pivotal tenets for progress within any role. She firmly believes that imbibing wisdom from fellow individuals, while actively contributing to their growth mutually cultivates development. The practice of periodic self-evaluation, the establishment of objectives and strategic planning, constitute integral elements of achieving success: her perspective underscores the significance of confronting challenges head-on and pursuing comprehension within domains of uncertainty. She envisions such endeavours as gateways to acquiring invaluable insights and achieving significant personal growth.

7. What does juggling a few balls mean to you?

Certain spheres hold fragility akin to glass, demanding the utmost delicacy—family, for instance. Her approach entails exuding care, nurturing compassion, and cultivating uplifting surroundings. Her focus centres on those spheres susceptible to rupture, all the while extending support to those spheres propelling progress.

8. If you were to put together a code of practice for women leaders, what would that code be and what would it look like?

Being considerate and promoting inclusivity holds paramount importance. Recognising that nothing exists in isolation, she advocates for open dialogues aimed at shaping inclusive work environments. Through these efforts, she envisions the establishment of secure workspaces, fostering an atmosphere where each individual can harness their full potential.

9. Watinta Abafazi, Watint'Imbokodo? Mosadi Otshwara Thipa Ka Bo Galeng. These are but a few sayings from the past that allude to the strength of women. What is your view on them?

The concept of women embodying strength aligns with certain realities. Nonetheless, the magnitude of strength remains contingent upon individual contexts and the fluctuations that life introduces. The tapestry of strength is intricately woven with our life experiences, with diverse interpretations stemming from personal narratives. From her vantage point, authentic strength finds its essence in the act of bolstering and uplifting others.

10. What advice do you wish someone had given you at the beginning of your career? And why?

Receiving guidance and mentorship along one's career trajectory holds immeasurable value. Although she herself

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didn't undergo such an experience, her aspiration to extend that very support to others stands as a commendable endeavour. The act of imparting knowledge and assuming a mentoring role carries the potential to instigate a positive ripple effect, aiding individuals in navigating their professional journeys with heightened efficacy.

Ms Tokoza Kwinana

*Executive Director: Human Capital Management,
University of Johannesburg*

Background

Ms Tokoza Kwinana, a native of Dutywa in the Eastern Cape, began her academic journey at the University of Western Cape, where she pursued a Bachelor of Administration. Following her undergraduate studies, she moved to Johannesburg to undertake her postgraduate studies at the University of Witwatersrand. Later, she joined RAU for her BCom honours in employment relations. In 1998, Ms Kwinana embarked on her professional career as a trainee in the mining industry where she gained valuable experience in various roles over a span of four years. Subsequently, she transitioned to the British High Commission in Pretoria and assumed the role of HR manager. She was responsible for the South African region, and parts of Lesotho.

In 2009, Ms Kwinana joined the University of Johannesburg as the Director for Business Partnering and held the position until 2019. Following this, she was appointed as the Executive Director of Human Capital Management.

Apart from her professional endeavours, Ms Kwinana, a devoted wife and mother of three, emphasizes the importance of faith in her life. She believes in the power of prayer and underscores the need to seek support during challenges. Her philosophy centres around maintaining a healthy mind and heart, and she recognizes the interconnectedness of the two.



Ms Kwinana acknowledges the complexities of dealing with people in her HR roles. Despite the prevalence of policies and processes, she emphasizes the significance of face-to-face interactions. According to her, these personal connections are essential as they allow one to have a deeper understanding of individuals, beyond the formalities of policies and procedures. Reflecting on her journey, Ms Kwinana advises others to overcome challenges promptly, safeguarding one's heart and mind. She emphasizes the value of connecting with people on an individual level while recognizing the unique and diverse nature of each person.

1. What are the early messages that you were hearing about the girl child? Messages that came from people you look up to and messages that ended up inspiring you in your leadership journey.

Reflecting on her upbringing and life experiences, she shares valuable insights that have influenced her personal and professional journey. Growing up in a rural area, Ms Kwinana encountered messages that reinforced gender stereotypes with societal expectations dictating that certain fields were reserved for men. Despite these challenges, she embraced a mindset of determination and resilience, aspiring to succeed in her chosen path. These early messages only fuelled her determination to break through gender stereotypes.

Messages from Ms Kwinana's mother played a pivotal role in shaping her values. Key lessons such as 'do not rush to have children' and 'education is important' underscored the importance of patience and academic pursuits. Ms Kwinana acknowledges the impact of being surrounded by strong women, particularly her grandmothers, who played a significant role in her upbringing. Raised in a community where mutual support was ingrained in all, she learned the importance of lifting others as one rises. This community spirit instilled in her the belief that success is not an individual endeavour but a collective achievement.

Quoting Maya Angelou, Ms Kwinana emphasizes the power of personal agency in shaping one's destiny. The message that "you may not control all the events that happened to you, but you can decide not to be reduced by them" resonates deeply with her. This philosophy guides her response to challenges, reinforcing her commitment to overcoming adversity.

Rejecting the notion that certain roles are exclusive to a particular gender, Ms Kwinana shares her childhood experiences where she engaged in activities traditionally associated with boys. In her grandmother's house, responsibilities were not gender-specific, fostering a belief in the capability of women to run households independently. Ms Kwinana learned the importance of self-reliance and resourcefulness from her grandmother. The idea that one does not always have to depend on others but can forge their own path and seek help when needed has become a guiding principle in her life.

2. What are some of the glaring obstacles for women to take on leadership positions in the 21st century?

Ms Tokoza Kwinana sheds light on persisting gender stereotypes and biases that continue to impact women in various professional sectors. Ms Kwinana underscores the lingering bias that questions women's ability to tap into their intellectual capacity. She notes the prevalent belief that women may be perceived as less competent and less assertive in their professional roles, facing scepticism about their capabilities compared to their male counterparts.

A notable stereotype, according to Ms Kwinana, is the belief that women are primarily responsible for family care, potentially hindering their professional growth. This perception contributes to underrepresentation in leadership positions and can result in gender pay gaps. Ms Kwinana highlights the existing underrepresentation of women in leadership roles across various sectors. Additionally, she points out the challenges women face in mentorship, as some

male leaders shy away from mentoring women due to concerns about potential harassment issues. She emphasizes that this hampers the progress towards achieving gender diversity.

Addressing the stereotype of women being viewed as emotional, Ms Kwinana challenges the negative connotation associated with this perception. She argues that leading with emotions is a strength and an aspect of authentic leadership: it is an essential quality that female leaders can bring to the table, enhancing their effectiveness in leadership roles.

3. Are female leaders born or made? Please elaborate as you consider the fact that most women have additional roles like childbearing.

Ms Tokoza Kwinana's perspective on leadership is rooted in the belief that leaders are inherently born with certain qualities. According to her, these innate traits form the foundation of leadership potential. She emphasizes that the realization of leadership abilities is a continuous process that involves exposure and experience. Ms Kwinana contends that leadership qualities are not acquired through formal education but are inherent traits. She believes that individuals are born with the potential and ability to lead, and these qualities serve as the groundwork for effective leadership.

While acknowledging the innate nature of leadership, Ms Kwinana stresses the importance of continuous development. Exposure to various experiences and learning opportunities is crucial in harnessing and refining these innate leadership qualities. Individuals need to immerse themselves in situations that allow them to understand key strategies, theories, and effective leadership practices.

Ms Kwinana illustrates her perspective with the example of her grandmother, who assumed a leadership role without formal education in the field. Her grandmother's leadership traits were inherent, and she developed them over time by navigating through various challenges and experiences. This

highlighted the notion that leadership is not confined to formal education but involves a continuous learning journey.

For Ms Kwinana, leadership development is a gradual and ongoing process. It involves recognizing and understanding the innate qualities within oneself and then actively seeking opportunities to enhance and apply these traits. It is not a quick process but rather a journey of self-discovery and refinement.

4. Women leaders are more aggressive than male leaders. What is your view on this statement? Kindly unpack it.

Ms Tokoza provides a nuanced perspective on the perceptions of women in leadership roles, challenging the stereotype that labels assertiveness as aggression. Her insights underscore the complexities women face in asserting themselves within professional contexts. Ms Kwinana rejects the notion that women leaders are inherently aggressive, countering the stereotype with the belief that women possess empathy and compassion. She emphasizes that while most women leaders embody these qualities, there are instances where some adopt a colder and more dictatorial approach.

According to Ms Kwinana, when women exhibit assertiveness, it is often misinterpreted as aggression. She highlights the challenge women face in navigating societal expectations, where they may be expected to take a backseat, leading to issues of inequality and gender bias.

Ms Kwinana challenges the conventional expectation that women should remain passive in leadership roles. She contends that women standing up for themselves should not be perceived as aggression but rather as a legitimate assertion of their rights and capabilities. This challenge to traditional gender roles can, at times, lead to surprises and misconceptions. Despite the stereotype, Ms Kwinana asserts that women leaders can be both empathetic and assertive. She believes that women bring empathy to their leadership roles

but may need to assert themselves to claim what is rightfully theirs or when advocating for their position at the table.

Ms Kwinana suggests that even in cases where women leaders may adopt a dictatorial approach, a deeper examination may reveal that their behaviour is often a response to specific circumstances. These leaders may be striving for change, pushing a particular agenda, or adapting to a situation that requires a different approach.

5. What is the most important risk that you have had to take in your leadership journey and why?

Ms Tokoza Kwinana provides a unique perspective on talent evaluation within the human resources domain, emphasizing the value of taking calculated risks in recruitment. Her insights challenge conventional expectations and highlight the potential for success in individuals who may not initially expectedly present themselves. She identifies a common challenge in the recruitment process, particularly in human resources. She also notes that individuals who may not initially appear to possess “polished communication skills” expected for a role are sometimes surprised by excelling once appointed.

Expressing a willingness to take calculated risks, Ms Kwinana sees the recruitment of candidates who may not showcase their skills effectively during interviews as an opportunity. Despite the initial presentation, she believes in the potential for these individuals to excel and contribute significantly once they are given the chance. Ms Kwinana challenges the notion that articulate communicators always translate into successful employees. She observes that some candidates, despite presenting themselves well verbally, may falter when allowed to demonstrate their actual capabilities. This highlights the importance of looking beyond surface impressions.

Ms Kwinana acknowledges that taking a chance on individuals who may not fit the traditional mould can be perceived as risky. However, she firmly believes that, more often than not, these risks are justified, as the appointed

individuals tend to exceed expectations and perform exceptionally well in their roles.

In her view, the process of taking chances on individuals whose skills may not be immediately apparent is a strategic move that pays off in the long run. Ms Kwinana emphasizes that the potential for success in unconventional candidates outweighs the perceived risks associated with deviating from traditional recruitment norms.

6. How do you continue to grow, develop, and show up as a leader? Share your recipe for success.

Ms Tokoza Kwinana underscores the significance of continuous learning, professional development, and the interconnectedness of personal well-being in her approach to her field. Her commitment to staying informed, embracing change, and fostering the growth of others highlights her dedication to positive influence within the workplace. She places great importance on staying current in her field, utilizing the accessibility of social media and actively participating in seminars and workshops. This commitment allows her to remain informed about industry trends, fostering an environment where learning, relearning, and unlearning become essential components of professional growth.

For Ms Kwinana, continuous learning is not just a personal endeavour; it is a powerful tool for positive influence within the workplace. She recognizes that the ability to adapt and evolve positively impacts her influence, contributing to a dynamic and forward-thinking work environment.

Ms Kwinana emphasizes the holistic approach of maintaining both physical and spiritual well-being. She asserts that the connection between the mind and heart is crucial, as it directly influences the quality of work and interactions with others. This holistic perspective aligns with her belief that personal well-being is intricately tied to professional success. A sense of pride in one's work is another cornerstone of Ms Kwinana's philosophy. She believes that taking pride in one's output contributes to a positive work

environment and, consequently, a positive influence. This pride is rooted in a dedication to continuous learning and a commitment to delivering high-quality results.

Ms Kwinana actively works with and supports those around her, recognizing the importance of collective growth. Her leadership philosophy revolves around the idea that personal and professional development should extend beyond oneself. She strives to ensure that her growth positively impacts others, creating an environment where everyone has the opportunity to advance.

7. What does juggling a few balls mean for you?

Ms Tokoza Kwinana imparts valuable insights into effective leadership, emphasizing strategic planning, accountability, and the importance of self-care. Her guidance centres around fostering interdependence within teams, ensuring clarity of instructions, resilience in the face of challenges, and the necessity of self-love for long-term success. Ms Kwinana highlights the significance of effective planning, acknowledging that while plans may evolve, having a well-thought-out strategy is crucial. She emphasizes the need to work with and through others, fostering interdependence within the team. The delicate balance of accountability ensures mutual support where she relies on her directors, and they, in turn, depend on her.

Keeping oneself and the team accountable is a cornerstone of Ms Kwinana's leadership philosophy. She stresses the importance of following up and following through on matters, especially when dealing with multiple responsibilities. This commitment to accountability ensures that tasks are completed efficiently and prevents issues from falling through the cracks.

Ms Kwinana advocates for strategic guidance within a team, emphasizing the need for clear instructions. Resilience is identified as a key quality, acknowledging the challenges faced in the professional realm. She encourages

the acknowledgement and forgiveness of mistakes and taking accountability when necessary.

The importance of self-care is a central theme in Ms Kwinana's approach. She stresses the need for leaders to allow themselves time to rest and recharge, acknowledging that continuous running can have negative long-term effects. Self-love is identified as an essential element for success and emphasizes that a leader's well-being is the foundation of the success of the team.

8. If you were to put together a code of practice for women leaders, what would that code be and what would it look like?

Ms Tokoza Kwinana articulates her leadership philosophy with a code titled 'Authentic Leadership,' which centres on being genuine, true to one's convictions, leading by example, and inspiring others. This code emphasizes the core values of integrity and excellence, considering them as essential drivers for effective leadership and fundamental aspects of humanity. Ms Kwinana's code underscores the importance of authenticity, urging leaders to be themselves and resist the temptation to mimic others entirely. While acknowledging the value of learning from different leadership styles, she advocates for incorporating these learnings in a way that aligns with one's individuality.

The code encourages leaders to lead by example, serving as role models for their teams. The aspiration is not only to guide but also to inspire others as they progress along their leadership journey. Ms Kwinana emphasizes the power of inspiration in cultivating a positive and motivated working environment. Integrity and excellence are identified as the bedrock of leadership, forming the ethical foundation upon which effective leadership is built. Ms Kwinana considers these principles to not only be integral to leadership success but also fundamental to defining humanity.

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Ms Kwinana introduces a metaphorical perspective with the “dance floor and balcony” analogy. Leaders are encouraged to actively participate on the “dance floor,” being engaged and part of the team. Simultaneously, they should intermittently step onto the “balcony” to gain a broader perspective, assessing the dynamics, recognizing different paces, and evaluating whether adjustments are needed.

The balcony perspective allows leaders to observe the dance floor from a different angle, identifying areas that may need adjustment. Ms Kwinana notes the importance of recognizing individuals not following the steps, those dominating the floor, and those who may need a change of pace or song. This insight enables leaders to foster an inclusive and adaptable environment. As a specific call to women leaders, Ms Kwinana encourages them not only to be on the dance floor but also to stand on the balcony. This dual role allows for active engagement with the team while providing the necessary distance for strategic observation. It also promotes the idea of empowering new voices by making space for fresh perspectives and opportunities.

9. Wathinta Abafazi, Wathint' Mbokodo? Mosadi Otswara Thipa ka Bo Galeng. These are a few statements that have existed, alluding to the strength of a woman. What is your view on them?

Ms Tokoza Kwinana passionately affirms the inherent strength and resilience of women, celebrating their ability to overcome adversity with determination, courage, and adaptability. However, she challenges the common narratives that portray women solely as strong and resilient, emphasizing the importance of recognizing and embracing the softer aspects of their nature. Ms Kwinana acknowledges the undeniable strength of women, emphasizing their capacity to conquer any adversity that comes their way. She highlights their resilience, determination, and courageous leadership, traits that showcase the formidable nature of women.

Contrary to prevailing notions, Ms Kwinana contends that the prevailing phrases do not adequately capture the full essence of women. She proposes a nuanced perspective that embraces both strength and softness. For her, women can be both strong and soft because these elements are not mutually exclusive but rather interconnected facets of their identity. Ms Kwinana advocates for acknowledging and appreciating the softness inherent in women alongside their strength. The duality of being “soft yet strong” or “strong yet soft” reflects the complexity and richness of women’s character. It is an invitation to recognize and honour the multifaceted nature of women, allowing them to express both strength and softness authentically.

From Ms Kwinana’s perspective, the strength and softness of women are not disparate; instead, they are interconnected and inseparable. Women exhibit strength when needed, drawing on their resilience and determination. Simultaneously, they embody softness, reflecting the inherent gentleness and compassion that is integral to who they are. Ms Kwinana encourages a holistic recognition of women’s nature, acknowledging that they can be powerful and gentle in different contexts. This perspective challenges stereotypes and invites a more nuanced understanding of the diverse qualities that women bring to various aspects of life.

10. What advice do you wish someone had given you at the beginning of your career? And why?

Ms Tokoza Kwinana shares valuable perspectives on the foundational aspects of a successful career, emphasizing the importance of building a personal brand, financial literacy, self-advocacy, and resilience in the face of challenges. She highlights the significance of establishing a personal brand early in one’s career and underscores the importance of consistency and staying informed to cultivate a strong and authentic professional identity. Building a personal brand sets the stage for a resilient and reputable career.

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Recognising the potential challenges young professionals may face with newfound financial resources, Ms Kwinana stresses the importance of financial literacy. She advises that understanding basic economic principles is crucial to making informed decisions and avoiding unnecessary pitfalls when handling money. Ms Kwinana emphasises the value of self-advocacy and cautions against judging others based on surface appearances. She acknowledges that well-packaged exteriors may not necessarily reflect the true substance within. Encouraging young professionals to advocate for themselves and approach situations with an open mind fosters a more resilient and adaptable mindset.

Addressing the enthusiasm of young professionals starting their careers, Ms Kwinana advises that while exploration is essential, it is crucial to acknowledge that reality may not always align with expectations. Having a plan in place allows individuals to navigate unexpected challenges and uncertainties, providing a strategic foundation for career growth. Reflecting on her own experiences, Ms Kwinana wishes she had been told that making mistakes is part of the journey. She encourages young professionals to understand that mistakes should not define their trajectory. Instead, it is essential to embrace lessons from errors, pick oneself up, dust off, and continue moving forward with resilience.

