INSIGHT

Nastascha Harduth
Director | Dispute Resolution
Head | Corporate Debt, Turnaround & Restructuring
CDH South Africa

Giving the next generation a seat at the transaction table makes good business sense, so lift as you rise!

My advice to younger colleagues is deceptively simple: your seat is not ornamental. It must serve a purpose for your presence to matter.

Over the years, I have watched junior professionals walk into meetings with a quiet hesitation, as if experience is measured only by years in practice. I understand that feeling. We all start somewhere, and most of us can remember a time when we wondered whether we had earned the right to speak.

What I have learned is that value is not only found in seniority. It is found in preparation, curiosity, careful listening, and the courage to ask the question that no one else has asked yet.

For me, that is what genuine transformation and talent development should look like. Too often, conversations about transformation focus on representation rather than participation. We celebrate who is in the room, but spend less time asking whether those people are genuinely included once they get there. A seat at the table means very little if the person occupying it is not empowered to contribute meaningfully.

Transformation is not about optics. It is not about placing a young professional, a woman or a previously excluded voice in a meeting so that the attendance list looks more diverse. That is not transformation; that is decoration.

True transformation happens when that person is given access to the actual work, the actual context, the actual client dynamics, and the actual commercial pressure. It happens when they are trusted not only to observe, but to think; not only to take notes, but to understand why the meeting matters.

> True transformation happens when that person is given access to the actual work, the actual context, the actual client dynamics, and the actual commercial pressure.

In corporate debt, turnaround and restructuring work, this lesson is particularly important. The transaction table is rarely a comfortable place. We often deal with businesses in financial distress, stakeholders under pressure, and decisions that carry significant consequences. There are competing interests, tight timelines and difficult conversations. In those moments, it is tempting to rely only on the same experienced voices.

Experience is invaluable, but it is not diminished by making room for fresh perspectives. In fact, it is strengthened by them. Younger professionals often see risks, opportunities and practical realities differently. Their perspective does not replace experience; it complements it.

One of the greatest misconceptions in business is that diversity and inclusion sit apart from commercial performance. In reality, they are closely linked. Better decisions are made when assumptions are challenged and blind spots are identified. That requires different backgrounds, different experiences and different ways of thinking around the same table.

Giving the next generation a seat at the transaction table is not an act of generosity; it is an investment in the future capability of the organisation. But access alone is not enough. There is a significant difference between inviting someone into a meeting and giving them the confidence, context and support to contribute to it.

That is where sponsorship matters. Mentorship and sponsorship are often spoken about as if they are the same thing. They are not. Mentors guide, advise and encourage. Sponsors create opportunities. They speak for emerging talent in rooms where decisions are made. They introduce them to clients and stakeholders. Most importantly, they trust them with meaningful work.

As leaders, we sometimes think our job is to protect younger colleagues from difficult situations. I increasingly believe our role is to prepare them for those situations. Growth seldom happens in comfort. It happens when people are stretched, but not abandoned; challenged, but not left unsupported.

Younger professionals also carry responsibility. Whenever I speak to junior colleagues, I emphasise that preparation is the ultimate equaliser. Confidence matters, but competence earns trust. If you want a meaningful role in complex transactions, understand the business. Think beyond the legal issue. Understand the commercial reality the client is facing. Anticipate the questions that may arise.

The most successful younger professionals I have worked with have all been relentlessly curious. They did not wait to be taught everything. They asked questions, sought opportunities and invested in their own development. When that mindset is met with genuine sponsorship from senior leaders, extraordinary things happen. I have been fortunate enough to experience this as both a sponsor and the one sponsored.

Some of the proudest moments in my career have not only been successful restructurings or positive client outcomes, but also watching someone find their voice: seeing a younger colleague speak up in a difficult negotiation, challenge an assumption respectfully, or realise that they belong in the room. There is something deeply rewarding about knowing you played even a small part in that growth.

In turnaround work, we often explain that struggling businesses cannot survive if they continue operating according to outdated models. The same is true of our professions and institutions. If we want to remain relevant, resilient and innovative, we cannot keep reproducing the same voices, the same opportunities and the same pathways to leadership.

We must deliberately create space for the next generation to learn, contribute and lead. When we lift others as we rise, we do more than advance individual careers or strengthen the profession; we help build and sustain the South African economy.

CDH