



Deepa Vallabh

Partner | Head of Africa: M&A & Co-Head of Corporate & Commercial



## Deepa Vallabh on the importance of effective mentorship

*Deepa Vallabh holds two incredibly important roles at international law firm CMS. She's both Head of Africa: M&A and Co-Head, Corporate & Commercial. With more than 21 years' experience in corporate and commercial law, she specialises in a number of legal areas, including mergers and acquisitions (M&A) (both domestic and cross-border), corporate reorganisations and restructurings with a particular focus on cross-border M&A into Africa.*

She would not, however, have been able to get that far without mentorship along the way. She's also taken the mentorship lessons from her own journey and is applying them to ensure that it's effective and meaningful, especially for women professionals.

In particular, she feels that it's important for people coming up in their careers to have different kinds of mentors for different purposes through the course of their careers.

### EXPERIENCE AND EXPOSURE

Deepa has experience in both running a practice as well as corporate, regulatory and compliance aspects of law across a variety of sectors - telecommunications, media and communications, agriculture, manufacturing, consumer products, automotive, mining and resources, private equity, insurance, and pharmaceuticals.

In part, she says, this was part of an intentional effort to get as much experience and exposure to a variety of sectors as possible.

Even here, however, mentors played a significant role. For instance, when she was Head of Legal at Clover, she received an offer from Webber Wentzel to join their corporate and commercial team. After discussion and guidance from the Deputy CEO of Clover, to whom she reported, he encouraged her to take it.

He felt that "I should get more experience

in practice and more exposure to large M&A transactions," she says. "Besides, having been involved at Clover on their large restructurings and acquisitions at the time, the Company was entering into the consolidation phase and transactional work would have been limited in the short term."

The move was an important step in her career, and she made partner shortly after she joined as a senior associate.

"It was a fantastic journey," she says.

"We were in the height of the M&A market at the time in South Africa. There was a flurry of transactions, particularly the larger mining BEE transactions that were dominating the M&A landscape. I joined a very busy team which accelerated my learning and my growth."

### LEARNING FROM CHALLENGES

Not long after, however, the global financial crisis in 2008/2009 hit and suddenly the flow of M&A activities slowed down considerably. Despite those challenges, Vallabh feels that the global crash was one of the best things ever to happen to her.

"It gave me time to reflect on what I wanted to do, and time to work a plan in terms of how I was going to grow my practice," she says. "And so that's what I did. With perseverance I built a self-sustaining practice over time."

"The ability to generate a client base and revenue makes you valuable to a firm," she adds. "You're not valuable to a firm if you are dependent on someone else for work."

It also taught her that, as a woman, she had to show the kind of entrepreneurial bent that many women aren't comfortable with.

### DIFFERENT KINDS OF MENTORS

That might not have been as easy, if she didn't have the kind of mentors she needed for different aspects of her career.

"I think it's really important to have a

mentor early in your career," she says.

"But I would also say that it's important to understand the kind of mentor that you want and need. I had mentors who taught me about the legal world and how it operates as a business, but I also had a mentor to help me with legal technical skills and one that I could debate complex matters with."

According to Vallabh, a lot of mentorships for women are focused on helping them be more confident in business environments.

"While I don't discount the benefit of that," she says, "it's also equally important that you get mentors who teach you about the business and how it operates."

She also points out that it's very different from the kind of mentorship men typically get, which includes being shown and introduced to the people they need to in order to advance their careers.

"The important element for me is to always find a mentor who teaches you about the environment that you operate in from a commercial perspective," she says. "You should also find a mentor who will teach you how to get better at your skill and then a mentor who you can bounce things off from a personal development perspective."

### PAYING IT FORWARD

With so much experience under her belt, Vallabh is also seeing the value of passing on the lessons she's learnt in her career.

"When you have a platform, you have to ask yourself, what you do with that platform. My goal is to ensure that I can impart both my business and technical learning to those coming up the ranks and in particular to woman and non-white professionals. Guidance on how to build your practice is often the most valuable insights you require to progress in your career. You have to share the platform and teach other aspiring lawyers how to navigate the world of law and build their own platforms one day," she concludes. 