



INSIGHT

Kuda Chimedza
Director | Banking, Finance & Projects
CDH South Africa

MINING RESILIENCE: HOW WOMEN CAN EXTRACT SUCCESS FROM STRUGGLE

When I started my career, I didn't fully appreciate the role of resilience. It is not an abstract ideal, but a currency, forged through early-morning calls, late-night deadlines, unspoken biases, unrelenting pressure, and still showing up with excellence and integrity. This women's month, I hope to highlight the power of resilience as a resource in building our careers and communities.

Mining is a violent process that ultimately extracts value. In the same way, resilience is not born from ease but from confrontation and resistance. For women, it must become a core characteristic. Resilience is what keeps the candidate attorney focused while navigating the transition to the corporate world. It keeps the young attorney engaged while scaling new frontiers. It enables a woman in a male-dominated space to correct assumptions, calmly, but firmly, resulting in a better kind of leadership.

Financial necessity limited my choices, and I applied only to the university where I could rely on the staff bursary and eventually the merit scholarship. My background didn't allow for pursuing passion, I had to keep in mind financial prospects when establishing and pursuing my goals. I discovered the timelines for securing articles late, and began the job hunt only in my third year. I applied to the large firms, and initially, my prospects looked good as I was selected for a vacation work programme. However, I interviewed badly and failed to secure a contract. I subsequently applied to medium sized firms then boutique firms, and received rejections, even from the 'safety options'. Balancing my studies and my two part-time jobs was challenging, and each rejection and unanswered application, affected my performance. By the time I started my final semester, it seemed all doors had been firmly shut, but I continued applying myself as best as I could. Hours after my final exam, I was offered articles at CDH.

Resilience is what keeps the candidate attorney focused while navigating the transition to the corporate world.

Starting articles brought new difficulties. Transitioning from being a top student to being taught the very basics was challenging. For the first time in my life, I was struggling to learn and regularly found myself questioning my place. It often felt like a continuous cycle of information overload and spot tests. I found it difficult to relate to my peers, having a distinct accent and a different background. I couldn't relate to the experiences that seemed to unite the group, nor could I contribute meaningfully to lunch time discussions, such as conversations about lavish vacations. After leaving the office, I would take two taxis to get home then cook for the family and clean. I would read late into the night, so that I would have useful contributions to make in meetings the following day.

I would watch the sunrise the next morning in my first taxi, then walk to work from the point where my second taxi dropped me off. Sometimes heavy rains would have me arrive at the office looking completely dishevelled only to be met with comments around personal branding. The associate in my first team often asked me why I looked so tired, but I found my daily routine difficult to explain to her. My health was suffering too. It wasn't just starting a new job, it was a whole cultural change, that came with its share of shock and disorientation. All of this and more, worked together to kill my confidence, and slowly but certainly cause self-doubt that has taken years to remedy.

As an associate, I experienced a combination of crash courses in law and life. I often had to juggle between humility and advocating for myself. I had insecurities around my competence, and thankfully as my career continued, I had colleagues and clients who affirmed my skills. I pursued postgraduate studies, now with clarity around my interest in finance. Part time studies while working full time is not a recommendation I would give to anyone. It was tough. Expecting distinctions quickly shifted to contentment with just passing, and the billable hour requirements only increased. Then came the global pandemic with its unique challenges. Around then, my team's structure changed, giving me increased responsibility.

Though it seemed impossible, I was enduring experiences which would have justified quitting. Instead they produced growth. After completing my studies, I was seconded and was quickly disabused of the idea that our in-house colleagues have it easier. A combination of factors summarised by my doctors as stress, led to hospitalisation and surgery. On return from sick leave, I continued my secondment, and while re-learning how to walk, I started to find my footing in a bank. I had an opportunity to pursue it, and seriously considered making the move to in-house counsel. However, I struggled with abandoning my dream of becoming a director/ partner at a top law firm. After years of hard work, and being a year or two away from achieving that goal, I ultimately decided to take more time and grow in practice.

Having seen so many quitting, and having forged through my own difficulties, I would agree with the seemingly dramatic notion that women's careers are built on blood, sweat and tears. One of the defining moments of my career came from failure, an unsuccessful application for promotion. I had followed the strategies for success. No honest person would dispute that I worked hard, researched good opportunities, sought mentorship, built a good network and upskilled myself. I had even sacrificed many opportunities in furtherance of my career, including pursuing romance and starting a family. I was one of the two members of my articles class who had remained at the firm throughout. So, to say I was disappointed by the outcome of my application would be an understatement. I fully intended to be professional during my application feedback meeting, and to receive guidance on the areas of improvement and the practical steps towards promotion. Instead, I broke down. Being reassured that I was doing well, and simultaneously understanding that I was in this meeting because I was not doing well enough, was a hard pill to swallow. I'm grateful for the grace I

received that afternoon, and for the comfort and encouragement of my family, friends, mentors and colleagues over the following year. It is what enabled me to stay the course. The next few months were spent shifting between aggressively pushing towards my targets, and hopelessness. My insecurities rose to their highest, and my confidence dropped to its lowest. After the longest and most difficult eighteen months of my career, I was promoted to director.

Our experiences train us to pivot, steady turmoil, and navigate uncertainty while still advancing. The lessons learnt from our challenges, and those of others, help us to build resilience and achieve our goals.

Why pen the low points of my career? I believe these stories are worth telling. For many women, career struggles are common, though they may take different forms. These stories are evidence of a truth we often forget; the resilience of women produces the resourceful and refined outcomes of the deals we celebrate. Women often bring a more adaptive, holistic approach to transactions. Our experiences train us; to pivot, steady turmoil, and navigate uncertainty while still advancing. The lessons learnt from our challenges, and those of others, help us to build resilience and achieve our goals.

Mining resilience is not just about surviving difficulty. It should be followed by changing the environment for those following us. This can be accomplished by being active mentors, and designing spaces that honour complexity, not just output. In that way, our resilience transitions from being a personality trait that we mine endlessly, to becoming a bridge to success. Reflecting, with others, on our experiences can be empowering. When shared, our stories become the rungs to our career ladders. My invitation is not to romanticize struggle, but to honour each other's experiences. To use our stories to build environments where strength is not only earned through suffering, but comes from inspiration and encouragement. 🙌