Prof. Wai Sze Leung

Senior Director: Postgraduate School, University of Johannesburg

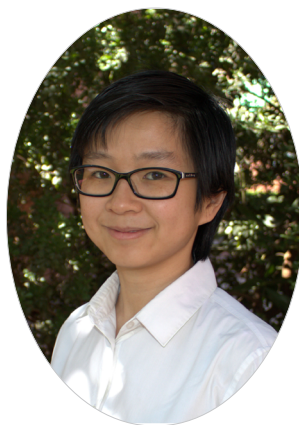
Background

Professor Wai Sze Leung was born in Hong Kong and migrated to South Africa with her family when she was four years old. She has a younger sister and brother. Professor Leung pursued her graduate studies in Information Technology at the University of Johannesburg, which was previously known as Rand Afrikaans University (RAU). Professor Leung fondly remembered her father's words as they departed Jansma International Airport in Hong Kong: "Today, you will be called Grace."

1. What were the early messages that you were hearing about the girl child? Messages that came from people you looked up to and messages that ended up inspiring you on your leadership journey.

Professor Wai Sze Leung remembers making the decision to study IT at UJ. However, some family friends expressed serious reservations about her choice to study IT, largely due to her being a woman and that society expected her to get married and start a family. Those around her believed that studying IT would be a waste of time. Despite all of this, she is grateful that her parents did not give in to societal pressures and allowed her to follow her dream.

Professor Wai Sze Leung remembers how her mother used to talk to her and her sister about Chinese culture and the prevailing role of men in society. She always



highlighted the significance of men as they were responsible for safeguarding the family name. However, despite this, her mother never failed to remind her and her sister that girls were equally capable of achieving anything they set their minds to. Nevertheless, in society, women are expected to prove their worth, and for this reason, her mother insisted that she should be independent and never rely on anyone, especially a man. “Be your own person,” her mother would say.

Professor Wai Sze Leung attributes her resilience to her maternal grandmother. In Chinese culture, when a woman’s husband passes away, she would become the property of the husband’s family and was expected to marry his brother as per tradition. However, her grandmother refused to follow this custom and left the village to live as an independent single mother in Hong Kong. She raised her seven children alone and instilled the same strong characteristics in her daughter, who in turn passed them down to Professor Leung. These character traits continue to be a part of her to this day.

2. What are some of the glaring obstacles facing women in leadership positions in the 21st Century?

Professor Wai Sze Leung acknowledges the progress made by women in leadership roles in the 21st century. However, she believes that women are often appointed to leadership positions merely to fulfil a diversity quota rather than being given actual opportunities to lead. She thinks that a more in-depth conversation is necessary to understand the challenges faced by women in leadership roles. It is not sufficient to simply place a woman in a leadership position; we need to define what that role entails. Unfortunately, women are often stereotyped regardless of their position or level in society.

3. Are female leaders born or made? Please elaborate as you consider the fact that most women have additional roles such as childbearing and child-rearing that society still expects them to fulfil.

Professor Leung argues that female leadership is a combination of nature and nurture. She believes that everyone has the potential to be a leader, but it also requires an opportunity to lead. As an example, Professor Leung admits that despite being a shy person, she was given the chance to lead and was nurtured into becoming a leader.

However, Professor Leung faced familial pressure to settle down and start a family, which she believes could have hindered her professional success had she given in. Many women face similar pressures, but some choose to pursue a career and raise a family. Professor Leung recognizes the challenges these women face and attributes their success to perseverance and a positive outlook. Balancing work and family can be difficult, especially when both parents work, but Professor Leung believes that each woman has her own unique experiences and finds a way to navigate these challenges.

4. Women leaders are more aggressive than male leaders. What is your view on this statement? Kindly unpack it.

Professor Leung argues that society has certain expectations regarding the allocation of gender roles and how each gender should behave. It is often believed that women are aggressive, even if they do and say the same things that men would. However, Professor Leung disagrees with this premise and recognizes that women have been stereotyped as being aggressive. She laments the fact that men are allowed to use any language and tone, while women are seen as aggressive when they use strong language. This shows that there are double standards for men and women in society.

Furthermore, Professor Leung also regrets the notion that women are homogeneous and should act and behave

similarly. She believes that women leaders generally follow the university's example of 'servant leadership'. There is a false sense that when women are seen as servant leaders, people will disregard them and walk all over them. Professor Leung rejects this notion as false and stereotypical. She concedes that some women do have a straightforward approach that is viewed as aggressive.

Despite all these challenges, Professor Leung is reminded by her mother's words that she can be whatever she wants to be and should not focus on people's views.

5. What is the most important risk you have had to take on your leadership journey and why?

Professor Leung attributes her leadership journey to her upbringing and the examples set by her grandmother and mother, which began when she was just 12 years old. While she admits that she doesn't always feel comfortable in her role, she has great faith in herself and believes that she can accomplish anything she sets her mind to. She considers herself a reluctant leader but understands that taking risks and stepping out of her comfort zone is necessary for growth. She also believes that she has been placed in a leadership position because others have great confidence in her ability and commitment to leadership.

6. How do you continue to grow, develop, and show up as a leader? Share your recipe for success.

Professor Leung believes that there is no fixed formula for leadership. It involves addressing each problem calmly and with understanding, constantly training and being aware, and learning new things every day. "As a leader, it is your responsibility to lead". She is grateful for the women in leadership training that provided her with valuable skills and knowledge. The leadership programme allowed her to share her knowledge and experiences with other female colleagues

and learn from them. Ultimately, it's about getting a seat at the table and being able to contribute. She said.

7. What does juggling a few balls mean to you?

Professor Leung is a strong proponent of teamwork and believes in the importance of leadership responsibilities. She emphasizes the need to keep an eye on the collective goal and encourages her team to lead by example. Although she is understanding of colleagues with families, she insists that each team member must be diligent in fulfilling their responsibilities, which often requires working from 08:00 to 16:30. Despite setting high performance standards Professor Leung values family responsibilities above all else and is a family person herself. At the end of the day, the leader needs to trust her team and guide them when necessary.

8. If you were to put together a code of practice for women leaders, what would that code be and what would it look like?

Professor Leung argues that women have diverse life experiences and circumstances. She believes that while some women face similar challenges, there are equally as many women who face different challenges. In her opinion, women are generally hesitant to admit when they are unsure and often feel overwhelmed by leadership roles. This is partly due to societal expectations and the unrealistic expectations that women place on themselves. Professor Leung does not believe that men generally place themselves under the same level of pressure as women; her male colleagues often say, "Fake it until you make it." In her final analysis, she believes it's alright for women to not know everything all the time, to make mistakes, and learn from them.

9. “Watinta Abafazi, Watint’Imbokodo” and “Mosadi o tshwara thipa ka bo galeng”, are sayings from the past that allude to the strength of women. What is your view on them?

Professor Leung shares that the African saying highlights the strength of women. She draws upon the experiences of many women who are the heads of households in South Africa and have the sole responsibility of caring for their families. This is a perfect example of how strong women can be. She also talks about her grandmother who was a strong woman and challenged the culture of oppression. Her grandmother left her village in China with an umbrella in one hand and a few buttons in the other, in search of a better life in Hong Kong. Her courage and determination have been a guiding force for Professor Leung in moments of her own strength. Women play a crucial role in South African society. Professor Leung encourages all women to have faith in themselves, regardless of their circumstances. People may bring up your failures, but they are a necessary part of growth. Keep trying until you succeed and if you fail, dust yourself off and keep going. She believes that society has generally failed women and that women should support each other. She is proud of her sister who works in human rights and advocates for women’s rights.

10. What advice do you wish someone had given you at the beginning of your career and why?

Professor Leung recommends that women who are beginning their careers should have faith in themselves. Despite the challenges and barriers, they may face, and even if they experience failure, they should maintain their confidence and always set attainable and practical objectives for themselves. Accomplished women who hold leadership positions must provide guidance and assistance to young and aspiring women leaders. It is their shared responsibility towards other women.

Dr Ndivhuwo Luruli

*Executive Director: Research Development and Support,
University of Johannesburg*

Background

Dr Ndivhuwo Luruli was born and raised in a village called Mauluma situated in the Nzhelele area of Venda. She spent her first 18 years there until she completed her matric. She spent her earlier years with her grandmother, Vho-Masindi, siblings and cousins. Her upbringing was characterized by a typical rural lifestyle engaging in the customary activities and experiences that a young girl in such an environment would encounter. This routine continued until she completed high school in 1999, at which point she began her studies at Stellenbosch University.

As an adult, she is now the mother of two daughters – Anza (13) and Vhuthu (11) who keep her actively engaged. She is married to Nyambeni, whom she met during her time at Stellenbosch University. This constitutes her immediate family.

1. What were the early messages that you were hearing about the girl child?

Regrettably, for her, it's one of those stories where she didn't come across much information or encouragement regarding the potential of a girl child, certainly not in a positive light. In her perception, it seemed as though she was destined to follow a predetermined path. Her upbringing took place in



a household where Christian values were upheld, and the expectation was that, eventually, she would marry, have children, and reside in Venda. If she were fortunate, she might find employment in Thohoyandou.

Reflecting on her past, she often finds herself at a loss to explain how her life has unfolded, because she lacked the kind of reference points that might have guided her towards different possibilities. Unfortunately, she wasn't fortunate enough to have access to inspirational female role models beyond what might be referred to as the "pastor's wife" archetype, or professions such as teaching or nursing. As a result, she felt destined to become a wife and a mother, and there weren't many uplifting stories or examples to challenge this perception during her formative years.

2. What are some of the glaring obstacles facing women in leadership positions in the 21st century?

She believes that when it comes to women and leadership, they can often be their own harshest critics and adversaries. She observes that women tend to place numerous obstacles in their own paths. In contrast, men, in her view, often possess a strong self-assuredness, believing they are born to take on any role or responsibility. She points out that this confidence doesn't always translate into outstanding performance. Women, on the other hand, tend to second-guess themselves.

Even in her current environment at the University of Johannesburg (UJ), she notices that when women are presented with opportunities, they frequently hesitate, thinking that the task may be too demanding or there might be too much on their plate. She also notes that women with families are quick to consider their family responsibilities, but she questions why the other parent isn't equally responsible. Children, she emphasizes, are not solely the responsibility of mothers, and the other parents should also share the load.

She believes it's crucial for women to reach a point where they feel entitled to pursue opportunities with the same confidence as men if not more. Women often have the capacity

to handle and excel in demanding roles, and they should recognise this. She argues that the primary barriers women face are often self-imposed, and if women tell themselves they can do something and go for it with determination, they can overcome these barriers. The key is to push forward, persistently seek opportunities, and keep knocking on doors.

3. Female leaders are born or made. Please elaborate, as you consider the fact that women have additional roles like childbearing and rearing that society still expects them to fulfil.

She believes that when it comes to success, it's a combination of both nature and nurture, but the nurturing aspect tends to play a more significant role. She explains that certain qualities like willpower, discipline, and focus are inherent to some extent. These traits, she thinks, are part of a person's natural disposition and can vary from one individual to another.

For instance, she gives an example from her own family, noting that her younger daughter appears to be naturally more focused than her older one. She has found that while she can encourage and instil certain behaviours in her older daughter, it doesn't come as naturally to her. In her view, many of these inherent traits are present from birth, but they can also be influenced and enhanced through upbringing and early experiences.

She points out that some skills and personality traits, which are essential for success, can be learned and developed over time. A prime example she cites is work ethic. She believes that work ethic is something that can be cultivated and improved by anyone willing to put in the effort. As individuals grow and aspire to achieve specific career goals, they can identify the skills and qualities required in the workplace and actively work on developing them.

In summary, she sees success as a combination of inherent qualities and learned behaviours. While some traits may be present from birth, many can be developed and honed

through dedication, commitment, and discipline as individuals progress in their personal and professional lives.

4. Women leaders are more aggressive than male leaders. What is your view on this statement?

She believes that one crucial aspect to recognise in the workplace is the prevalence of labels. In her view, individuals are inevitably labelled, whether the labels are positive or negative, and whether they align with one's self-perception or not. These labels can vary widely from being described as "gorgeous," "soft-spoken," and "kind" to potentially being labelled as "antisocial." She acknowledges that, often, women's voices go unheard, and this can lead to situations where confident individuals may dominate conversations, even if they are not necessarily leading in the right direction.

She highlights the challenge women face when they find themselves in situations where their voices are silenced merely because of their gender. This, she believes, can push women to assert themselves more aggressively to be heard. She argues that this assertiveness is not necessarily a natural trait but rather a response to the need to be recognised and heard. Women sometimes need to speak up forcefully to ensure their opinions are acknowledged and valued in male-dominated spaces.

She suggests that women often exhibit different personalities in professional and personal settings, emphasising the need to adapt to different environments. In professional spaces, some women may feel the need to be more assertive and vocal to overcome the biases they encounter. She acknowledges that this behaviour change is often driven by external factors and the dynamics of the workplace, rather than being a true reflection of an individual's personality.

Ultimately, she believes that women should not be confined to predefined labels or expected to conform to certain behaviours. Instead, she emphasises the importance of creating inclusive environments where women are treated as

equals and their diverse strengths and qualities are recognised and appreciated, without the need for forceful assertiveness.

5. What is the most important risk you have had to take on your leadership journey and why?

She acknowledges that one of the challenging aspects of her role as a leader is having to initiate disciplinary processes for employees who exhibit poor performance. Despite her dislike of this aspect of her job, she emphasises that it's a task she has had to undertake numerous times. She views it as a necessary step not only for the sake of the organisation but also for her reputation as a leader. She believes that when employees underperform and leaders fail to address the issue, it reflects poorly on both parties.

She states that a sense of risk is associated with every disciplinary process, as the outcome is uncertain. Each instance presents a unique set of circumstances, making it impossible to predict how it will unfold. She recalls having to handle similar situations in her previous jobs, even going so far as to encourage some staff members to resign when they were not a good fit for their roles. Surprisingly, she maintains contact with these individuals, showing a genuine interest in their well-being.

In her efforts to help staff members find the right fit, she has engaged in conversations about their interests and strengths. When an employee was unhappy due to a misalignment between their role and their true interests, she facilitated transitions to more suitable positions. She believes that by aligning employees with roles that match their passions, they are more likely to excel and contribute positively to the organisation. She has experienced success in helping several individuals transition to roles they are genuinely passionate about, thereby ensuring that her team comprises individuals who are dedicated to their work and can contribute to her team's success.

6. How do you continue to grow, develop, and show up as a leader? Can you share your recipe for success?

What Dr Luruli values and upholds the most is a robust work ethic and considers herself as notably focused. She attributes the foundation of her work ethic to her deep passion for her profession. She genuinely loves what she does, and this love fuels her dedication.

For her, the enthusiasm for her work transcends traditional working hours. She recalls instances where she willingly stayed late, even until midnight, to complete tasks such as submission of grant applications. She mentions a specific occasion when she had to interrupt a family dinner at a restaurant to attend a late meeting, all while maintaining her laptop at hand. Her commitment to her job is such that she seized the opportunity to resolve a professor's struggle with an EU grant application issue during that family outing.

She emphasises that her work isn't just a job but rather a source of fulfilment and satisfaction. Her disciplined approach, unwavering focus, and commitment to excellence are inherent traits that she believes she was born with. She takes pride in her ability to get the job done efficiently and without compromise, always striving for excellence. Additionally, she acknowledges the importance of finding outlets that help her switch off from work-related stress and maintain a healthy work-life balance.

7. What does juggling a few balls mean to you?

She reveals that she has a natural inclination to stay busy and productive throughout the day, and she doesn't mind it at all. Having the ability to multitask and engage in various activities keeps her content. She recalls a time when she had to step into the acting Executive Director: Research and Innovation role when the previous incumbent left UJ, but she continued to handle her regular responsibilities as Director without any reductions in her workload. Despite these added

responsibilities, she and her team continued to meet, and for the most part, exceeded their targets successfully.

For her, the key is to avoid boredom at all costs, as she readily admits to getting bored easily. She takes pride in her capacity to effectively balance her work commitments with her personal life, suggesting that she juggles both aspects quite skilfully. In essence, she thrives on the challenge of keeping herself engaged and productive, relishing the opportunity to accomplish more than one task in a day.

8. If you were to put together a code of practice for women leaders, what would that code be and what would it look like?

She offers valuable advice to women, especially those in leadership positions, emphasising the importance of owning one's space and roles with confidence. She encourages women to take charge and not hesitate to fully embrace the responsibilities they are given, regardless of the nature or significance of those roles. She acknowledges that sometimes women may feel the need to convince themselves or others of their qualifications for a role when they should simply step into it and run with it.

Furthermore, she stresses the need for women to be kind to themselves. She recognises that women often struggle with self-imposed pressure to constantly be busy and productive. She occasionally reminds herself to take short breaks and relax, even if it's just for a few minutes with a cup of tea, before diving back into work.

She also addresses the issue of women feeling apologetic about their family commitments in the workplace. She shares a personal anecdote about a clash between a work commitment and her daughter's Grade R graduation day. In this situation, she unapologetically prioritised her family over work, realising that her child's milestone event was a once-in-a-lifetime experience. She firmly believes that women should not feel compelled to apologise for making

such choices, even in executive roles, as they are not just professionals but also wives and mothers. She humorously underscores the importance of making oneself available for love and not becoming so busy that loved ones cannot find the time to connect.

Overall, her advice centres on empowerment, self-compassion, and recognising the value of balancing personal and professional responsibilities without feeling the need to apologise for making family a priority when necessary.

9. “Watinta Abafazi, Watint’Imbokodo” and “Mosadi o tshwara thipa ka bo galeng” are sayings from the past that allude to the strength of women. What is your view of them?

She reflects on a realisation she had about the expectations placed on women. She acknowledges that while there is a lot of talk about women being strong and resilient, it’s equally important to recognise that it’s okay for women to embrace their vulnerability and not constantly feel the need to be the “rock” or the one who takes charge in every situation. She believes that sometimes women can push themselves to take on too much and adopt the role of the unyielding, ever-capable “rock,” and this can lead to unnecessary stress and burnout.

She shares that she has learned the value of occasionally allowing herself to be vulnerable and not always feeling the need to be in control or to handle everything herself. She mentions conversations with her husband, where she expressed her desire to take a step back and not be the one who always must take on every challenge. She recognises that while she is fully capable of handling a wide range of responsibilities, it doesn’t mean she should take on everything all the time.

She emphasises the importance of intentionally choosing moments to be the “damsel in distress,” metaphorically speaking. By doing so, she believes women can avoid falling into the cycle of constantly overextending themselves and then complaining about it later. She acknowledges the

strength of women but also values the freedom to occasionally step back from that role and allow others to support and care for them.

In summary, she highlights the need for women to balance their strength with vulnerability and to communicate their desire for support and care when necessary. She recognises that being strong doesn't mean always having to be the one who takes charge, and it's perfectly acceptable to embrace moments of vulnerability and seek assistance from others.

10. What advice do you wish someone had given you at the beginning of your career, and why is that?

She recounts a conversation where someone advised her that it's perfectly acceptable to be ambitious and that she need not feel guilty about it. This advice struck a chord with her and allowed her to embrace her ambition without reservations. She recalls a humorous incident from before she joined UJ, where a colleague jokingly commented on her strong work ethic, suggesting that she appeared to be working as if she were paid on commission. While this comment was made in jest, she takes her work very seriously and approaches it with unwavering commitment and focus. She has always operated with the mindset that someone is constantly watching over her shoulder, ensuring she delivers her best.

