



# Q&A

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### What did your path into Restructuring look like – was it intentional, or did you discover it along the way?

I like to think that Restructuring found me! As a student at UCT in the 1990s, I was very interested in research topics that explored corporate failure, and started my Masters with the topic: 'Predicting Corporate Failure Using Neural Networks'. Unfortunately, I did not get to complete my Masters as I moved to the UK in the middle of the programme. Fast forward three years, and I was an audit manager at one of the Big 4. One night, I found myself working late in the office with the Restructuring partner; she was one of a handful of female partners at the time. I overheard her conversation with a client, and I remember being intrigued by not only what she was saying to the client, but *how* she was saying it. I knew I needed to find out more, so I arranged a coffee chat the next week, and the rest is history.

### Have there been key decisions that significantly impacted your career trajectory?

I decided early on in my career that I wasn't going to say 'no' to an opportunity that came my way because I was too scared, afraid I wasn't qualified enough, or that it would take me out of my comfort zone. Despite sometimes being terrified, I've said 'yes' anyway. This has led to many leadership roles (both in England and in South Africa), from leading the restructuring and insolvency Young Professionals in South-East England to now chairing the South African Restructuring & Insolvency Practitioners Association (SARIPA) – the first woman to hold this position in its 40-year history. I encourage my team to take advantage of every opportunity that comes their way – practice also makes perfect – and there is never a better time to start building your brand than right now.

### Have you faced any gender-based challenges or biases in your career? If so, how did you navigate them?

There is a misconception that you need to be 'tough' in restructuring, and that 'tough' means you need to be aggressive. This is because the environment can be brutal and intense. Given what is at stake, the emotions in the boardroom can run very high. In too many job interviews, I've been asked how I would handle situations where men are shouting at me. In one interview, I was even asked whether I had ever cried in such a situation! I've been told I'm too 'nice' to be in restructuring, too 'softly-spoken' to be successful in this field.

Generally, I don't have a verbal response to these statements. I prefer to demonstrate with my actions. I firmly believe that my ability to be calm in a high-pressured environment, being able

to diffuse tension and to empathise, have made me the leader and restructuring professional that I am. I don't need to try to be aggressive or transactional to be successful; I just need to be myself.

### How have you balanced your personal life with the demands of a career in restructuring?

Balance is always an interesting word for me; it implies equilibrium – 50/50. I don't see it this way. I see 'balance' more as 'alignment'. So, provided that there is alignment with what matters most to me at a given point in time, I am usually content. If a deal is at its peak, it matters most to me to be there in the thick of it with my team. If it is my Mom's 80th birthday, it matters most to me that I am present with my family, celebrating. I've found that setting boundaries is critical to getting this right – boundaries for others and myself! I have also learnt how to recharge – what gives me energy, what I need in order to enable me to perform at my best. I focus on these things when I feel out of alignment.

### Did you have any mentors or role models? How did they influence your journey?

The first Restructuring partner that I worked for was female. She became my mentor and we still keep in touch today. We had very different styles, but this was accepted and encouraged. She made me believe that there was space for me in our field, that I didn't need to try to pretend to be anyone else but myself. She valued the different way we approached problems, and how we managed and dealt with clients, which ultimately led to better client outcomes.

When, in 2019, I was offered the position to build and develop the restructuring practice at Deloitte Africa, I jumped at the chance. At the time, I was the only female leader of a Big 4 restructuring practice in South Africa, and I knew I could succeed by being myself.

### What barriers still need to be broken down in the restructuring industry for women?

Women are still significantly under-represented at senior levels in restructuring – whether as senior BRPs, advisers or bankers. It requires intentional sponsorship and more inclusive networking spaces to try to improve representation. We also need to demonstrate to young women that there is a path forward that's flexible; that sustainable models of work are possible, and that diverse leadership styles are the norm. 🙌

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