



“ Ziyanda Ntshona – a leader making an impact ”

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By Masetuka Ntsoereng

Those readers who are established corporate lawyers may recall the first unnerving moment when, as a newly-qualified professional, you had to speak up in front of a boardroom packed with middle-aged company executives and senior attorneys in suits and ties.

It was no different for Ziyanda Ntshona, the head of the Corporate Business Unit at Webber Wentzel – she often has to lead in boardrooms where she is the only woman and the only black person.

“The meeting starts with an assumption that I am not competent, and I have to look past this assumption despite how ridiculous it is, almost give the people in the boardroom time to acclimatise to the black woman lawyer in the room. My reward is always seeing the faces around the boardroom when they realise I know what I am talking about.”

Her advice to other young lawyers: cultivate confidence and be deliberate and tenacious about what you want.

Ziyanda was appointed head of the Corporate Business Unit in September 2020. She believes that the team within Webber Wentzel uses its knowledge and skills to achieve a transformative impact for clients. The firm attracts high-profile and complex, multi-jurisdictional transactions across the continent. Over her 17-year career at the firm, Ziyanda has been involved in transactions that have made an impact beyond the boardroom. In her role as head of the Corporate Business Unit, Ziyanda wants to ensure that every lawyer has an opportunity to be involved in such matters.

In recognition of her professional expertise in law, she has been

recognised by a number of international legal directories. Some of the most recent include being named by Legal 500 from 2018 to 2022 as a legal expert, and named by Chambers Global 2022 as a ranked lawyer.

As a leader in Webber Wentzel, she believes she contributes towards creating a working environment where all people feel they belong, and their skills are equally valued. This is beyond representation towards a diverse equity partnership, and one of the ways to achieve this is by increased participation of black people and women in the equity partnership.

“I see my role as being an engine for accelerated change in the composition and culture of the leadership team and the firm, so that it reflects South Africa and, even more importantly, results in a team that can continue to successfully identify and respond to the real challenges and opportunities on the continent. We have an opportunity to make a real impact, and I want to be part of that.”

She has found that many of the skills she acquired over her career and through her experience in M&A practice, such as teamwork and collaboration, can be used in her leadership role. In managing a team of professionals, she strives for balance between support and supervision on the one hand and independence and intellectual freedom on the other.

Excellence and client service are the cornerstone of her practice, and these are never compromised. She believes in empathetic but firm leadership and in being readily available to meet clients’ needs.

Ziyanda strives to remain relatable to more senior lawyers and younger colleagues inside and outside the firm. She pays particular attention to younger colleagues who feel marginalised and overlooked. “I want to draw out the unlikely heroes and enable them to be heroes in their spaces. I want them to understand that you only succeed by doing – I believe in bias towards action,” she says.

She has been involved in many initiatives to mentor younger colleagues. She has participated in both Webber Wentzel’s formal mentorship programme and a transformation sponsorship programme to ensure that young African professionals are sponsored on their path to partnership. A true champion for firm values, Ziyanda has twice been awarded the firm’s Transformation and Diversity Value Award. Outside the firm, Ziyanda was also named by the South African Professional Services Academy as the 2019 “Woman Professional of the Year.”

Ziyanda is a Non-Executive Director for the Kolisi Foundation and also serves on the board of Ubuntu Pathways; these roles have provided her with an organic and strong link to make a sustainable impact in her hometown, Gqeberha, and an opportunity to use her legal skills selflessly to benefit the common good. 🇿🇦