She acknowledges that her strong work ethic can sometimes unsettle others or make them feel threatened. However, she believes that working diligently is an integral part of her identity, and she does not see it as a negative trait. Instead, she wishes that someone had told her earlier in her career that there's nothing wrong with working hard and being dedicated to one's job. She firmly believes that hard work will eventually be recognised, even if not immediately or in the current workplace.

She also mentions the common phrase "that is not in my domain," which people often use to avoid taking on additional responsibilities. She contrasts this by stating her willingness

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to tackle tasks outside her immediate area of expertise or responsibility, viewing them as opportunities for growth and contribution.

In conclusion, she reflects on how she used to feel guilty about her strong work ethic but now fully embraces it. She recognises that it has taken her until her 40s to come to terms with her ambition and dedication, but she is now comfortable in her skin and unapologetic about her commitment to hard work and excellence.

Ms Nomsa Mahlangu

Senior Director: Sports, University of Johannesburg

Background

Ms Nomsa Mahlangu was born in Nelspruit, Mpumalanga in 1974, excited to turn 50 (2023). She is a proud sports administrator and considers herself a leader, mentor, friend, aunt, and sometimes a mother figure. According to her, sports is much more than just playing – it is about education as well. She believes that many young people and aspiring sports leaders admire her and look up to her as an inspiration. She takes her mentorship responsibilities very seriously. Currently, Ms Nomsa Mahlangu holds the position of senior director for sports at the University of Johannesburg. She is also a member of the executive committee for the Federation of International University Sport (FISU). Additionally, she made history by becoming the first woman to be elected to the South African Football Association Board (SAFA) in 2009. Ms Nomsa has a saying: “I get paid by the University of Johannesburg, but I work for everybody.”

1. What were the early messages that you were hearing about the girl child? Messages that came from people you looked up to and messages that ended up inspiring you on your leadership journey.

Ms Nomsa was raised by her maternal grandparents, who taught her that there are no gender-specific roles or responsibilities. This upbringing



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has significantly influenced her views and perspectives as an adult. For instance, her uncle is one of the best cooks she has ever met, defying the stereotype of cooking being a task for females. Her grandmother was a crucial figure in her childhood and is responsible for shaping her confidence and independence, both as a woman leader and a mentor. For Ms Nomsa, confidence is a vital characteristic that allows you to navigate uncharted and even hostile territories. She believes being confident in your abilities and knowledge is crucial to success.

Her grandmother had taught her to value every individual and to never judge someone based on their social status, financial position, or political power. She believed in showing respect to everyone and being considerate towards others, irrespective of their standing in society.

Despite the positive messages reinforced by her grandparents, today's society sends conflicting messages about gender roles.

Her upbringing and strong belief in justice led Ms Nomsa to become a political activist, fighting for women's rights and advocating for spaces where women can speak out and have a voice of their own. She first became involved in student politics at Vista University, where she later joined the Sports Council and became an active member. Ms Nomsa specifically fought for the inclusion of women's sports. She remembers that during her time at Vista University there was no football team for women. Despite this, she believed that she was the best player and saw herself as a solidarity player. Ms Nomsa was a pioneer, enabling other women to follow her lead and fulfil their passion for playing football.

2. What are some of the glaring obstacles facing women in leadership positions in the 21st Century?

Ms Nomsa firmly believes that gender bias and stereotypes are still prevalent in modern society. This is similar to her own experience as a student at the University of the Free State many years ago. She fought for women's sports at a time when they

were completely dominated by men. This included advocating for equal opportunities for women in sports administration, planning events, and participation as players.

In 2019, as a young woman working at SAFA, she often faced opposition from men who did not value her opinions. They would reject her input and deem it insubstantial, asking the proverbial question, “What is a woman doing in men’s sports?”. To overcome this obstruction, she identified a male committee member who could sponsor her ideas and speak on her behalf during meetings. She found it ironic that the committee would only accept her views when they were expressed by men. She learned valuable lessons about the role of women in sports, leadership, and the inherent challenges that women face in male-dominated arenas like sports. Many women face similar challenges such as lack of mentorship and partnerships, and her experiences are not unique.

Ms Nomsa believes that women in leadership positions should leverage their power and influence to create opportunities for aspiring women leaders to emerge and thrive. While we often hear about the “glass ceiling” that prevents women from advancing in their careers, Ms Nomsa is committed to shattering that ceiling for all women in sports. To achieve this, she believes that there needs to be a change in society’s perception of women as mere stay-at-home mothers responsible for domestic work and childcare. This also requires a shift in the way gender roles are viewed in our communities, where boys are often given better opportunities to further their education than girls.

3. Are female leaders born or made? Please elaborate as you consider the fact that most women have additional roles such as childbearing and child-rearing that society still expects them to fulfil.

Ms Nomsa believes that leaders are not born, and even those who claim to be born leaders require personal development. Being in a leadership position doesn’t necessarily mean that you’re leading. In addition to the question of whether leaders

are born or made, there is also the question of what qualities make a good leader. For Ms Nomsa, there are intangible things that a leader must learn and external factors that shape and mould them into becoming better leaders. Leaders must be able to encourage, support, and create an environment where other aspiring leaders can grow. When it comes to female leaders, Nomsa believes that they are shaped by multiple factors, including context, education, society, and most importantly, their willingness to lead others.

4. Women leaders are more aggressive than male leaders. What is your view on this statement? Kindly unpack it.

A woman's behaviour is influenced by various factors, including her environment. Sometimes a situation demands her to be assertive, while at other times she needs emotional strength and intelligence. Unfortunately, even when a woman displays positive emotions, she may still be accused of being aggressive. Conversely, if she cries, she may be called weak. This creates an untenable situation for women, leaving them in a no-win scenario.

Ms Nomsa has a strong belief that society's perception and stereotypes of women are misleading. She thinks that these perceptions create a narrative that portrays strong women as aggressive. She recalls a particular incident from 2015 when a colleague sarcastically commented that he hoped she knew what she was doing. This comment implied doubt about her ability to carry out her responsibilities based on her gender. Ms Nomsa believes that the only way to overcome these misguided perceptions about women is for women in leadership positions to be competent leaders.

5. What is the most important risk you have had to take on your leadership journey and why?

Upon reflection, she realised that the most significant risk she took while navigating her leadership journey was neglecting

her daughter due to work commitments. She admitted that her daughter was raised by everyone in her family except herself. Although it was a risk, Nomsa believed that it paid off in the end. She was able to reconnect with her daughter when they lived together during her daughter's tertiary education.

6. How do you continue to grow, develop, and show up as a leader? Share your recipe for success.

The hallmark of a leader is authenticity according to Ms Nomsa. She believes that the best version of oneself must always be to show up. Ms Nomsa argues that being the best agent of oneself requires self-reflection, as well as surrounding oneself with people who know how to bring out the best in you. She sees herself as a leader who leads through consultations and consensus-building. Education is important, but so is building personal relationships and surrounding oneself with people who both agree and disagree with you. Most importantly, Ms Nomsa believes that people should add value to one another.

7. What does juggling a few balls mean to you?

Navigating multiple roles at the same time comes with the territory of being a woman leader. Juggling different roles simultaneously requires good resources and time management. However, it's crucial not to allow any role to dominate or suffer. According to Ms Nomsa, your mental and physical health should not be compromised in the process. It's a delicate balancing act where treating everything as a priority while keeping yourself as a priority and focusing on your goals is key.

If you were to put together a code of practice for women leaders, what would that code be and what would it look like?

“Well, for me, being a woman leader means a few things, but the most important is being aware of who I am and what I represent to others. It's about promoting fairness, including everyone, growing professionally, and giving back.

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“As women leaders, it’s up to us to bring solutions. We’ve got to be the ones speaking up for equality and making sure everyone feels included. That means getting involved in mentorship programs and creating opportunities we may not have had ourselves.

We’ve also got to support young leaders, both boys and girls. Sometimes we focus too much on girls and forget about the boys. We need to be genuine in our support. I remember when I was starting out, people thought I was too rude or aggressive. But if I see a young person acting like me, I want to encourage them and say it’s okay to be yourself, even if society judges you unfairly.

And let’s talk about equal pay. It’s something we still need to fight for. When we’re in positions of influence and see unfairness, we can’t just let it slide. We have a responsibility to change things.

We’ve also got to empower young people and be good at resolving conflicts without taking sides. Communication is key. And we should support the growth of others, doing things that maybe weren’t done for us.

And let’s not forget about policies. We need to push for changes in the rules and guidelines of the organizations we’re part of. We’ve got to be the change we want to see. But it’s also important to be self-aware, to understand how our actions and words impact those around us”.

8. “Watinta Abafazi, Watint’Imbokodo” and “Mosadi o tshwara thipa ka bo galeng”, are sayings from the past that allude to the strength of women. What is your view on them?

“I don’t agree with those statements. You see, they were meant to celebrate and appreciate women’s strength. However, they also have negative meanings. For me, there are both positive and negative sides to them. I don’t agree with the negative parts, but the positive aspects are important. It’s crucial to

recognize women's strength and resilience, but we shouldn't lose ourselves in the process.

Let me give you an example from my own life. In the society where I live, some people have labelled me in a negative way because I'm turning 50 and unmarried, while most of my peers are married. This shows how unfair culture can be to women.

In my leadership journey, particularly when I was in the SAFA executive, I experienced discrimination based on how I dressed. Some men wouldn't talk to me when I wore pants, but they would if I wore skirts."

9. What advice do you wish someone had given you at the beginning of your career and why?

"It's totally fine to just be yourself. Remember, you're only human. Sometimes, I felt like I needed to hold back and not be too bold because I was scared. Society doesn't always expect women to be in certain roles. Maybe I would have achieved more by now if I'd been reassured that it's okay to be where I am and do what I'm doing.

Back then, it would have helped if someone had told me that learning doesn't just come from qualifications and certificates. There's so much more to it. I wish I had someone guide me to find a mentor and seek feedback actively to grow as a leader. If that had happened, I might have avoided some mistakes and not come across as intimidating to others. People might have felt more comfortable talking to me instead of being scared that I'd snap at them for no reason."

Associate Prof. Kirti Menon

*Senior Director: Division for Teaching Excellence,
University of Johannesburg*

Background

Prof. Kirti revealed that it has been a long journey because she is almost at the end of her career. She began as a schoolteacher, moving on to become a lecturer. With the advent of democracy, she began to do the work of reconstructing our society through education and worked on several projects for the government. For example, she worked on research projects like the schools audit in Gauteng, the UNEPTSA bursary programme. In 2000, she was offered a consultancy with the then Committee of University Principals (CUP), which then became SAUVCA, HESA and is now USAF. The core of her work then was to create an institution that would be transformed and more inclusive. In 2001, she joined the Council of Higher Education where she stayed for nine years as the Director of Accreditation and National Reviews.

Prof. Kirti's growth from being Director for nine years saw her move to the Department of Higher Education and Training as Chief Director: Institutional Planning. Shortly after moving into the position, she became the acting Deputy Director General: Universities Branch and then went off and completed her PhD and joined UJ in 2015. She was appointed as Director: Academic Planning. She shared that she had a great deal of experience in the domain that she was appointed into, and this included vast knowledge in academic planning, and familiarity with government



legislation and other regulatory frameworks relevant. She is excited about her journey and is proud of her more than 25 years in higher education. This has provided her with a ringside seat to the higher education that she is passionate about. In 2017, as a result of reconfiguration of functions, she was appointed as Senior Director of the now named Division for Teaching Excellence as such is an invited member of ELG.

1. What were the early messages that you were hearing as a girl child? Messages that came from people you look up to and messages that ended up inspiring you in your leadership journey.

Prof. Kirti mentioned that she was brought up with significant role models who were activists and did not consider themselves bound by gender distinctions. She thinks that she was very fortunate in her career to have the CHE where her immediate boss was a woman academic who was well respected in the sector. She added, “I think that I was very fortunate to have so many women leaders who forced us to think outside the general conventional societal definitions of women”. Furthermore, Prof. Kirti pointed out that her parents were quite focused, and determined that the children go to university. As a first generation university graduate, growing into independence was encouraged. .

2. What are some of the glaring obstacles for women to take on leadership positions in the 21st Century?

She said she believes there is a general perception about what women are capable of achieving, although she personally hasn't faced much of it herself. However, she recognizes that these perceptions can be problematic. Additionally, she says, there are the usual responsibilities and challenges of managing multitasking.

3. Are female leaders born or made? Please elaborate as you consider the fact that most women have additional roles like childbearing and childrearing that require them to still focus.

Prof. Kirti pointed out that she was very fortunate to have a husband and daughter who encouraged and supported her in her career. This allowed her the space to juggle multiple roles whilst still focusing on her career.

4. Women leaders are more aggressive than male leaders. What is your view on this statement? Kindly unpack it.

Prof. Kirti suspects that this statement is probably entertained because people do not believe nor understand that women can be leaders too. The same steering and charting out a particular direction for one's division or a domain may come across as being aggressive when you are a woman. According to her, in instances where it is a man standing up, being consistent, being assertive, and pushing boundaries, no one would question it or deem it aggressive.

5. What is the most important risk you have had to take in your leadership journey and why?

The biggest risk Prof. Kirti took was leaving a full-time job to complete her Ph.D. and that is because she was in a managerial position, and they were not given a sabbatical. She had moved from academia into government and into managerial positions, which shifted her focus, however, it did not mean that she had shifted her desire to do scholarly work. With excitement, she added that a week before this interview in 2023, SENEX approved her promotion to associate professorship.

She is ecstatic about her achievements and acknowledges that she is ending her career on a high. There are still some regrets that she delayed working as a scholar alongside her other jobs.

6. How do you continue to grow, develop, and show up as a leader? Share your recipe for success.

According to Prof. Kirti, passion and knowledge are important. She sleeps, dreams and breathes her work, and is constantly keeping herself up to date with new developments in her field both nationally and internationally. She constantly tries to infuse the same sense of passion amongst her staff. She added that higher education is changing constantly, and ideally, the University of Johannesburg must innovate along with it. UJ offers an exciting space as it welcomes innovation with no compromises made in its quest for social justice. She is proud of the strides that the Division for Teaching Excellence is making, indicating that it is well-known for being innovative and at the forefront in terms of the work undertaken. Prof. Kirti also mentioned that her recipe for success includes sitting quietly and doing her work, additionally, leading and inspiring change in teaching and learning within the broad higher education environment in South Africa, noting also the rapid disruptions in technology spaces.

7. What does juggling a few balls mean for you?

Prof. Kirti reckons that, over the years one gets used to managing multiple tasks because people play different roles and these overlap, interlink, interconnect and one begins to develop a little rhythm and a system. Prof. Kirti shared that she believes that she is pretty well organized, “I am very well planned, I know a week in advance what our plans are in the household, and I know what our plans are at work. I can organize myself accordingly and recalibrate if required,” she shares.

8. If you were to put together a code of practice for women leaders, what would that code be and what would it look like?

Prof. Kirti thinks that one should be passionate about what they do and be deeply respectful to others around them.

Integrity and ethical practice should be central in everything that is undertaken.

Irrespective of race, gender, and class. Prof. Kirti is passionate about higher education she shares, “It is in my blood”. Her message is, “to be enthusiastic, respectful, to keep abreast with the trends in your work environment and to manage all the balls that you have to juggle, and to do so with some level of organization”. Furthermore, she mentioned that it comes with understanding, for example, she has a lot of women in her division, and she understands what it means to have load- shedding. “For example, when you have two small children at home and you’re going to go home to four hours of load- shedding, her thought is, “How best can I as your manager assist you because I know that not everyone can afford to Uber eats every day. So, ensuring that she is sensitive and attuned to the needs of her staff is important.

9. Wathint’ Abafazi, Wathint’ Imbokodo? Mosadi Otshwara Thipa Ka Bo galeng. These are but a few statements that have existed, alluding to the strength of a woman. What is your view on them?

For Prof. Kirti, these statements are quite true, if she looks at women in leadership in higher education, there are examples of women who have led from the front, despite the noise that goes with one’s job.

10. What advice you wish someone had given you at the beginning of your career? And why?

According to Prof. Kirti, the advice she would give to someone is that they should finish their PhD early in life.

Dr Nompumelelo Mkhize

Director: Transformation, University of Johannesburg

Background

Dr. Nompumelelo Mkhize was born in Pietermaritzburg, KwaZulu-Natal, as the third child in a close-knit family. Her parents, Mr. and Mrs. Mkhize, raised her alongside two surviving siblings, though she has experienced the loss of both her father and her elder brother, who have since passed away. Dr. Mkhize's early education took place at a small town known as Edendale and later completing her high school years at an all-girls school (Russell High) in Pietermaritzburg, setting the foundation for her academic and leadership journey.

She pursued her tertiary education both in KwaZulu-Natal and Gauteng, where she developed a strong passion for education, personal growth, and leadership. Dr. Mkhize is a devoted mother, sister, and a loving aunt to a niece and nephew, whom she cherishes deeply. Her family plays a central role in her life, and she is dedicated to fostering a nurturing and supportive environment for them.

In addition to her personal commitments, Dr. Mkhize is deeply passionate about the transformative power of education and is a strong advocate for leadership development, particularly within her community. She strives to make a meaningful impact through her foundation work, inspiring others to value education and embrace leadership roles.



1. What were the early messages that you were hearing about the girl child? Messages that came from people you look up to and messages that ended up inspiring you in your leadership journey.

According to Dr Mkhize's grandmother, the role of a girl child was one of immense responsibility. From a young age, girls were expected to care for themselves and those around them, a duty that extended well into adulthood. Dr Mkhize reflects on how this expectation transcended social class or status; it was a constant through the transition from childhood to womanhood. The care of others was deeply ingrained, and Dr Mkhize grew up with a heightened sense of responsibility not only for herself but also for those around her. Caring for herself came naturally while taking care of others became second nature.

Dr Mkhize fondly recalls how this concept positively shaped her upbringing. Surrounded by encouragement, she often heard from elders in her community that she would become an advocate, as her articulate nature and strong debating skills were evident from a young age. Their belief in her abilities gave her the confidence to assume leadership roles early in life. Whether at church, in primary school, or high school, she was a leader. She attributes much of this to the constant encouragement she received as a girl child, which reinforced her belief that she was destined for leadership. This belief shaped her understanding of her purpose and aligned her growth with the path her family and community had envisioned for her.

