



INSIGHT

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The everyday leadership choices behind empowered women, empowered nations

Women's Month is an opportunity to celebrate progress, but it should also prompt me to ask a more personal question: what have I learnt, across my own career, about what it actually takes to empower the women around me?

This year's theme – Empowered Women, Empowered Nations – naturally invites conversations about leadership, development and economic growth. But I have come to believe that a nation is only ever as empowered as the women inside the organisations that make it up, and I have seen that truth play out at close range, inside my own firm.

That may sound obvious. Yet I sometimes wonder whether it has become so familiar that I no longer stop to consider what it really means in practice.

"People are our greatest asset" has become one of the most repeated phrases in business. I genuinely believe it. Yet when markets tighten or uncertainty grows, people, and women in particular, often become the first variable we try to optimise. We redesign structures, compress roles and pursue efficiency, while expecting women to navigate growing complexity with fewer resources and less access to the power and sponsorship that would make that navigation easier.

The contradiction is hard to ignore. At precisely the moment we need women – whose talents have too often been undervalued – to think differently and build confidence in others, we can unintentionally make it harder for them to do exactly that.

Looking back, what has stayed with me is not any single moment, but what those moments taught me about leadership. The leaders who shaped my career were not necessarily those with all the answers. They were the people who saw potential before it was obvious, who trusted women with meaningful opportunities, and who understood that developing people is not separate from delivering results. It is how lasting results are achieved.

Those lessons feel increasingly relevant today. Organisations across Africa are navigating economic uncertainty, geopolitical shifts, and rapid technological change. In an environment where almost everything is evolving, one source of advantage remains consistent: the quality of our people, including how fully we empower women, and the environments we create for them to succeed.

This is where culture plays such an influential role.

Culture is often spoken about as though it were intangible. I see it differently. It reveals itself in everyday decisions: who is trusted with responsibility, whose perspectives are genuinely considered, and whether leaders create space for people to contribute before they have every answer. Are we letting the women capable of moving us forward into the room?

These moments rarely attract attention, but collectively, they determine whether women feel empowered to grow, innovate and take ownership. They also determine whether organisations retain the women they cannot afford to lose, and whether women feel trusted to drive meaningful change.

Leadership, therefore, requires something more than technical excellence. Technical expertise will always matter, but today's leaders are increasingly called upon to create the conditions in which women, and others, can perform at their best. That demands judgement, curiosity, humility, and a willingness to listen before deciding.

Listening remains one of the most underestimated leadership disciplines and, ironically, a gendered one; a quality often associated with women empowering one another simply by being heard. It uncovers risks that data cannot reveal, and builds trust when certainty is impossible. In uncertain times, trust is not a soft quality – it is a strategic advantage.

The same principle applies to transformation.

Too often, transformation is reduced to targets or compliance obligations. Those measures matter, but they are outcomes, rather than the purpose itself. The real objective is to build organisations that are stronger because women's experience, perspective and ideas are genuinely harnessed.

Throughout my own career, I have benefited from leaders who invested in my potential before I occupied positions of leadership myself. Their confidence created opportunities that shaped the trajectory of my career, and reinforced an enduring responsibility: leadership is ultimately about creating opportunities for others, which, done well, has a ripple effect far beyond any one organisation.

Women's Month reminds us that women continue to encounter barriers that deserve deliberate attention. Representation matters because it expands what others believe is possible. Simply put, if a nation's women are not empowered, that nation cannot fully empower itself.

But representation should never be the finish line.

The more important question is whether talented people are consistently trusted with meaningful work, challenged to develop new capabilities, and supported by leaders who are prepared to advocate for them. Organisations that do this well are not simply advancing individual careers. They are strengthening their own ability to adapt, innovate and compete.

I remain optimistic about Africa's future because I have seen the ingenuity, resilience and ambition of its people. Our continent has never lacked talent. The challenge for leaders is creating organisations where that talent, especially women's talent, can flourish.

Empowered women and empowered nations are, therefore, about more than economic policy or representation. They are about the decisions leaders make every day to invest in people, create opportunity, and build workplaces where women can do their best work.

Those investments rarely make headlines, and they seldom produce immediate returns. But over time, they become one of the few competitive advantages that compounds.

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