Q&A

Zine Misani

Head | Structured Trading
Absa Corporate and Investment Banking

Mentorship, sponsorship, and 'lifting as you rise'

Who was the first person in the industry to take a genuine bet on you, and how did that sponsorship change the trajectory of your career?

This was our current Head of Global Markets, then Head of Structured Trading. I was in Product Control, supporting the Structured Trading desk, when the team needed someone for a project on operationally intensive books, with the possibility of transitioning into trading over time. As an accountant, moving into front office was intimidating, but I was determined to make the opportunity count. I do not think it began as intentional sponsorship, but I believe that my work ethic, consistency and dedication made him take an interest in my growth. Years later, I now lead the very business I was brought into – a reminder that one opportunity, matched with hard work and belief, can change a career.

There is a difference between a mentor (who gives advice) and a sponsor (who advocates for you behind closed doors). Have you had a sponsor, and how did that dynamic work?

I have had a few sponsors in my career, and some of what I've achieved would not have been possible without them. At times, the sponsorship was informal, but I have seen the power of people believing in you and speaking about your capability in rooms you don't yet have access to. I was also intentional: I shared what I wanted to achieve, why I believed I was ready based on my execution record, and why the opportunity made business sense. Sponsorship works best when belief is matched by delivery.

As a successful leader now, what standard do you set for yourself when it comes to mentoring the next generation of female analysts and associates?

I believe mentorship is not just something the next generation should embrace when it is offered; it is something those of us who have walked the path have a responsibility to make available. I am happy to mentor formally or informally, because women coming after us should not have to learn every lesson the hard way if we are able to guide, caution or equip them better.

For me, there is little worse than watching someone land in a position you could have helped them avoid. So, if it means 'inserting' myself as a guiding hand, with the right intention, I will do it. We cannot be comfortable with the next generation fighting the same battles without at least trying to prepare them better.

What is the most rewarding piece of advice you've ever given to a younger colleague that you watched them successfully put into practice?

The most rewarding advice I gave was to take even the administrative or repetitive parts of the job seriously, because in our work, those details enable you to do the real job well. I watched the younger colleague apply that with discipline, and it became one of the things that set him apart. What looked like routine admin built the attention to detail and understanding of the book that later helped him identify and execute trade ideas others were missing.

It reminded me that very little is truly meaningless if approached with the right mindset. The habits he built in the less glamorous parts of the role became a competitive advantage, and he grew into one of the strongest young traders in the division.

Peer-to-peer support is vital. How do you build a strong network of allies among other women working in law, audit and banking to support your transaction pipelines?

I think we need to be intentional about surrounding ourselves with like-minded people in areas that complement our own spheres of influence. We see how effectively our male counterparts leverage networks for visibility, access and opportunity, and we should be just as deliberate.

For me, those connections come from engaging with genuine curiosity: understanding what people do, the pressures they face, and how their work influences mine. That creates mutual curiosity and shifts relationships from networking to partnership, improving how we solve problems and support transaction pipelines.

Strong peer support is built through consistency, respect and a willingness to understand beyond your immediate role. When women across law, audit, banking and other functions take an active interest in each other's work, collaboration becomes a real commercial advantage.

How can corporate finance institutions move beyond 'diversity checkboxes' to create environments where young women actually want to stay long-term?

Organisations need to move beyond broad commitments and create real clarity on career progression: what behaviours, characteristics and standards are valued, what excellence looks like, and what is genuinely rewarded. Those standards must then be applied consistently, regardless of who is being assessed.

That consistency builds trust and shapes the culture organisations say they want. Young women are more likely to stay where the path is visible, expectations are transparent, and opportunities are not dependent on proximity or bias. In that environment, exceptional performance becomes the norm, creating a stronger and more sustainable business.