2. What are some of the glaring obstacles for women to take up leadership positions in the 21st Century?

Dr Mkhize believes that numerous obstacles continue to hinder women from occupying leadership positions and claiming space in society. Despite the perception that patriarchy has been eradicated, she firmly asserts that it remains prevalent and remains one of the biggest barriers preventing women from advancing into leadership roles. . Is South Africa ready for

female leaders? It almost seems as if women need to be stern and overwhelmingly strong-willed for them to “fit in”. Those who are pushing for gender equity are soon polluted with tags such as distractive or argumentative to give a few examples and this makes women apologetic about their strengths, and capabilities. Often, women are told to grow their emotional intelligence whilst men are viewed as of solid and sound mind.

She explains, “I am expected to be a mother at home, right?! I am also expected to commit to being present at all school functions, to attend school meetings, because we still live in a world where men believe it’s a woman’s duty to do so.” The challenges that come with a present mother, constantly showing up for your children are understated. The expectation is that women should execute all their roles, seamlessly without any complaint.

Dr Mkhize also points out how some leaders schedule work meetings as early as 07:30 AM, which creates difficult choices for women in leadership positions. They must decide whether to prioritize taking their children to school or make alternative arrangements, often feeling conflicted about balancing family responsibilities with professional demands. This, she says, may seem like a small issue, but not every woman in leadership has the luxury of delegating such tasks. This constant struggle creates anxiety for many women leaders, as their male counterparts typically do not face the same challenges. She emphasizes that women in leadership often grapple with the pressures of being both a present mother and a successful professional.

Although Dr Mkhize has found a way to balance her work and personal life, she believes that many women in leadership are trapped between societal expectations of being nurturing mothers at home and competent leaders in the workplace. These dual demands, she notes, present a unique and difficult challenge that women must navigate daily.

3. Are female leaders born or made? Please elaborate as you consider the fact that most women have additional roles like childbearing that require them to still focus on.

Dr Mkhize holds the firm belief that all women are inherently born with leadership qualities. However, she emphasizes that being an effective leader is closely tied to one's ability to discern the specific area in which they are called to lead. According to Dr Mkhize, it is not merely about possessing leadership skills but understanding where those skills are best applied. She argues that no matter how much leadership training one might receive, if a woman is trying to lead in a space she is not called to, she will struggle to succeed in that area. "So, I want to say to you female leaders, every woman is a leader," Dr Mkhize affirms. She further expands on this point by stating that it is essential for every woman to grasp what it truly means to be a woman. She explains that the ability to conceive, give birth, and nurture a human being is not just a biological function but a profound testament to the inherent leadership capabilities that women possess. In Dr Mkhize's words, "being entrusted with the ability to conceive, give birth, and raise another human being is a clear indication that you are a leader in your own right."

In addition to this, Dr Mkhize points out the extraordinary resilience women demonstrate, particularly during pregnancy. Despite enduring the physical and emotional challenges of pregnancy, women are still expected to show up at their workplaces, perform their professional roles, and fulfil social responsibilities, often without acknowledgment of the strain they bear. Society tends to take this for granted, assuming that women have always managed to juggle these roles seamlessly throughout history, making it appear as if this is second nature to them. Yet, Dr Mkhize stresses that the most critical factor is how women tap into this innate leadership gift. She urges women to manifest their leadership abilities in various facets of their lives, be it in their careers, homes, or communities. "If you are a woman who understands the gift that is leadership, you will be able

to lead whoever you were meant to lead with great success,” she concludes.

4. Are women leaders more aggressive than male leaders? What is your view on the statement and kindly unpack it?

Dr Mkhize finds it intriguing—and problematic—that women leaders who exhibit firm or stern leadership styles are often labelled as “aggressive,” while their male counterparts are usually praised or celebrated for displaying the same leadership qualities. She finds terms like “Iron woman” particularly troubling, especially when used in a professional context to describe women leaders. For Dr Mkhize, these labels not only perpetuate negative stereotypes but also undermine the significant contributions these women make to their organisations and fields.

Dr Mkhize believes that women who are often labelled as “aggressive” are, in fact, some of the most brilliant leaders. These women are driven by their commitment to executing their mandates with precision and ensuring that their work meets a high professional standard. She points out that many of these women do not settle for mediocrity; instead, they push for excellence in all they do. Their strong leadership is not rooted in aggression but rather in a desire to see the job done right. To illustrate this point, Dr Mkhize draws a parallel between women leaders with stern leadership styles and mothers raising children. Most mothers discipline their children out of love and a desire to see them succeed, not out of harshness or cruelty. Similarly, women leaders who are firm in their roles are not being aggressive—they are simply focused on fulfilling their responsibilities and ensuring success. “Many women leaders are not aggressive,” Dr Mkhize explains. “They show up, and unapologetically so, because they understand that once the mandate is fulfilled, everyone will be pleased with the results of their hard work.”

She further explains that these women often return to their softer, more nurturing selves once the task at hand is

completed. They can play dual roles—being both firm when necessary and gentle when appropriate. The ability to navigate these different roles does not make them aggressive, but instead demonstrates their versatility and depth as leaders. “I just find the term ‘aggressive’ very disturbing,” Dr Mkhize says, as it fails to capture the true essence of these women’s leadership styles. Instead of focusing on labels, she urges people to recognise the professionalism and excellence that such women bring to their leadership roles.

5. What is the most important risk you have had to take in your leadership journey and why?

Dr Mkhize reflects on the significant decision to “pause” her corporate career and transition to an institution of higher learning, a move that came with a notable salary reduction. For her, this was not a compromise but a bold risk. Before joining the University of Johannesburg, Dr Mkhize had a flourishing career with her previous employer, where her leadership and impact were so profound that the company struggled to accept her resignation. She recalls that had she stayed, she would likely have risen to the role of CEO, given the trajectory of her career and the influence she had in that organisation.

Despite the promising future in corporate, Dr Mkhize felt compelled to make a change for her personal growth and fulfilment. She acknowledges that staying in her corporate role would have meant sacrificing some of her personal goals—particularly her academic aspirations. One of those goals was to earn her Ph.D. and, ultimately, the title of “Doctor” or “Professor” before the age of 40. She admits that had she not made the transition to academia, she would not have achieved these milestones.

For Dr Mkhize, leaving behind a career that was on an upward trajectory, particularly to accept a position with a reduced salary, was undoubtedly a significant risk. However, she emphasizes that this decision was a crucial part of her leadership journey, one that allowed her to pursue her passion for education and personal development. The move was

not just about changing industries, but about aligning her professional path with her long-term goals and aspirations. In hindsight, Dr Mkhize views this risk as essential to her growth and fulfilment as both a leader and an individual.

6. How do you continue to grow, develop and show up as a leader? Share your recipe for success.

Dr Mkhize's approach to continuous growth is deeply rooted in self-awareness and humility. She emphasizes the importance of acknowledging that, as a leader, you do not and cannot know everything. In her view, taking on a leadership role does not signify that you have "arrived" or that you now possess all the answers. Leaders must avoid the mindset that, because they hold a position of authority, they are always right and everyone else is wrong. For Dr Mkhize, leadership is not about having all the knowledge but about maintaining an openness to learning. This learning, she explains, is not limited to formal education or returning to university for additional qualifications. Instead, it involves immersing oneself in understanding the portfolio or department they are responsible for. She uses the example of Prof. Mpedi to illustrate this point. Although he may not hold specific qualifications in engineering, humanities, or health sciences, he is still highly effective in overseeing these diverse areas. "He understands what output should look like," Dr Mkhize explains.

In her view, the key to success lies in a leader's ability to determine what the desired outcomes are and identify the right people to help achieve those goals. Once a leader has a clear vision of the output and has surrounded themselves with the right team, they are well-positioned to succeed. Dr Mkhize stresses the importance of staying informed and up to date with the responsibilities of one's portfolio, but just as crucially, of recognizing the value of the expertise and skills of those around you.

A great leader, she argues, is one who collaborates with and heavily relies on their team members, allowing them to excel in their respective areas of expertise. Success is not

achieved by thinking you have all the answers, but by working together with your team to achieve shared goals. Ultimately, Dr Mkhize believes that a leader must never think they have “arrived” but should always remain open to learning, growing, and trusting in the people around them to win and succeed together.

7. What does juggling a few balls mean for you?

Dr Mkhize emphasises that juggling multiple “balls” requires a deep understanding of oneself. For her, this introspective journey begins with a crucial question: “What would the world have missed had I not been born?” This reflection allows her to identify socio-economic issues that resonate with her values and commitments. By holding herself accountable, she continually evaluates what actions she is taking to address these issues. She challenges herself with the thought: if not her, then who will take on this responsibility?

This commitment led Dr Mkhize to establish the Nompumelelo Foundation, an initiative dedicated to supporting illiterate children in South African townships. Recognizing the urgent need for educational resources and support in these communities, she felt compelled to make a tangible difference in their lives. In addition to her philanthropic efforts, Dr Mkhize actively engages in various personal and professional endeavours. She runs a book club with women leaders she has met throughout her leadership journey, fostering a community of learning and support. Dr Mkhize also plays golf, which serves as a recreational outlet amidst her busy schedule. Moreover, she is a devoted full-time mother, fully aware of the impact her presence has on her children. She believes that integrity fuels her ability to juggle these various responsibilities. For Dr Mkhize, life is about showing up and honouring commitments, even when the circumstances are challenging. “Even when I am coughing, I will die in that meeting,” she shares, underscoring her dedication. “I just need to show up for my kids. It’s important for a parent to be present because, in doing so, you teach

your kids that life is not about giving excuses.” She asserts that being fully engaged teaches her children the value of commitment and accountability.

Dr Mkhize is keenly aware that her presence matters, both as a mother and a leader. She strives to ensure that neither her children nor her team members feel the absence of a “mother” or “leader.” This sense of responsibility means that no “balls” should be dropped. As a woman leader, her focus is on staying organized and on top of her responsibilities, ensuring that tasks are completed even when she feels overwhelmed or exhausted. Her approach exemplifies the importance of resilience, commitment, and the unwavering pursuit of excellence in all aspects of her life.

8. If you could put together a code of practice for women leaders, what would that code be and how would it look like?

Dr Mkhize outlines her personal code of conduct for women leaders, beginning with the imperative to “**Keep abreast!**” This principle underscores the importance of being aware and informed. She cites Prof. Marwala, who poignantly states, “Those who cannot read cannot lead.” Dr Mkhize clarifies that this statement should not be interpreted literally; rather, it highlights the necessity for leaders to be cognisant of their surroundings and the context in which they operate. For Dr Mkhize, keeping abreast means being informed about current affairs, including everyday issues such as the price of petrol, bread, and eggs. It involves understanding economic indicators like the Consumer Price Index (CPI) and recognizing how these factors can affect both oneself and the people being led. She reinforces Prof. Marwala’s assertion by explaining that “a leader who cannot read should not lead people,” as this lack of awareness hinders a leader’s ability to empathize with their team. “You are literally going to be closed off from your people,” she notes. “We are leaders through people, not because we are great, but through the people that we lead.”

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The second tenet of her code is “**Be a mosquito!**” Here, Dr Mkhize draws inspiration from Prof. Mpedi, who uses the metaphor of a mosquito to illustrate the importance of persistent awareness and disruption. Prof. Mpedi notes that although a mosquito is small, it produces an irritating noise that disrupts sleep until it is acknowledged. In the context of leadership, Dr Mkhize explains that leaders must challenge and “irritate” existing structures and the status quo until they are recognized. She believes that true leadership involves continuously pushing boundaries and advocating for the platforms they create. “One is never truly a leader if they do not irritate the status quo,” she asserts.

The third principle in Dr Mkhize’s code is “**Do what you say you are going to do!**” A leader must keep their promises. “If you say you are going to deliver, deliver—even if you are not feeling well. Even when it is uncomfortable or you do not personally believe in what you are delivering, you must fulfil your mandate,” she emphasizes. For Dr Mkhize, accountability to one’s commitments is paramount and is part of what distinguishes effective leaders.

The fourth point is “**Integrity**”. Dr Mkhize highlights the critical nature of integrity, noting that it speaks on behalf of a leader, even in their absence. She shares a powerful example: when a leader embodies integrity, their team members might say, “If only our leader were here, this would have been done, and not just done but done exceedingly well.” Integrity thus builds a foundation of trust and respect that endures beyond a leader’s presence.

Finally, the fifth tenet of Dr Mkhize’s code of conduct is “**Credibility**”. She believes that possessing both integrity and credibility creates a strong reputation that will speak volumes on a leader’s behalf, even after they have departed from this world. Dr Mkhize’s code underscores the essential qualities of self-awareness, persistence, accountability, integrity, and credibility as foundational elements for effective leadership, particularly for women in leadership roles.

9. Watint' Abafazi Watint' Imbokodo and Mosadi Otshwara Thipa Ka BoGaleng. These are a few statements that have existed alluding to the strength of a woman. What is your view on them?

Dr Mkhize reflects on powerful statements such as “You strike a woman; you strike a rock” and “A woman holds a knife at the sharpest edge.” While these phrases may be criticized or shunned in the latter days, she expresses a deep understanding of their origins. In her view, these statements highlight the tenacity inherent in women. She believes that women are naturally resilient and tend not to give up easily; they are “called to a higher power.” For Dr Mkhize, the notion of being meek and apologetic is counterproductive. “Yay!” she exclaims passionately, “if you adopt that mindset, you will struggle, you will not survive.” She emphasizes the importance of strength and resilience in navigating life’s challenges, particularly for women.

Dr Mkhize resonates strongly with the sentiments expressed in these statements. She does not shy away from being compared to a rock; in fact, she embraces it. “Mark me absent,” she declares, indicating that she rejects the idea of being perceived as soft or weak. Instead, she aspires to embody the qualities of an educated, strong, and powerful woman. “I want to be a woman who stands for her family, who stands tall at work, and who shows up all the time,” she states emphatically. She articulates her desire to make her time on earth meaningful, recognizing that her presence has significance. “If I were not here, a lot would have been lost by the people on this earth,” she reflects. This awareness fuels her determination to be impactful in her community and to lead with purpose. Dr Mkhize wholeheartedly identifies with the statements she discusses, viewing them as affirmations of strength, resilience, and the unwavering commitment to contribute positively to the world around her. In doing so, she champions a vision of womanhood that is rooted in power, accountability, and a profound understanding of one’s worth and impact.

10. What advice do you wish someone had given you at the beginning of your career and why?

Dr Mkhize reflects on her journey and expresses a desire that someone should have advised her early on that she would encounter people from all walks of life, and that through these encounters, she need not change who she is. This realization stems from hearing popular advice aimed at women leaders—tips such as “be as firm as a man,” give strong handshakes, or wear suits to meetings. These notions suggest that success for women in leadership requires adopting traditionally masculine traits. However, Dr Mkhize challenges this belief. She argues that when women try to mould themselves to fit into leadership roles that society has historically associated with men, they risk losing something valuable: their inherent femininity. “We slowly lose what God has given us,” she says, stressing that there is no need to relinquish femininity in order to lead effectively. For her, being a leader does not require compromising the qualities that make women unique; instead, she advocates for women to lead authentically, embracing who they are without conforming to external expectations.

Dr Mkhize also wishes she had been told earlier not to overextend herself for work that will still be there tomorrow. This profound reflection underscores the importance of balance, particularly in the demanding world of work and leadership. She stresses that it is essential to prioritize one’s health and well-being, recognizing that overworking can lead to burnout. “Take care of yourself today,” she advises, “so that you can perform at your optimal best tomorrow.” For Dr Mkhize, self-care is not a luxury but a necessity for sustained success. By maintaining a healthy balance between personal well-being and professional responsibilities, women leaders can continue to thrive in leadership roles without sacrificing their authenticity or their health.

In essence, Dr Mkhize’s message is clear: women can lead powerfully without having to conform to rigid societal expectations, and they must prioritize their own well-being to maintain their ability to lead effectively in the long run.

Prof. Kammila Naidoo

Executive Dean: Faculty of Humanities, University of Johannesburg

Background

Prof. Kammila Naidoo grew up in Durban. Her childhood was spent in the inner city of Durban where her parents worked. This exposed her to the lively and diverse environment of Durban City. She recalls the city and the places in which she lived as being multi-ethnic and integrated.

During the 1970s, she attended St Anthony's School in Centenary Road. Despite her Hindu background and her parents not being particularly religious, she developed a strong connection to the school. She was notably enthusiastic about her education, and the school's teachers and principal recognised her dedication. At the age of eleven, she was entrusted with the responsibility of leading the school in prayer, a role that she found to be a powerful experience. Standing next to her principal, she would instruct everyone to bow their heads, setting the tone for her future role as a dean. In addition to her academic pursuits, she did well in sports during her time at the Roman Catholic school. Although it may be surprising to some, she was an athlete who participated in various sports, including running and netball.

Her educational journey continued when she transitioned to a high school in Pietermaritzburg, Raisethorpe Secondary School. This new institution marked a considerable change from her previous Roman Catholic school, as it was a secular and more authoritarian educational



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environment. It was during her high school years that she developed an intense sense of political awareness. She hailed from a politically active family with some relatives in exile. While acknowledging that the political landscape has evolved over the years, she reflects on the different nature of politics during her youth compared to the contemporary political climate.

She recalls that her political awakening occurred during her high school years, marking a departure from her earlier reputation as a diligent student who led the school prayer. She began asking critical questions and also delved into feminist literature which ignited her interest in feminism. This newfound consciousness led her to make a bold statement by cutting her long hair and adorning herself with feminist stickers that proclaimed women's rightful place in the world. This journey of conscientisation and politicisation steered her towards the humanities. Although she could have followed one of many career paths, her desire to contribute to positive change and understand the evolving South African context, influenced her to study the arts (specifically, sociology, politics, economics, and communication) at the University of Durban-Westville.

Her early career took shape at Unisa in the 1990s, just before the democratic elections in South Africa. Unisa, a largely white institution at the time, posed some challenges for her because she was not fluent in Afrikaans. To bridge this gap, she underwent special training to become more competent in Afrikaans. Despite the initial linguistic hurdles, she performed well as a lecturer at Unisa and began her journey in the field of distance education.

Her experience of day-to-day living in Pretoria was markedly different from that which she experienced in Durban, and she found herself adjusting to an unfamiliar environment. However, she enjoyed the change and found Pretoria to be fresh and distinct. In particular, the sociology department at UNISA was young and liberal, emphasising cultural understanding and openness to other perspectives. Her time at

Unisa also led to an opportunity for further academic growth when she received a Commonwealth Scholarship in 1997 to begin a PhD in the United Kingdom. She was then granted unpaid leave to pursue her studies in the United Kingdom for three years. This experience turned out to be life-changing, as it exposed her to an entirely different academic and socio-political environment. She dedicated herself to her studies and managed to complete her PhD in Sociology within the tight three-year time and budget constraints. The sense of urgency and purpose left her with no room for excuses, and she worked tirelessly to achieve her academic goals.

Upon her return from the UK, she found herself growing restless in the field of distance education. She began to contemplate a change in her academic path and decided to transition to a new institution. She did not venture too far, as she made the move to the University of Pretoria (UP). Her career trajectory was marked by considerable progress. She moved from being a Senior Lecturer to an Associate Professor, actively engaging in various academic activities such as teaching, research, and mentoring. Her influence extended beyond the Department, as she played a pivotal role in driving the gender studies program within her faculty. She also started to take on responsibilities related to supervision, mentorship, and training, witnessing her first doctoral students graduate—an exhilarating experience for her.

In September 2010, she embarked on another significant chapter in her academic journey by joining the University of Johannesburg. Over the years, she has amassed experience in academia, with a rich history of professional development and a commitment to education and mentorship along the way.

Throughout her life journey, she endured the trials and tribulations of family life, work-life balance, and motherhood, all of which gave shape and direction to her professional trajectory within the academic realm. Her overarching goal as an academic has been to foster the growth and development of others. Being an educator and seeing her students thrive and reach their full potential has been a source of immense

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satisfaction for her. She firmly believes that there is nothing more rewarding than being a dedicated teacher and making a positive impact on the lives of her students.

Throughout her career, she has strived to maintain a strong ethical foundation and a genuine sense of care for those she interacts with. She acknowledges that her path has been far from smooth, with numerous obstacles and challenges to overcome. However, she believes that she has navigated through these initial difficulties to carve out a meaningful and impactful career in academia.

In her current role as Dean of Humanities at the University of Johannesburg, she expresses contentment with the integrated and purpose-driven environment. She values the University's commitment to Pan-African ideals and sees herself as a part of this vibrant academic space. Reflecting on her career trajectory, she acknowledges the effort she put into building her path at each stage.

From the 1990s to the 2000s, she observed a fundamental transformation within institutions. Notably, she perceived a brisk shift in the landscape of women's leadership roles. In 2013, she assumed the role of Head of the Department of Sociology at UJ, marking a significant milestone. While there had been women in leadership roles before, she believes that she may have been the first woman of colour to hold this position in the department. This change is emblematic of a broader shift in her generation, where women are gaining more opportunities in leadership positions.

Furthermore, her journey took her to the position of a woman dean, which was still an unusual occurrence at the time in the humanities. She notes that, along with her, there are now many other women deans in their respective fields, most of whom may also be pioneers in their roles. This gradual transformation highlights the evolving landscape of leadership within academia. She emphasises that the current state of progress was not achieved without considerable hard work and dedication. The journey has been marked by a commitment to

core values and a determination to create a more inclusive and diverse academic community.

1. What were the early messages that you were hearing about the girl child? Messages that came from people you looked up to and messages that ended up inspiring you on your leadership journey.

Throughout her life, she never subscribed to the notion that there were inherently different opportunities and expectations for boys and girls. This perspective was instilled in her from her school days, with both teachers and parents emphasising equality. Her mother, a schoolteacher herself, particularly encouraged her and her siblings, regardless of gender, to strive for exemplary achievements. She felt that girls should be under even more pressure to excel, as the path might be more challenging for them, compared to their male counterparts. This upbringing instilled a strong work ethic and a drive to succeed in her.

She is grateful that she was never limited or told that certain paths were reserved for her and different ones for her brothers. Her parents had high expectations for their daughters, and her schoolteachers shared the belief that every student should possess a strong work ethic and be highly motivated. This early foundation, rooted in equality and a commitment to hard work, served as an ongoing source of inspiration throughout her life.

While her university lecturers may have had a somewhat different, and less-driven, approach, she attributes her unwavering determination and dedication to her early childhood experiences and the values instilled by her parents and schoolteachers.

2. What are some of the glaring obstacles facing women in leadership positions in the 21st century?

She acknowledges that while universities have evolved in the 21st century, there are still several work domains where

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progress has been slower. Many powerful institutions maintain a predominantly male-dominated culture, often characterised by a strong masculine presence. Even when women are integrated into such environments, they are often confined to specific roles and levels within the hierarchy. This, she believes, leads to a real and tangible glass ceiling for women in these settings.

In her view, the struggle lies in bridging the gap between the democratic principles that support women's rights and the actual realisation of these rights in practice. The challenge is to transform these rights into lived experiences. Within the university context, she emphasises the importance of creating a critical mass of women in leadership positions. At her university, she observes women holding leadership roles at all levels, from middle management to executive leadership, and she believes that this critical mass is essential to sustain progress. If there was only a small number of women in leadership, it would be difficult for them to collectively assert their influence and impact.

She also recognises that not all tertiary institutions are the same, and her perspective is influenced by her position in the South African Humanities Deans' Association. While UJ has seen a positive emergence of women in leadership roles, she acknowledges that many other institutions remain heavily male-dominated.

Addressing the obstacles that persist, she points to deep-seated patriarchal attitudes and structures as key challenges that need to be addressed. To facilitate change, she advocates for efforts at multiple levels, including working with students and implementing curriculum changes within institutions.

3. Are female leaders made or born? Please elaborate as you consider the fact that most women have additional roles like childbearing and childrearing that society still expects them to focus on.

As a sociologist, she passionately believes that women leaders are not simply born; they are shaped by a combination of innate qualities that may manifest early in life and the nurturing and support they receive from those around them. She points out that even an exceptional individual might not reach their full potential if they face significant challenges or obstacles in their life.

In her view, women leaders are both made and shaped by the opportunities they seize to improve themselves. Confidence plays a crucial role, and when others show faith in them and encourage their potential, it can bring out their best. She places a significant emphasis on mentoring, seeing it as a vital tool for growth. Women leaders have a responsibility to help others, especially younger women, shine and reach their potential. She believes that women leaders should actively support and nurture talent, playing a crucial role in fostering the growth of others.

In essence, she views women leaders as a product of their environment, where both their natural-born qualities and their determination to refine their talents are critical. Against this background, she underscores the importance of creating an environment that constantly encourages and supports the development of women leaders.

She believes that for young individuals aspiring to make a difference and play a meaningful role, finding strong role models is crucial. These role models serve as sources of inspiration and guidance, offering traits, paths, and confidence that aspiring individuals can relate to. It is essential for young people to actively engage with these role models and be open to learning from their experiences. A mentorship and learning relationship should be a two-way street, with the mentor becoming a valuable resource for the aspiring individual. In her perspective, acquiring the necessary skills and preparing

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oneself for a leadership role is a key step towards embarking on a leadership path. It involves seeking training and development opportunities that will equip individuals with the knowledge and capabilities needed to excel in one of many more senior positions.

Senior women leaders, she argues, bare a responsibility to identify and nurture talent within their sphere of influence. She takes the initiative to approach young colleagues and encourages them to consider applying for promotion or stepping up into leadership roles. She emphasises the importance of creating opportunities and offering support to those who may doubt their readiness for leadership positions. Her approach is to reassure them that the leadership journey is one that can be taken together, with a commitment to mutual learning and growth. She recognises that being a good leader often involves learning on the job, as there is no one-size-fits-all toolkit for leadership.

She acknowledges that even individuals in high-ranking positions, such as herself, face moments of uncertainty and questions about their roles. She recounts having new Vice-Deans who sought guidance and clarity on their exact roles and responsibilities. In response, she emphasises that while there are institutional expectations there is no formal training manual for such positions. Instead, one begins by immersing oneself in meetings, reading extensively, learning on the job (including learning to decipher the numerous acronyms used) and developing an independent approach.

She firmly believes that individuals should take the initiative to seek coaching and training to excel in their roles. She highlights the abundance of resources available for self-improvement and development. She recognises that sometimes people may be reluctant to attend training or pursue development opportunities, but she encourages young people to understand that there is a wealth of resources at their disposal. Institutions are often eager to invest in the growth and development of their staff, so it is crucial for individuals to seize these opportunities and make them work in their favour.

4. Woman leaders are more aggressive than male leaders. What is your view on the statement?

She firmly rejects the stereotype that women leaders are generally more aggressive than their male counterparts. She points out that while displays of anger or aggression by women may stand out more and be remembered longer, due to being perceived as uncommon behaviour for women, this doesn't mean that women, on average, exhibit more aggression. She highlights that there is no empirical evidence to support such a stereotype.

In her view, instances where women do appear aggressive can often be attributed to the frustration of not being heard or acknowledged, particularly in situations where they find it challenging to assert their position. Sometimes, adopting a more assertive and louder demeanour may be a tactical choice to ensure their voices are heard and their ideas recognised, especially in male-dominated settings.

She also notes that in many cases, aggression might be a necessary response to navigate and succeed in environments where they are outnumbered by men. However, she reiterates that women are not inherently more aggressive than men. In fact, she points out that research suggests that men tend to display more aggression and that most bullies are men.

Her perspective emphasises the importance of understanding the context and the reasons behind certain behaviours, rather than making generalised assumptions about the aggression of women leaders.

5. What is the most important risk you have had to take on your leadership journey and why?

She acknowledges that stepping into the role of a dean has been a significant risk for her. Prior to taking on this position, she had a reputation for being a kind and well-liked person. People supported her, which contributed to her decision to pursue this leadership role.

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However, she recognises that once in the role, she had to shift from being a liked figure to someone responsible for implementing stringent university policies. This transformation meant that she was now required to give instructions, which could sometimes lead to friction with those who had supported her previously. The risk, in her view, lies in potentially losing or demoralizing that support base. On a few occasions, disciplinarys have had to be held. These can be extremely difficult to go through for all involved.

The core risk, as she sees it, is the risk of leadership itself. It involves making decisions and taking actions that may not always align with the preferences or expectations of everyone, leading to the possibility of losing friends or facing criticism from those who were once supportive.

6. How do you continue to grow, develop, and show up as a leader? Share your recipe for success.

She emphasises the importance of being vigilant, agile, and attentive to all aspects of her work. She admits to working consistently and diligently, ensuring that no task is left unattended and that nothing is postponed until tomorrow. Her approach involves staying on top of the demands of her role, whether they pertain to colleagues, staff, or students. By tending to these demands promptly, she prevents them from piling up and causing unnecessary anxiety.

At the end of each day, she takes satisfaction in knowing that all her key tasks have been completed, allowing her to relax and recharge. Her management style is focused on efficiently handling day-to-day responsibilities, to avoid the stress of unfinished work.

She also places great value on proactivity and anticipatory planning. By engaging with departments and individuals to anticipate potential problem areas and create solutions, she helps them stay creative and forward-thinking. This approach encourages innovation and prevents individuals from feeling directionless.

In addition to being agile, she believes in thorough planning and event coordination. Celebrating successes and achievements within her institution helps maintain a positive atmosphere and high morale. Overall, she advocates for a proactive and vigilant approach at all levels of leadership, which includes staying creative, managing day-to-day responsibilities efficiently, and celebrating successes.

7. If you were to put together a code of practice for women leaders, what would the code be and what would it look like?

She emphasises the importance of continuously investing in oneself, particularly in acquiring formal qualifications. Women leaders are often scrutinised based on their qualifications, and she notes that women may even need to possess more qualifications than their male counterparts to compete effectively. Beyond formal qualifications, she underscores the significance of developing strong social and emotional skills, as they play a crucial role in how a leader interacts with others, presents themselves, and is perceived by others.

She acknowledges that many women leaders grapple with imposter syndrome, a feeling of inadequacy despite their achievements. Building self-confidence is essential in overcoming this challenge and thriving in leadership roles. To do so, she believes it's essential to acquire the skills needed to manage oneself effectively.

In her view, a good woman leader is not only self-aware, but also highly attuned to the political and environmental dynamics surrounding them. Understanding the broader context allows leaders to offer strategic solutions and navigate complex challenges. This requires being well-informed about institutional goals and having the ability to think strategically.

Additionally, she notes that women leaders often operate in relative isolation and may not have strong networks. She advocates for the importance of building and leveraging networks, seeking mentors, and collaborating with others.

The support and guidance of mentors and peers have been instrumental in the success of many women leaders, and she encourages women to actively seek out such support to excel on their paths to progress.

8. Watinta Abafazi, Watint’Imbokodo? Mosadi Otshwara Thipa Ka Bo Galeng. These are but a few sayings from the past that allude to the strength of women. What is your view on them?

She believes that there are several statements hinting at the strength of women. She acknowledges that while women can indeed be strong and powerful, it is essential not to adopt an invincible facade. She points out that sometimes, women celebrate their strength to the point where they neglect their vulnerabilities. She emphasises that there are moments when women do break, and during those times, it is crucial to care for themselves and seek support.

In her perspective, women should embrace both their strengths and weaknesses. They shouldn’t feel compelled to present themselves as tough as rocks, on par with macho men in unwavering resilience. Instead, she aligns with the UJ Chancellor’s feminist approach (offered at the 2023 Helen Joseph Memorial Lecture) that recognises the complexities of ‘being human’ in the 21st century.

She draws a parallel to the past, such as the strategic use of portraying women as unbreakable rocks during events like the 1956 Women’s March. However, in the present era, where human rights, gender rights, and democracy prevail, there is no need to maintain the facade of being indestructible. Instead, it is possible to acknowledge and address susceptibilities without compromising one’s strength. Overall, she appreciates the approach presented in the lecture hall, which aligns with the idea that women can be strong while recognising their vulnerabilities and the need for prioritising care and support.

9. What advice did you wish someone had given you at the beginning of your career and why?

She reflects on her own journey in leadership, noting that she spent a significant portion of her career in a teaching role, before being encouraged to step into leadership positions, such as becoming the head of a department and eventually a dean. She confesses that she never imagined herself in these leadership roles and initially viewed it as playing a game.

She expresses a desire for someone to have recognised her leadership potential earlier in her career and encouraged her to take on leadership roles. She believes that there may have been a misconception that she was primarily a supportive and “nice” person who excelled in the background rather than in leadership positions.

Her perspective is that women often tend to take on supportive roles and help others to lead but are slow or hesitant to see themselves as potential leaders. She regrets that she was not encouraged or did not see the possibility of playing a leadership role earlier in her career, possibly around 15 years ago. She believes that women should be encouraged to start their leadership journeys early, rather than waiting until they are deemed more mature to be respected in leadership roles.

Ultimately, she advocates for nurturing and empowering younger women to take on leadership positions earlier in their careers, recognising that they are fully capable of excelling in such roles.

Prof. Nadine Petersen

Executive Dean: Faculty of Education, University of Johannesburg

Background

Prof. Petersen holds the position of Dean of Education at the University of Johannesburg (UJ). Her career path began as a teacher. She taught for approximately 8.5 years. She describes this experience as a “hard proving ground” where she had to mature quickly as both a professional and an educator.

Her journey into academia took an unexpected turn when she approached the Dean of Education to address a racist lecturer’s mistreatment of black students. To her surprise, she was offered a job as a tutor coordinator despite not having an honours degree at the time. This job opportunity was part of an employment equity initiative to increase black representation at the University.

She has been associated with her current institution and its predecessor for at least 26 years, progressing through various ranks. She acknowledges that the journey has not been easy, even though her institution is considered highly transformed.

She identifies herself as an activist, emphasising her commitment to justice, fairness, equality, and gender issues. Her activism extends beyond women’s rights to address broader societal inequalities. She highlights that the experiences of women vary significantly, based on factors like race, and says it is essential to recognise and address these



differences to ensure equitable representation and progress for all women.

She also underscores the importance of acknowledging the unique struggles faced by women from different racial backgrounds, such as Black, White, Indian, and Coloured women. She believes that paying attention to these differences is crucial to effectively address and advocate for the diverse needs and experiences of women in society.

1. What were the early messages that you were hearing about the girl child? Messages that came from people you looked up to and messages that ended up inspiring you on your leadership journey.

She expressed her thoughts on the predominant messages she received from what she referred to as the Coloured community, where girls were expected to be seen and not heard. She noted the stark contrast in how girls and boys were treated, with boys being encouraged to pursue careers while girls were confined to certain roles.

Growing up with a single father seemed to have a profound impact on her perspective. Her father never viewed her gender as a limitation. Despite being the eldest of two children, with a younger brother who had become a successful businessman, her father never hesitated to emphasise her intelligence. He often praised her, even comparing her favourably to her brother, although he was more successful in conventional terms. Her father's constant message to her was that she could achieve anything she set her mind to.

Her father's advice also included a memorable analogy: "If people are bigger than you, both literally and figuratively, pick up a brick and defend yourself, throw it at them, lob it at them." This message, to never feel overpowered and to stand up for oneself, had stayed with her throughout her life. She firmly believed that no one should be considered too big to be challenged or brought down to size.

Her family history also played a significant role in shaping her values and determination. Her father's eldest sister had endured years of exile and witnessing the challenges she faced and the impactful role she played, served as a source of inspiration for her.

From an early age she had learned to speak up, advocate for others, and take a stand. She had been fortunate to encounter strong women who served as teachers and mentors in her life, each with unique qualities that she could learn from. However, she emphasised that her learning was not limited to women alone; she had also been influenced by remarkable men. In academia, she highlighted individuals like Professor Jace Pillay as exemplary figures who had always supported her and been there when needed.

In conclusion, her upbringing and life experiences had instilled in her the belief that one's gender should never limit one's potential. Her father had always treated her as an equal and encouraged her to lead, leaving a lasting impression that shaped her values and determination to overcome obstacles.

2. What are some of the glaring obstacles facing women in leadership positions in the 21st century?

She highlighted several issues that she believed women commonly face. One recurring challenge she mentioned was the constant messages, both explicit and subtle, that often undermine women's self-confidence and make them doubt their abilities. Many women, she noted, struggle with impostor syndrome, questioning whether they are truly good enough for the roles they aspire to. In contrast she observed that men often exhibit unwavering confidence, even in situations where they may not be the most qualified, leaving her curious about the origins of such self-assuredness.

She attributed this difference in confidence to societal norms and socialisation, suggesting that while society encourages men to forge ahead without restraint, it simultaneously implies that women should hold themselves

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back. She felt this contributes to women not fully believing in their own potential.

Additionally, she expressed concerns about the lack of support from managers when it comes to women advancing in their careers. She believed that women often need stronger advocates to help them secure leadership positions, even when they are fully capable. She questioned the assumption that every man who ascends to a leadership role is 100% prepared for it and asserted that there should be more robust mechanisms in place to promote women into leadership positions, beyond mere lip service and superficial leadership programmes.

Furthermore, she emphasised the need for effective mentoring, noting that not all mentors provide the necessary guidance. In her experience some mentors, who were women themselves, didn't encourage her to speak up and be assertive. Instead, they inadvertently conveyed the message that having a voice was less important. She underscored the importance of mentors who empower women to be outspoken and confident in their leadership roles.

Lastly, she discussed the issue of gender-based pay disparities, pointing out that women are often paid less than men for similar positions even within academia. She highlighted historical discrepancies at her institution, where men consistently earned more than women, reinforcing the gender pay gap.

She argued that women's struggles encompass not only personal doubts but also systemic challenges, including societal expectations, inadequate support from managers, suboptimal mentoring, and gender-based pay disparities. She emphasised the need for substantial changes and genuine commitment to address these issues and promote gender equality in academia.

Professor Nadine emphasised that women in leadership roles are not solely defined by their professional lives; they are also mothers and wives. She underscored the importance of acknowledging that we still live in a society where certain

traditional expectations persist. While women may take on leadership positions, they also have responsibilities and commitments in their personal lives, including caring for their children and managing their households.

She recounted her own experiences as a young lecturer, recalling a time when she had to pick up her daughter from school every day. meetings were often scheduled during that crucial time which had left her in a difficult position. Faced with this dilemma, she made the decision to prioritise her child's needs and skipped the meetings for two years. She felt that those organising the meetings, who were mostly men without children, didn't fully grasp her challenges. This created tensions and highlighted the disconnect between the demands of her personal life and professional responsibilities.

She outlined five key challenges faced by women in leadership: self-doubt, limited financial support, the need to balance personal and professional lives, the lack of understanding from colleagues without similar family responsibilities, and structural issues within organisations, that sometimes support individuals she perceived as ill-suited for leadership roles. Professor Nadine believed that addressing these challenges is essential for achieving true gender equality and fostering an inclusive environment for women in leadership positions.

3. Are female leaders born or made? Please elaborate as you consider the fact that most women have additional roles like childbearing and childrearing that society still expects them to focus on.

Professor Nadine Petersen encountered labels like “loud,” “arrogant,” “conceited,” and “aggressive” being directed at her, among others. She believes in not being too quick to judge. She doesn't imply that everyone needs to aspire to be a CEO of a company, but rather that leadership can manifest in diverse ways. In her opinion, anyone can develop leadership qualities, given the right socialisation, training, and opportunities.

She firmly believes that every woman has the potential to evolve into a leader. Her perspective extends beyond traditional CEO roles to encompass leadership in various domains, including personal development and academic careers. She perceives leadership as the capacity to guide oneself, as well as the ability to lead others, particularly young individuals with whom one engages. For her, the concept of leadership spans a wide array of roles in which women can take the lead, reflecting the diversity of opportunities for women to demonstrate leadership qualities.

4. Woman leaders are more aggressive than male leaders. What is your view on this statement?

She strongly objects to the notion that aggression is a valid label for her behaviour. She perceives the term “aggression” as a label often wielded by men to characterise women who assert themselves. She points out the double standard, noting that men who exhibit similar assertiveness are described using words like “forthright” and “confident.” In contrast, when she engages in the same behaviour she is often labelled as “loud” and “aggressive.” Professor Nadine dismisses these labels as baseless and nonsensical. She believes that sometimes she is compelled to adopt a more forceful communication style simply to ensure that her voice is heard. When she speaks up, she has frequently encountered dismissiveness or indifference towards her opinions. Consequently, she may resort to persistence and repetition to make her points understood.

In her view, what may be interpreted as “aggression” is, in fact, a strategic response to the need to be heard and acknowledged. She suggests that when others fail to grasp her message the first time, raising her voice becomes a means of ensuring that her perspective is recognised and taken seriously.

5. What is the most important risk you have had to take on your leadership journey and why?

Speaking up has always been an integral part of her approach particularly when her views weren't aligned with a positive consensus. She's not afraid to take a stance that challenges the status quo, to question, and to offer critiques. This assertiveness is not a one-time occurrence, but a consistent aspect of her approach.

She recognises that speaking up carries inherent risks. When you voice dissent or critique it often leads to alienation as not everyone is receptive to change. Many individuals have grown comfortable with the existing situation and may be resistant to any form of criticism or change. Speaking out makes her vulnerable and exposed, and at times, she lacks support from fellow women, who may be hesitant to do the same.

She firmly believes in the importance of speaking up even if it means offering direct and unvarnished feedback. She acknowledges that she may not always be the most tactful person, but when she voices an opinion, she does so forthrightly. If her approach isn't well-received, she doesn't consider it her problem.

In her professional interactions, she believes that individuals should be able to accept her comments at face value and respond accordingly. She also acknowledges that people's egos are often intertwined with established processes and the way things have always been done. Consequently, when she raises concerns, it can be perceived as a personal attack or a challenge to their egos. Despite these risks, she remains committed to speaking up, recognising that it has always been and continues to be a significant risk she's willing to undertake, in the pursuit of meaningful change and progress.

6. How do you continue to grow, develop, and show up as a leader? Share your recipe for success.

Professor Nadine does not claim to have a fixed recipe for leadership but believes in continuous growth. She's open to receiving input from everyone, particularly when it's constructive, even if she may not always like what she hears. She values the insights of her close friends and colleagues, even when their feedback isn't always popular or aligns with her preferences. Instead of becoming defensive, she takes a self-reflective approach to understand what she might not be seeing and how she can improve her behaviour.

Seeking advice is a recurring practice for her, and she appreciates that guidance comes from various spheres, not just academics. Her younger brother extends resources and support to aid her growth. Consultants and senior colleagues also contribute by helping her understand how she can present herself as a leader.

In her leadership role she aspires to be an activist leader who fearlessly addresses issues that need attention and doesn't shy away from speaking up when things aren't right. She recognises that trust isn't automatic but must be earned through actions. Her core values revolve around justice, fairness, equality, and equity, which guide her behaviour and decisions.

She emphasises that she's not in leadership to win a popularity contest or make friends. While she appreciates being liked and friendly with others, her primary focus is on fulfilling her role effectively. If her actions and decisions aren't well-liked by everyone, she doesn't consider it her problem. She's resolute in her commitment to calling out issues and making principled decisions, even if they may be seen as harsh at times. Her leadership is grounded in her unwavering principles and dedication to bringing about positive change.

7. What does juggling a few balls mean to you?

It is a common reality for many women to juggle multiple responsibilities, much like balancing many apples at once. In her case, she has a family, and she and her partner share the responsibility of four grown children. Additionally, she provides care for her elderly father who has Alzheimer's disease, which is a significant obligation.

She's also had a dedicated employee who has been instrumental in looking after her daughter over the years, a crucial support system that has allowed her to reach her current position. She feels a sense of obligation toward her employees and has naturally taken on other responsibilities and relationships as well.

She emphasises that her support extends beyond just financial assistance; it also involves investing her time and effort. This constant juggling can be challenging, as it may lead to neglecting personal well-being which includes one's physical health.

Her brother recently provided her with valuable advice and suggested that she should set boundaries for her direct reports. He recommended that they shouldn't contact her beyond a certain time, allowing her the space to disconnect and recharge. She recognises that women often take on numerous responsibilities, due to societal expectations and the desire to prove themselves in their roles. She personally is driven by ambitious goals and strives for excellence in her professional life.

Professor Nadine doesn't settle for standing second in line; she aims to be the best in her field and believes that if she's part of a team, she should be the best team member possible. While her drive is commendable, and she acknowledges that it can lead to taking on more than one can handle. She shares an example of a recent request for help with a bank account issue, which took three hours of her time to resolve. She understands that support isn't solely about money; it encompasses emotional and practical support as

well. She frequently finds herself supporting not only her immediate family but also others who seek her assistance in various ways. In essence her narrative reflects the complex and demanding nature of women's roles, often characterised by the need to balance multiple responsibilities, while striving for personal and professional success.

8. If you were to put together a code of practice for women leaders, what would that code be and what would it look like?

Professor Nadine believes codes of practice should be grounded in strong principles and values. As she mentioned earlier, there are four key principles that hold importance for her. She also believes that care should be an integral component of this code. When she says care, she does not mean a superficial or insincere form of kindness. It should be about genuinely caring for the well-being of others, and this concern may manifest in various ways.

She illustrates this with an example, that she once had to have a difficult conversation with a close friend, where she told her that she might not be suited for an academic career and that she was potentially wasting her time. It was a challenging conversation, and it caused a strain in their friendship for a while. However, she believed she was demonstrating care because her friend was struggling and constantly feeling like a failure. True care involves genuine concern for someone's well-being and their path to progress.

In a code of practice for women or any leader, she believes that if you lack values, principles, and a substantial dose of this kind of genuine care, you're not fulfilling your role effectively. "It's not about being nice to everyone or offering empty compliments". It is about having a deep-seated concern for the well-being and advancement of others. "Without these elements, you're simply wasting your time".

When she says someone is doing well, she means it with every fibre of her being, and does not say it just for the sake of

it or to deceive anyone. Genuine care and support for the well-being and progress of others should be at the core of any code of practice for leaders, especially for women.

9. Watinta Abafazi, Watint’Imbokodo? Mosadi Otshwara Thipa Ka Bo Galeng. These are but a few sayings from the past that allude to the strength of women. What is your view on them?

These sayings have been entrenched in her culture for an extended period. Nevertheless, she contends that their original meaning and significance have gradually diminished over time. Given the prevailing gender-based violence and the impunity with which individuals, especially women, endure physical, emotional, and mental harm, these sayings no longer resonate with her.

She still upholds belief in the fundamental worth and empowerment that these sayings can offer, but she laments their trivialisation and misuse. They are frequently evoked on occasions like Woman’s Day, often by politicians and other individuals seeking to make a statement. However, she maintains that unless society, institutions, and individuals genuinely embody the values and principles encapsulated within these statements through their actions, these sayings remain devoid of substance and meaning. In essence, she argues that these sayings must be revisited and reclaimed in a manner that aligns with the urgent imperative to effectively address gender-based violence and inequality. Merely reciting them without substantive action, she contends, does a disservice to their original intent.

10. What advice do you wish someone had given you at the beginning of your career and why?

She expressed a sentiment that resonates with many women. She wishes that she had received advice to be more astute, less trusting, and less naive when it came to financial offers presented to her during her career. In many organisations,

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there's a prevailing illusion that women are receiving the best possible deals, and that other women are always looking out for their interests. This can often be misleading.

She has come to realise that assuming the initial offers women receive are the best the institution can provide is a mistake. She acknowledges that most men are more inclined to negotiate with counteroffers, a practice that women should not shy away from. Reflecting on her own career, she can see instances where she may have disadvantaged herself because she didn't negotiate for better terms.

One significant challenge she highlights is the secrecy surrounding salaries and financial matters in organisations, not only at UJ, but in many other places as well. This lack of transparency means women may not be fully aware of how they could potentially shortchange themselves. Looking back on her own journey at the age of 57, she sees that she may have been at a disadvantage over the past 20-30 years.

She emphasises the importance of young women understanding that this disadvantage can compound over time. If someone earns more than you for just five years, they are putting away significantly more money for their future. She acknowledges that women often operate under the assumption that the organisation has their best interests at heart, but the organisation may not prioritise gender parity as much as hoped.

In her view, it is crucial for women to pay closer attention to their financial situations and not assume that the organisation will automatically do what's best for them. She believes that if organisations genuinely cared about women, there would be greater parity between men and women in terms of compensation and opportunities.

Ms Lerato Riba

*Executive Director: Financial Governance and Control,
University of Johannesburg*

Background

As the eldest child in her family, Ms Riba shared that her early responsibilities of looking after her siblings, learning from her parents, and her natural inclination towards being risk-averse, played a significant role in shaping her career choices.

Ms Riba explained that her family background presented her with two primary career paths. On her father's side, many family members pursued commerce-related programmes, while on her mother's side, there was a focus on the medical field. However, her affinity for numbers and logical thinking led her to choose a career in chartered accountancy.

She initially considered actuarial science but realised that it wasn't the right fit during her university studies at UCT. Her academic journey wasn't without its challenges. After excelling as an A student in high school, she encountered difficulties during her first semester at university, especially while studying actuarial science. She faced a critical decision point where she had to choose whether to dwell on her struggles or take proactive steps to find her true passion. Ms Riba decided to pivot her academic path, following her interest in chartered accountancy.

Her dedication and hard work paid off as she successfully completed her undergraduate studies within the required time frame. However, the challenges continued as she delved into the



professional world of chartered accountancy. She shared her experiences of the rigorous process, including completing her articles and writing board exams.

One remarkable aspect of her journey was her determination to overcome obstacles. She highlighted the pride she felt in overcoming challenges during her studies and exams, particularly in obtaining her CTA (Certificate of Theory in Accounting).

Ms Riba also emphasised her belief that leadership was not limited to positions or titles; instead, it was a choice that individuals could make in various aspects of their lives. She encourages the early adoption of leadership qualities and traits, as they can have a positive impact throughout one's life.

Furthermore, Ms Riba discussed her professional experiences, noting that she worked in various companies that significantly contributed to her personal growth. Her career path took her through different sectors, including the public sector. She mentioned her role at the National Treasury and how it eventually led her to her current position at the University of Johannesburg.

In summary, Ms Riba's journey is marked by her resilience, adaptability, and a strong commitment to her chosen path, which has led her to become a successful professional in the field of chartered accountancy and a leader in her own right. Her story underscores the importance of embracing challenges and seizing opportunities along the way.

1. What are the early messages that you were hearing about the girl child? Messages that came from people you look up to and messages that ended up inspiring you in your leadership journey.

She shared the significant influence of her family, particularly her grandparents and parents, on her personal development and confidence. Ms Riba was fortunate to have both maternal and paternal grandparents in her life while growing up in a household where both of her parents were present. This family

environment played a pivotal role in shaping the perspective she formed about herself and her potential.

Ms Riba emphasised that her parents never differentiated between their children based on gender, despite the political concepts of their time. They instilled in her the belief that she could aspire to be anything she chose in life. They encouraged her to be confident in her abilities and never limited her based on traditional gender roles. She fondly mentioned that her parents' support was so empowering that she jokingly mentioned knowing how to change a car tyre because her mom taught her and being intentional in handling household chores due to her dad's influence.

For Ms Riba, the voices that encouraged her to believe she could achieve anything while being authentic to herself left a lasting impression and shaped the person she has become today. She carries this belief in herself and her capabilities, which has contributed to her confidence and her determination to pursue her chosen path in life.

Ms Riba's upbringing in a supportive and egalitarian family environment, where gender was not a limiting factor, played a vital role in shaping her self-belief and confidence. These early influences have had a significant impact on her life and have contributed to her sense of empowerment and determination.

2. What are some of the glaring obstacles for women to take on leadership positions in the 21st century?

Ms Riba discussed her perspective on the challenges women faced in the workplace particularly when it came to traditional gender roles and the impact on their career progression. Ms Riba believes that traditional roles, which often box women into the category of nurturers and caregivers, while not always representative of the whole, could be a positive aspect if viewed in a more inclusive manner. She pointed out that the work environment had not adequately accommodated those roles, thus posing challenges for women.

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According to Ms Riba, one of the most significant issues she has experienced and continues to observe in today's world is the impact of women as child-bearers on their career progression. She highlights the fact that women often need to take time off from the office for certain periods due to pregnancy and childcare responsibilities. In certain professions, this is still viewed as a potential hindrance to career advancement.

She shared a personal example, saying, "if I look at some of my male counterparts, who were perhaps at the same career level as I was when I decided to rear my family and had to take a step back to make time for these responsibilities, I felt the impact. On the male side, life continues as usual thus presenting gender inequalities." Ms Riba expresses her concern that workplaces have not yet found effective ways to prevent these challenges from hindering women's career progress.

For Ms Riba, it is unfortunate that no adequate solutions have been found to address this issue in the workplace. She believes that when something is seen as a hindrance, it is crucial to explore how it can be turned into an advantage or an opportunity for growth. To address these challenges, she personally pursued further education and sought ways to bring a unique set of skills to the table, beyond what is traditionally expected of chartered accountants. She advises others to do the same and encourages them to find ways to turn hindrances into opportunities to contribute distinctiveness to their work.

Finally, Ms Riba's insights shed light on the challenges women face due to traditional gender roles and the impact on their career development. She emphasises the importance of finding innovative ways to navigate these challenges and bring uniqueness to one's professional journey, ultimately contributing to a more inclusive and equitable work environment.

3. Are female leaders born or made? Please elaborate as you consider the fact that most women have additional roles like childbearing and childbirth that require them to focus on caring as well.

Ms Riba addressed a question concerning the idea that women, by virtue of bearing and raising children, might be seen as being naturally born into leadership roles. She expressed her perspective on this matter and highlighted her belief that leaders were not born but made.

Ms Riba clarifies that she doesn't entirely agree with the notion that women are automatically born into leadership due to their role in childbearing and caregiving. Instead, she believes that leadership is a conscious decision and a choice that individuals make. She stated, "In any circumstance, do I choose to take a lead on something, or do I sit back and allow things to happen around me?"

She further explains that because leadership is a matter of choice, it is something that is developed and nurtured over time. Various factors contribute to an individual's journey towards becoming a leader. These factors can include the passage of time (accumulated experience), specific life circumstances, and a personal interest in exploring leadership opportunities further.

4. Women leaders are more aggressive than male leaders. What is your view on this statement? Kindly unpack it.

She highlights an essential perspective on leadership and the relationship between personality traits and gender. According to her, individuals have the agency to choose the personality traits they wish to emphasise in their leadership style, irrespective of their gender.

Ms Riba clarifies that if a person decides to adopt an aggressive leadership style, it is a result of their personal choice rather than being determined by their gender. She emphasises that there are various leadership styles, and

people bring different qualities to the table. Some individuals may naturally lean towards more aggressive approaches, but this inclination is a matter of personal choice and what resonates with them.

She further stresses the importance of assertiveness in leadership, noting that it is an invaluable quality for all leaders to possess, as opposed to aggression. Different situations may call for the application of various leadership traits, and it is up to the individual leader to decide which traits to emphasise. Ms Riba's view is that these choices should not hinder leaders from achieving their goals.

Ultimately, Ms Riba emphasises that personality traits and leadership styles are individual choices and should not be attributed to gender. In her perspective, leadership qualities are not gender-specific but rather a reflection of the individual's unique personality and preferences. Key takeaway is for leaders to bring their authentic selves to the workplace, in that way promoting diversity, which has been proven to enhance workplace performance.

5. What is the most important risk that you have had to take in your leadership journey and why?

Ms Riba's understanding of leadership resonates with a definition that focuses on one's ability to influence others to take actions they might not typically take. In her view, effective leadership involves having a vision of what needs to be accomplished and guiding others along a path towards that vision. She emphasised that this path is not without challenges as it often involves a mix of opportunities and hindrances.

Ms Riba explains that achieving the envisioned outcome often requires taking risks. She likens this aspect to an academic discussion, highlighting that in the pursuit of a goal, individuals often encounter various risks and uncertainties. Despite these challenges, she believes in the saying that "anything worth achieving does not come easy."

Finally, Ms Riba's perspective on leadership centres on the idea of influencing others to pursue actions that may not be easy but are worth it in the end. It involves having a clear vision, navigating through a mix of opportunities and obstacles, and being willing to take risks to achieve the desired outcome. This perspective underscores the determination and commitment often required in leadership roles.

6. How do you continue to grow, develop and show up as a leader? Share your recipe for success.

Ms Riba shares her perspective on the concept of achieving success and emphasises that she doesn't believe there is a single, foolproof recipe for achieving it. She acknowledges that she is still on her own journey and believes that the path to success is not a 'one-size-fits-all' notion.

Ms Riba highlights the importance of drawing joy from interacting and engaging with a wide array of people. In her view, this interpersonal connection and learning from others is a significant factor in personal and professional growth. She stresses that when individuals engage with people whom they view as different from themselves, they often find valuable lessons to learn.

Furthermore, Ms Riba emphasises the value of being intentional about learning and personal development. She shares that, in her career, she always seizes opportunities to further her education and professional development. She believes it's important to be deliberate in this pursuit. She also recommends exploring personal interests and expanding one's knowledge into areas one might not have initially considered.

She noted, "I think it is important to just expose yourself to experiences and knowledge because that contributes to being able to relate well with others, and that, for me, is growth."

Ms Riba's perspective underscores the belief that there is no universal path to success, and the journey is unique for each individual. She places a strong emphasis on engaging

with diverse individuals, being intentional about learning and development, and exploring personal interests as key components of personal and professional growth.

7. What does juggling a few balls mean for you?

Ms Riba shares her experiences as a multitasking individual and the challenges of managing multiple responsibilities in a dynamic world. She jokingly expresses her desire for a personal assistant in all facets of her life, due to her propensity for multitasking. She emphasises that in this rapidly changing world, having an effective strategy for juggling various responsibilities simultaneously is crucial.

Ms Riba stresses the importance of prioritisation to prevent burnout and safeguard mental health. She emphasises the significance of having a strong value system that guides individuals in determining their priorities. She shares, “I think that the key for me in terms of how to prioritise and minimise the risk of adversely affecting mental health, is possessing fundamental values around who you are and what role you bring to society at large. This proves invaluable in the quality of decisions taken.”

Ms Riba also acknowledges the challenges of being a working mother and the guilt associated with having to prioritise certain responsibilities over others. She reiterates that the ability to prioritise effectively is closely tied to one’s value system.

Ms Riba highlights her experiences as a multitasking individual in a fast-paced world. Ms Riba stresses the importance of effective prioritisation as a means to prevent burnout and safeguard mental health. She emphasises the role of fundamental values in guiding one’s priorities.

8. If you were to put together a code of practice for women leaders, what would that code be and what would it look like?

Ms Riba shares her code for success, which comprises three fundamental principles. First and foremost, she emphasises the importance of ‘bringing the authentic you to the table.’ Ms Riba believes that an individual’s authenticity is invaluable, as each person possesses unique qualities and experiences that can contribute positively to any situation. She underscores this as her golden rule. Secondly, she stresses the significance of self-discovery and continuous personal growth. Knowing oneself is a lifelong journey, and she encourages individuals to invest in this exploration. Lastly, Ms Riba highlights the idea that ‘it’s not all about you.’ She reminds us that we are all part of a larger collective and that valuing the contributions and perspectives of others is essential for success.

9. Wathinta Abafazi, Wathint’ Mbokodo? Mosadi Otswara Thipa ka Bo Galeng. These are a few statements that have existed, alluding to the strength of a woman. What is your view on them?

Ms Riba emphasises the importance of recognising that individuals bring a wide range of traits and attributes to the table, and these qualities are not solely determined by gender. She notes that historical stereotypes and biases still persist today, often associating certain traits more with one gender than the other. Ms Riba expresses her view that such stereotypes may lead to missed opportunities as her belief is that while women can rise to the occasion as alluded to by the above saying, there are no inherent limitations due to gender. All individuals have their assortment of qualities to bring to the table, and thus contribute to the collective good.

10. What advice do you wish someone had given you at the beginning of your career? And why?

Ms Riba expresses her gratitude for having persevered with the chartered accountancy profession. She characterises it as a journey that, despite its challenges, also brings joy, fulfilment and an array of opportunity. She emphasises the importance of taking the journey as it comes and of viewing every experience as a learning opportunity, while being intentional about it.

Ms Riba also reflects on how, had she known about the opportunities this profession presented as well as the impact one is able to make, at the beginning of her career, she might have been kinder to herself, acknowledging that life unfolds as it is meant to, with a purpose to how things transpire.

Ms Khathu Sibanda

Chief Information Officer, University of Johannesburg

Background

Ms Khathu, currently serving as the Chief Information Officer at the University of Johannesburg (UJ), hails from Limpopo, South Africa. Her educational journey began in Venda, where she attended a mid-primary school. At the age of 12, she had the opportunity to enrol in a boarding school in Lebowakgomo, which played a pivotal role in shaping her independence from a young age. During this period, neither of her parents was present, and the boarding school allowed students to return home only quarterly. This experience taught her valuable life skills, including financial management, laundry, and self-sufficiency.

Her time at the boarding school also brought her face to face with the disparities in financial resources. Observing that some students had more financial means than she did, she took the initiative to perform services such as laundry and room cleaning for her better-off peers in exchange for compensation. This experience provided her with insights into societal differences in needs and wants.

She pursued her tertiary education at the University of the North in Limpopo and University of Pretoria and embarked on her professional journey as a graduate in training at Eskom, where she gained significant experience and honed her professional skills. Her career at Eskom progressed, eventually leading her to managerial and executive



roles. Alongside her corporate journey, she nurtured her entrepreneurial spirit, co-founding a company with a former colleague during her tenure at Eskom where she did work for MTN, BCX and Gijima. However, she later realised that entrepreneurship was not her calling.

Subsequently, she held leadership positions at the Electronic Toll Collection, a special-purpose vehicle under SANRAL before eventually joining UJ. In addition to her professional endeavours, she is a loving spouse and a dedicated mother to three sons.

1. What were the early messages that you were hearing about the girl child? Messages that came from people you looked up to and messages that ended up inspiring you on your leadership journey.

Khathu reflected on her childhood experiences and highlighted the prevalent traditional gender roles imposed on women, where they were predominantly assigned domestic and caregiving responsibilities. During her formative years, she witnessed a shifting landscape as these traditional gender roles began to evolve.

Her father played a significant role in challenging these traditional norms. Recognising her potential, he defied gender stereotypes by enrolling her in a technical school. This choice was particularly significant given the perception of such environments was predominantly male dominated.

Throughout her upbringing, she fondly recalls her father's empowering words which became a guiding principle in her life. He often reminded her, 'Your individuality is defined by your principles, values, and inherent qualities, not by external influences.' These words instilled in her the belief in self-empowerment and the importance of defining one's identity and worth independently from external influences.

She shared that "Leaders always talk about the limitless opportunities and possibilities that exist for women; however, these are very scarce and rare. It is extremely challenging for

women to excel in technical environments.” She expressed that her father instilled in her a “can do and will do” attitude, giving an example that one day she came from school and told her father that she found one of the subjects she was doing, Technical Drawing, to be too difficult for her. With that challenge, she requested to inquire about whether she could change the subject – , in her pursuit, she learned that the subject was an additional subject and not compulsory. She did not have to do it. She added that her father empowered her to address and face difficulties head-on, challenging the status quo and encouraging her not to stick to the normal way of doing things.

Her mother consistently imparted knowledge about her family’s historical background and everything she had overcome in life. With her mother coming from a poor background, her early life was marked by the absence of her grandfather, who left her family when she was very young. In the face of this challenge, her great-grandmother stepped in to provide guidance and support, ensuring that her mother could pursue a nursing career.

Throughout her upbringing, her mother shared stories from her own childhood, emphasising the importance of resilience and the belief that one could achieve excellence in life, even with limited resources. Her mother instilled in her the notion that she could accomplish anything she set her mind on, regardless of the constraints she faced.

She recognises the vital roles played by both her parents in her life journey. She acknowledges the invaluable support of a diverse group of individuals who have served as role models, mentors, and sources of inspiration. Collectively, these figures have made significant contributions to her personal and professional development which ultimately shaped her into the person she is today.

2. What are some of the glaring obstacles facing women in leadership positions in the 21st Century?

Khathu emphasised the challenges women face in achieving work-life balance. She highlighted how the expectation of balancing career and family responsibilities often impacts women. As women progress rapidly in their careers, they may face a dilemma where pursuing their professional ambitions may require external support for household tasks, such as childcare, cooking and cleaning. This situation can lead to judgments about their commitment to their households. Conversely, if their careers do not advance, it can negatively affect them. Khathu also underscored that work-life balance remains a significant obstacle for women. She noted that there have been improvements in the 21st century, as more men are actively partnering with their spouses to support them in daily tasks, contributing to a more balanced approach to life and work.

Khathu probed into the concepts of the 'glass ceiling' and the 'glass cliff.' The term 'glass ceiling' signifies the formidable barriers that women often encounter in their professional careers. She illustrated this concept by highlighting situations where women are offered challenging roles, only to face insurmountable obstacles. She noted that women may enter such positions with the apprehension of encountering an invisible 'glass ceiling,' only to experience substantial setbacks.

Khathu also addressed the issue of gender biases in professional settings. She provided an illustrative example wherein a woman may suggest a particular course of action during a meeting, only to have her idea disregarded. Conversely, when a man offers a similar suggestion using different phrasing, he is more likely to receive credit for the idea. Khathu emphasised that women often encounter unfair stereotyping, being pigeonholed into roles and compartments that do not align with their abilities and aspirations. Regarding the assumption that women are limited to caregiving roles, she further added that women should be vocal, especially

where gender biases are displayed. Instances where a woman's suggestion would be ignored but accepted if submitted by a man have found their way into boardrooms. She added that women should stand their ground and make their point. Additionally, gender biases need to be addressed as women experience these obstacles every other day.

3. Are female leaders born or made? Please elaborate as you consider the fact that most women have additional roles such as childbearing and child-rearing that society still expects them to fulfil.

She underscores that it relies on the individual and the surrounding circumstances. She then explained that “some women may possess qualities and characteristics that immediately predispose them to a leadership role. They have certain traits in them such as charisma, empathy, confidence, resilience, and can tackle anything, and that makes people believe in everything that they say”. However, the above highlighted characteristics do not guarantee one to be a leader or rather, an effective leader, even if one ends up assuming a leadership position.

She further emphasises that the age-old question of whether leaders are born or made remains a complex one, and the perspective varies for everyone. For Khathu, leadership skills are cultivated over time through a combination of education, life experiences, mentorship, setting of personal goals, adaptability, and responding to changing circumstances. In her view, good leadership involves actively seeking exposure to diverse perspectives, which, in turn, shape decision-making abilities and the capacity to resolve conflicts effectively.

Conversely the answer to whether leaders are made or born largely depends on the specific context and environment in which one finds oneself. She places significant importance on having a supportive family background, highlighting how her parents played a crucial role in partnering with her during her upbringing. This support system facilitated her ability to

collaborate effectively as she matured. She shared an example from her own experience, recounting her assumption of a leadership position at UJ in a challenging environment in 2018. Since the institution recognised the complexity of the situation, it was recommended that she receive coaching and mentorship, which she embraced as a valuable opportunity for growth. She stressed that this perception might differ if she had a different mindset, potentially interpreting the recommendation as a suggestion of inadequacy. In summary, Khathu re-emphasised that the nature of leadership—whether innate or developed—hinges on the specific context and environment in which a leader operates.

4. Women leaders are more aggressive than male leaders. What is your view on this statement? Kindly unpack it.

She pronounced that when a woman becomes assertive or stands her ground, she is perceived to be aggressive. In contrast to when the same action is taken by a man, society will categorise a man as an assertive leader. She further emphasised that she invites women to be assertive, to state their beliefs, and urges women to be who they are, irrespective of the environment in any circumstance. She added that it is not viable for any leader to tiptoe and ask themselves “Am I being assertive here? Was I too assertive there?” If there is a situation where a woman is found to be aggressive or too assertive, then constructive criticism should be applied and not generalisations about all women leaders being aggressive. It is broadly claimed and generalised that female leaders are aggressive. This needs to come to an end, because it is impeding women to focus.

5. What is the most important risk you have had to take on your leadership journey and why?

Khathu expressed that entrepreneurship was her biggest risk. Starting her own company in 2015 was her biggest learning point. Starting a business came with a lot of uncertainty. She

knew that going into business would impact her finances but did it anyway, because she had the “can do, will do” attitude. She realised in her second year of business that launching a new business was a different ballgame altogether. With that she learnt that “there are people who are wired and made for certain things, and this makes them fit into entrepreneurship better”. With her, not knowing what her next move would be was hard. Not knowing if the business would be successful or not was rather frustrating. Starting a business was risky for her as she realised it was not for her. She came to believe that entrepreneurship was not for her at the time. With this realisation, Khathu gave herself time to assess her situation, she then decided to start looking for a job again.

6. How do you continue to grow, develop, and show up as a leader? Share your recipe for success.

Khathu emphasised the significance of continuous learning and the acceptance of not knowing everything in her approach to leadership. She underscored her commitment to providing others with a platform to educate her on subjects she may not be familiar with as one of her strengths. She openly encourages her team, emphasising their intelligence, and urging them to impart their knowledge to her, even in her capacity as a Chief Information Officer. She addressed the common misconception that leaders, particularly in her role, are expected to possess comprehensive knowledge. She candidly expressed that her team might assume she has all the answers, such as troubleshooting a computer issue or resolving a software malfunction, even when she may not possess the requisite expertise.

Khathu response to challenges she cannot resolve herself is to seek assistance, viewing it as an opportunity to learn. She remained receptive to broadening her knowledge and firmly believed there is no shame in asking for help or admitting when she doesn't know something. She is proactive in assessing her strengths and weaknesses, actively seeking feedback

from her children, her spouse, close associates, networking connections, and friends to facilitate her personal growth.

Additionally, she maintained a long-distance mentorship relationship with a mentor overseas, even though they hadn't met in years. She valued the availability of her mentor for guidance and clarity through phone calls. She emphasised the potential for continuous coaching and mentoring, and she recognised the importance of knowing who to reach out to for specific guidance and support, a principle that has been instrumental in her journey.

7. What does juggling a few balls mean to you?

For her, it means ensuring time management and effective communication; by always ensuring she clearly communicates with her husband, her children and those she works with. Time management for her also includes respecting other people's time, informing people when she is unable to do something. She added that multitasking forms a part of strength in a woman. She made an insightful observation, highlighting the multitasking abilities of women in managing various tasks simultaneously, such as watching TV, cooking, tending to their husbands, and assisting their children with homework—all in a single moment. This adept juggling of responsibilities reflects the capacity to take prompt action by identifying issues proactively.

She further emphasised the need for proactive problem-solving, distinguishing it from the common tendency of waiting for issues to surface. She articulated that individuals often claim to possess strong problem-solving skills but frequently overlook the importance of identifying potential problems, mitigating them before they escalate, and effectively resolving them in their early stages to prevent significant challenges from emerging.

8. If you were to put together a code of practice for women leaders, what would that code be and what would it look like?

Khathu affirmed the principle of leading by example, advocating for integrity, accountability, and a strong work ethic. She firmly believes in not instructing others to do something that she does not practice. This commitment extended to her leadership style, where she fosters an environment of trust and autonomy. She cited an example of not requiring her employees to report their movements to her, since she did not report her own movements to her manager Dr. Ralephata. She valued the importance of personal responsibility and ethical behaviour.

Diversity and inclusion also occupy a central role in her leadership philosophy, given the varied backgrounds of individuals within her team. She stressed the significance of listening before speaking, underlining the importance of empathetic leadership. She shared an example concerning a YES program graduate applying for an internship at UJ while residing in Pretoria. She illustrated how differently individuals might interpret the situation based on their backgrounds and experiences. She emphasised that as a leader, it is crucial to be both diverse and inclusive while highlighting that empathy should not be misconstrued as a sign of weakness. Her leadership approach centred on understanding, respecting, and fostering a harmonious work environment, where individuals are appreciated for their unique backgrounds and perspectives.

9. “Watinta Abafazi, Watint’Imbokodo” and “Mosadi o tshwara thipa ka bo galeng”, are sayings from the past that allude to the strength of women. What is your view on them?

She said that those statements came in an era where women wanted to put a statement out there, to show they were strong and resilient and that they were contributing to certain goals, which South Africa wanted to achieve. One could refer to these

statements because of the history behind them and it was important to refer to these statements within the historical context in which they were developed because women wanted to portray their strength at that specific time in the past. Khathu stressed that she did not want to be known as a rock, “a hard person that if you touch me, you will know me”, as it goes against leadership as she understands it. She stated that “to be a rock” must be contextualised properly.

10. What advice do you wish someone had given you at the beginning of your career and why?

Reflecting on her career journey, she expressed the wish that someone had shared the importance of embracing mistakes and the notion that errors are permissible, forgivable, and valuable learning opportunities. She recounted her early career experiences, where the prevailing sentiment was that mistakes were not tolerated. This environment, possibly attributed to the technical and safety requirements, posed considerable challenges for her. She conveyed her regret about the fear that was instilled in her, the belief that mistakes were unrecoverable, and the perception that one could not afford to err.

Underscoring the negative impact of such a mindset, asserting that it discouraged innovation and inhibited individuals from introducing novel ideas. She expressed the desire to have been liberated from the fear that a single mistake could result in dire consequences, suggesting that it might have enabled her to approach her endeavours with a greater sense of innovation and creativity.

She reflected on the significance of achieving a balance between technical qualifications and educational qualifications within the context of a technical environment like Information and Communication Technology (ICT). She expressed her wish that someone had enlightened her about the challenges of solely pursuing educational qualifications without acquiring the necessary technical skills. She noted that relying solely on educational qualifications, even at the

master's or doctoral level, can lead to failure in roles that demand technical expertise.

According to Khathu, the key to success in such environments lies in striking a balance between educational and technical qualifications. She stressed the importance of obtaining relevant technical certifications, such as Microsoft and security certifications as essential components of a technical skillset. She emphasised that individuals lacking traditional educational backgrounds but possessing the necessary technical qualifications can be entrusted with critical responsibilities, even in billion-dollar systems.

She pointed out that technical know-how is especially crucial for those at lower professional levels, as it enables them to grow and advance, based on their technical proficiency, an aspect that educational degrees alone may not adequately address.

She offered valuable guidance to young individuals, emphasising the importance of recognising and embracing their unique life journeys. Her advice centred on the idea that each person's journey is their own and that it was essential to take ownership of it. She underscored that while other people may be available to assist, the primary responsibility remained with the individual.

She encouraged young individuals to approach their journeys with a sense of ownership, setting clear goals and actively taking charge of their careers. The pivotal concept she emphasised was that it is 'your journey, your life.' By internalising this perspective, one could clear the path to success. This outlook avoided the common trap of comparing oneself to others and expecting handouts. She cautioned against assuming that what happens to one person should automatically apply to everyone else. Youngsters should refrain from the mindset of entitlement, and instead, they should focus on crafting their own unique journeys and shaping their destinies.

Prof. Mmasethunya Temane

Executive Dean: Health Sciences, University of Johannesburg

Background

Prof Temane, currently serving as a Professor at the Doornfontein Campus (DFC) at the University of Johannesburg (UJ), has been on a remarkable journey driven by her unwavering belief in the transformative power of education. From her formative years, she embraced her parents' conviction that "Education is the key"—a principle that shaped her path. Initially trained as a nurse, specializing in psychiatric nursing, she discovered her passion for psychiatry despite her initial reservations about the nursing profession, which she chose under family pressure. Her original desire to study social work was thwarted by parental objections, leading her to commit herself fully to nursing and strive to meet their expectations.

After completing her first undergraduate degree at the University of North-West, she embarked on a pivotal chapter in 2010 when she joined UJ, aspiring to work in the Department of Nursing. Prof Temane's career trajectory includes diverse experiences, such as working in IT healthcare and psychiatric hospitals. Her academic journey, somewhat serendipitously, was influenced by the guidance and mentorship of Prof Poggenpoel, which significantly impacted her professional development.



1. What were the early messages that you were hearing about the girl child? Messages that came from people you looked up to and messages that ended up inspiring you on your leadership journey.

Prof Temane's journey is marked by the challenges she faced as a young girl and throughout her early education. From a young age, she struggled against discouraging messages that constantly reminded her of societal gender norms and limitations. Her siblings often told her, "You are not supposed to do this," but her unwavering determination and stubbornness drove her to defy these expectations. It was only when she achieved her first, second, and third degrees that her family began to recognize her accomplishments and offer their respect.

Her reflection on her school days revealed a lack of affirmation and encouragement for girls, who were typically relegated to the background without opportunities to explore their full potential. This past still deeply upsets her considering the absence of messages that could have inspired and encouraged her during her formative years.

The turning point in her life came during her first undergraduate degree, where she finally received messages of inspiration and support. Her experiences at Weskoppies Psychiatric Hospital were marked by the misconception that she had attended a 'Model C' school due to her achievements—a testament to her unwavering determination and the recognition of her capabilities. During this time, she found mentors who encouraged her to excel and reach her full potential.

Prof Temane is passionate about sharing the message that women can achieve anything they set their minds to. She firmly believes that females should not be afraid to pursue their dreams. Her story serves as a source of inspiration for everyone, underscoring the importance of empowerment and encouragement for women in education and society.

2. What are some of the glaring obstacles facing women in leadership positions in the 21st century?

Prof Temane declared that the first obstacle is individual barriers and explained that the messages one receives can make you start questioning yourself, which can turn into self-doubt. Another obstacle would be organizational barriers. Although we work in an environment where people will say they care for you and believe in you, there are subtle biases against women. Women have to position themselves as women so that they will learn to know and understand themselves. Every woman should remind herself that she has unlimited potential and should never allow anyone to tell her what she can or cannot do. She added that she coaches herself and reminds herself of these words without it turning into a cliché. She has regular conversations with her best friend about obstacles that she faces, which has helped her immensely.

3. Are female leaders born or made? Please elaborate as you consider the fact that most women have additional roles like childbearing and childrearing that society still expects them to fulfil.

Prof Temane believes that female leaders are born and not made. She expressed that there is not much of a difference between female and male leaders. It has been difficult for her to engage in a male-dominated environment. Although people will always say that male leaders are born, so are women. This is illustrated by how women can juggle all their different roles and still make it to the top. Therefore, she believes that female leaders are born and not made.

4. Women leaders are more aggressive than male leaders. What is your view on this statement? Kindly unpack it.

During a candid conversation, Prof Temane playfully remarked that the above statement sounded like it was written by a man, highlighting the challenges that women sometimes face

in advocating for themselves and their beliefs. She does not personally subscribe to this viewpoint, firmly believing that society often struggles to comprehend and appreciate women who stand firm and express assertiveness.

She stressed that it is crucial to recognize that not all women exhibit passive-aggressive behaviour and that it is unjust to stereotype women leaders as aggressive. Prof Temane underscored the importance of understanding the dynamics at play, noting that women leaders must be well-versed in “the game” and its rules, striving to act on their own terms, rather than adhering to someone else’s ideas.

Moreover, she acknowledged that some men may attempt to push women to their emotional limits, which is a test of resilience and a reflection of societal expectations. Women, she explained, may find themselves pushed into a state of apparent aggressiveness, but this does not necessarily mean they are inherently aggressive. Their assertiveness may be a response to the external circumstances they face.

5. What is the most important risk you have had to take on your leadership journey and why?

Prof Temane shared valuable insights into the nature of leadership, highlighting that taking up a leadership role is inherently a risk. The uncertainty of the journey ahead, including the unknown challenges, team dynamics, and the very essence of leadership, can be a daunting prospect. She underscored the need for leaders to consistently perform at their best, both for themselves and their teams, as they step into the role.

A pivotal moment in her leadership journey occurred in 2017 when she was nominated for the position of Head of Department (HOD). Initially, she hesitated to accept the nomination, as she had always envisioned leading from behind the scenes. However, she sought counsel from Prof Swart, who, upon learning of her reluctance, urged her to embrace the role, emphasizing that it was a path she should not shy

away from. His unwavering support played a significant role in her decision-making process.

In response to Prof Swart's encouragement, she engaged in reflective discussions with her closest friends and family, seeking diverse perspectives on her potential leadership. Among those she consulted was her brother, an academic, whose unique viewpoint challenged her thinking. Additionally, Prof Khan also played a significant role in mentoring the leadership process for the Vice Dean and Acting Deanships roles. "I am grateful for my mentors' guidance in my leadership journey."

6. How do you continue to grow, develop, and show up as a leader? Share your recipe for success.

Prof Temane places great value on personal and professional development through open and insightful conversations with other women and friends. She emphasizes that these exchanges serve as an invaluable resource for her growth. Prof Temane relies on her best friend and a network of women who engage in discussions about leadership in various contexts. Through these dialogues, she gains access to diverse perspectives and experiences, which in turn inform her own approach to her roles and work.

These conversations take place across different settings, allowing her to absorb insights and knowledge from a broad spectrum of viewpoints. Prof Temane appreciates the ability to select and adapt strategies and behaviours that resonate with her own goals. She highlights that learning from women in various professional settings, regardless of whether they share the same career path, has been instrumental in her development.

By listening to their stories of success, overcoming challenges, and facing struggles, she gains inspiration and a deeper understanding of how to navigate her own challenges. Prof Temane's approach emphasizes the importance of women supporting and learning from one another—a practice that has significantly contributed to her own growth and evolution.

7. What does juggling a few balls mean to you?

Prof Temane stated that “juggling a few balls” embodies her capacity to handle several tasks and complete them with minimal stress. When she does encounter stress, she is dedicated to finding effective solutions or catching up on the tasks she’s managing.

Notably, Prof Temane does not have children and is not married, making her immediate family her primary concern. She stresses the importance of maintaining a delicate balance between her professional responsibilities, her family’s well-being, and her own life. In this intricate juggling act, she recognizes the necessity of centring herself to ensure her ability to function optimally in all facets of her life.

8. If you were to put together a code of practice for women leaders, what would that code be and what would it look like?

Prof Temane shared two fundamental principles that guide her approach to leadership and personal well-being. The first principle is the importance of remaining true to oneself and embracing authenticity. She believes that to lead effectively and thrive, it is essential to stay grounded and genuine, reflecting one’s true values and beliefs.

The second principle involves establishing a deep connection with one’s mind, body, and spirit, which, in turn, facilitates a connection to the external environment. Prof Temane articulated that this internal connection is a prerequisite for effective leadership. She recognized that by engaging in meaningful conversations and growing with them, female leaders can navigate their roles with minimal stress.

She emphasized that the way a person “shows up” in their professional and personal life is crucial. Prof Temane adheres to a strong belief in the significance of mental health in leadership. She contends that without a strong connection to oneself and one’s environment, it becomes challenging to be authentic and to lead effectively in any capacity.

9. Wathinta Abafazi, Watint'imbokodo? Mosadi o tshwara Thipa Ka Bo Galeng. These are but a few sayings from the past that allude to the strength of women. What is your impression of them?

Prof Temane believes in these statements and added that it is evident in the way women have always had to battle in their work environments and personal lives. She referred to a song line: “This is a man’s world, but it is nothing without a woman.” Prof Temane shared a poignant personal reflection, recalling a time when she felt disconnected but continued to turn to the above line and its song that holds significant meaning for her. She revealed a profound perspective, highlighting the unpredictable strength that can be found within a woman when she is touched or moved. For Prof Temane, this strength is not about aggression or proving a point to others, but rather about affirming her own capabilities and resilience. This introspective moment underscored the profound internal journey she embraces, emphasizing the importance of self-discovery and self-empowerment in her life.

10. What advice do you wish someone had given you at the beginning of your career, and why?

Prof Temane stated that she was lucky that Prof Marie Poggenpoel had been with her since they met. She stated that if someone had told her earlier: “Know your worth, do not compromise for anyone,” maybe her destiny would have been different. She added that every woman should know that they are more than just average. For her, this statement reminded her of her mom, who passed on three years ago, who was strong, independent, and always reminded her that “It will happen” whenever she would complain about how hard life had been.

Prof Temane believed that as a leader, certain words, advice, and expressions define and shape your identity. She emphasized the significance of these words in leadership. She pointed out that while some leaders may offer brief praise,

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such as “You are doing good,” it is essential to seek a deeper understanding and elaboration of such remarks. Furthermore, she highlighted the importance of self-affirmation with positive words and beliefs.

This interview with Prof Temane offers profound insights into the challenges, inspirations, and personal growth of a woman leader in the field of education and beyond. Her experiences and reflections serve as a valuable guide for aspiring female leaders navigating their paths in the 21st century.

Dr Denyse Webbstock

*Senior Director: Institutional Planning Evaluation & Monitoring,
University of Johannesburg*

Background

Dr Denyse studied political science at the University of KwaZulu Natal in the 1980s and it was during a rough time in South Africa.

Dr Denyse has always thought of herself as being an academic who is going to have an academic career, but that did not pan out because she spent 10 years in exile and found jobs so that she could survive. In the early 90's she eventually came back to South Africa. "I remember the very moment, actually it was a bizarre moment. I was looking after a bunch of Dutch kids and we were skiing on the Alps and Austria I think, and I remember the Dutch teacher came skiing up to me and said they're going to release Nelson Mandela" she said.

After she got back to South Africa, she got a temporary lecturing job in the political science department at the University of KwaZulu Natal. At a later stage, she got a permanent job as an evaluator within the academic development paradigm at the University and it was during the time black students were starting to get accepted into the University, so the idea was how they were going to make it happen. Furthermore, Dr Denyse added that she had a male boss and within the first month, he left because he was depressed with the whole program. She stayed at UKZN for 17 years.

Dr Denyse went to the council in higher education as a



director of accreditation of all the programs in the country. She then got another job in CHE as the director of monitoring and evaluation. Dr Denyse started working at UJ in 2019 where she works with institutional planning, monitoring and evaluation, “It hasn’t been little bits and pieces all over, but it’s been developing my space within various organizations”.

1. What were the early messages that you were hearing as a girl child? Messages that came from people you look up to and messages that ended up inspiring you in your leadership journey.

Dr Denyse mentioned that she has never thought of herself as a girl child, she was fortunate enough to be surrounded by her mother. Her mother had a full-time job and financial insurance, but at the same time, she was extraordinarily gifted at all the domestic arts. Dr Denyse added that her mother could do anything she wanted to do, all the sharing and making wedding cakes and all those things on top of a full-time job. Therefore, she saw all that as normal, as women did everything.

Dr Denyse added that her sister is the same, a very strong woman who has always been in management in her career and has always been capable of managing everything. “So, I never thought that women wear the disadvantage or so, I just thought women are strong” she said. She continued to mention that she went to an all-girls high school, and it never occurred to her that science was a boy thing and not a girl because the women did everything. They were all female teachers she talked to, so there was no frame of reference to say a person is pigeonholed in this area. Dr Denyse believes that she was very fortunate as she always thought to herself, “You are lucky to be a girl because girls do everything”.

2. What are some of the glaring obstacles for women to take on leadership positions in the 21st Century?

Dr Denyse as she highlighted in the previous question that she cannot find a generation of women who thought they could not do everything, and in practice she does not think anyone can. According to her, an obstacle is that an individual knows that they must make choices and very conscious choices, about how they are going to be a career person and a mother and be creative at the same time.

Moreover, Dr Denyse believes that in South Africa we are very fortunate, “We do not have quite as many structural obstacles in the terms of our law, and in terms of equal opportunities for jobs and in terms of pay, and all of those things, as in some other countries, clearly men are carrying the burden of having to sort out the households many, many of them without male help but luckily they are strong and can do that”. She continues to add that it is quite different in this country, unlike some of the people she knew from Europe, she gives an example that one of the biggest obstacles there is that she sees a whole generation of women going backwards because of the cost of childcare. When childcare is unaffordable the only option one has is to stay at home whether university-educated or not, but one cannot afford to have someone look after the children. She adds, “So you don’t work and then have a whole generation of very educated middle class women who are not progressing in a way that we have forwarded our paths here, and actually it is a very funny phenomenon but I think that’s one of the obstacles in the 21st century”.

3. Are female leaders? Please elaborate as you consider the fact that most women have additional roles like childbearing and childrearing that require them to still focus on.

Dr Denyse notes that she does not know whether they are born or made, and she thinks that one has some characteristics and inner strength that will serve them as the leader. She indicates that leaders are made because even as a mother at

home, you are a leader because you lead a household, a family, a church group etc. She also thinks that it is about harnessing the characteristics that one has and putting them to use in a leadership role. 'I think that if you have self-belief, you can put yourself in any kind of leadership role and take charge of things, organize whatever and women are good at organizing" she said.

4. Women leaders are more aggressive than male leaders. What is your view on this statement? Kindly unpack it.

Dr Denyse said, "one made me laugh because if I think back and I'm thinking back a couple of decades now and I think back to various bosses and people in leadership positions when I was on flat in the leadership positions, honestly some of the worst bosses were women". She added that they were brittle, threatened, nasty and when she thinks about a few decades back, she cannot think of a male boss or leader at that time. Women who got in those positions had fought hard to get there, and so once they were there, they thought the only way to stay there was to trample on others That made them special, so if there were other capable women around, those were see as threats, and Dr Denyse would often talk to the younger women in the university back then and tell them that no matter what they say, they do not have to be nasty, brittle, bullying to assert themselves as a leader. She said, "You just need to accept the fact that you are there, and you are there by the virtue of your capabilities to be generous in your leadership role, so be warmer and encouraging of others and don't be threatened".

Dr Denyse pointed out that she experienced that a lot, she thinks that a few conflicts she's had on her career, five out of six would have been with women. On the other hand, if she wanted to get something done or had an idea that she wanted to enact, she knew that she would always need to go to a male boss, and they would say it is a great idea. But if she went to a woman, they would be all hedged about with all sorts of issues

and threats. Dr Denyse reckons that is not like that anymore, there are now great female bosses, “so I really think that it’s about learning to be stronger in your shoes, as they say in Dutch, and be more generous” she said.

5. What is the most important risk you have had to take in your leadership journey and why?

Dr Denyse is risky averse, so she did not take any big risks, but she states that starting a new job is always a risk and for instance, for her when she moved from KZN CHE it meant moving between towns, to take her family with and that’s a risk. It may not have worked out for them, but they got to follow her, so that in a sense a risk worth taking if one is fairly clear about where they want to go and what they want to do. Dr Denyse then said, “I have not been very good at managing that risk and I stay too long in a place because I’m risk averse, it’s actually an a contradictory thing when you realize you’ve kind of done as much as you can in a particular space, it’s time to move on”.

Dr Denyse, continued to add that, one may ask themselves if they need to go through the whole challenge of learning a new space all over again, reestablishing themselves and so on. Therefore, the risk Dr Denyse has taken is staying in one place for too long because she is afraid to move.

6. How do you continue to grow, develop, and show up as a leader? Share your recipe for success.

Dr Denyse pointed out that she got through different phases of leadership journey, she is now kind of winding down her leadership journey in a sense end. It gives her pleasure to see others grow, and she always explains to her staff that her job is no longer about challenging, she had her chance, and her job is to make her shy. She said, “It is kind of a difficult thing because for somebody who has developed their own journey and learned about everything on the way, it was always important to me to know how to do everything, and now I want

to be comfortable in the fact that there are things that my team can do and I can't and it's wonderful, actually". She applauds them for the things they can do and tries to find things they are good at and give them space and the opportunity to grow and that gives her pleasure.

7. What does juggling a few balls mean for you?

According to Dr Denyse, there are so many things that one must take care of as a woman in leadership, not least family. She had her child when she was 41, which was a big shock because she was in the middle of a new career. She was living in Pietermaritzburg while working in Durban so that means she drove 160 kilometres per day. She decided to breastfeed for 18 months, travelling for 160 k's per day and still having to do all the domestic things, she said: "I remember just driving back with these sore breasts and wet shirts and panicking about getting home in time and to her, and all that, you know, it is just the instance that you can do everything you see, and refusing to compromise so obviously one has to juggle a bunch of things".

Dr Denyse mentioned that motherhood was the most exciting experience of her life and she's always been a full-time worker/ leader. She always tried to make time to go to some school events but couldn't go to them all, unlike all the mothers who were able to do all of that and sometimes she was a little envious of that. However, Dr Denyse had meetings to do but she always managed to find enough space and time to talk through the men's issues of love. Basically, for Dr Denyse, making the right compromises is important.

8. If you were to put together a code of practice for women leaders, what would that code be and what would it look like?

Dr Denyse pointed out she could not put together a code, perhaps some advice: One must remember that they are where they are because of their capabilities so they should believe in

themselves and stand tall. Do not be threatened or fight others around you, she added, “you are there because of who you are and what you can do and understand that well in the way you treat others, and you can help yourself to grow”. Furthermore, Dr Denyse reckons that it is important to share ideas and feed off each other in the journey, therefore one should recognize strong people around them and work with that, always work with inspiring people because you get further together.

9. Watinta Abafazi, Watint’Imbokodo? Mosadi Otshwara Thipa Ka Bo Galeng. These are but a few statements that have existed, alluding to the strength of a woman. What is your view on them?

Dr Denyse reckons that women can be quite vulnerable, she has had one or two Human Resource challenges in her leadership career and that can be exhausting. It can take its toll on a person, and she thinks that one of the lessons she learnt is that a person is bound to get people in their life who are just not as competent as everybody else or not invested in their job. Also, if you have different values it becomes like the other person is problematic. But because of being strong, a person deals with it, but it can be hurtful inside because it may feel like a failure, so that’s where one can be vulnerable.

10. What advice do you wish someone had given you at the beginning of your career? And why?

According to Dr Denyse, one must make sure that they move jobs within 6-7 years, because they will grow more, and shouldn’t stay too little because they will not achieve anything. She said, “Take that risk and move a little bit more often”.

