Q&A

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Mentorship, sisterhood, and 'lifting as you rise'

There is a powerful African proverb: *"If you want to go fast, go alone; if you want to go far, go together."* How do you practically apply this to building support networks among female professionals across African finance?

I first heard the adage, "If you want to go fast, go alone; if you want to go far, go together" from my mother, several years before I entered the finance world. She often impressed upon my sisters and me the importance of sisterhood and a strong support system. I watched her and her friends support one another as they built successful businesses. Their example taught me, early on, that progress is rarely achieved alone – it is sustained through relationships built on trust and shared purpose.

When I began my career in investment banking, I was deliberate about building a network of female professionals. I started through a graduate trainee programme, which placed me within a cohort of ambitious young people and gave me an early opportunity to form meaningful professional relationships. Over time, many of those relationships became sources of honest feedback, encouragement, knowledge, opportunities and perspective. This experience reinforced my belief that one of our most valuable professional assets is the community we build around us.

I apply this adage by cultivating relationships at every level:

- With mentors who have walked the path before me, and can share their experience and help me navigate unfamiliar situations;
- With peers with whom I can exchange ideas, opportunities and support; and
- With the younger generation of women, whom I can guide and advocate for.

In practice, this means investing in relationships consistently, sharing opportunities, making introductions, and supporting women even when there is no immediate benefit to oneself.

In your journey, have you experienced the difference between a mentor (who gives advice) and a sponsor (who actively advocates for your promotion behind closed doors)? How are you playing the role of sponsor for others now?

Mentors are invaluable advisors, but sponsors can alter the trajectory of a career. A mentor helps prepare one for opportunities; a sponsor helps ensure that one is even considered for them. I experienced this distinction in my first investment banking role, where I met a senior professional who became a genuine sponsor. He saw my potential, advocated for me, and helped pave the way for my next two career moves. Eight years later, he remains actively invested in my development and career progression. This showed me how transformative it can be when someone is willing to attach their reputation to your potential.

I now try to extend the same support to younger women. Beyond offering advice, I review their work, provide candid feedback, make introductions and share opportunities. For me, lifting as I rise means helping younger women build the competence and confidence to succeed, and then leveraging my access and network to help open doors for them. In African finance, where access, visibility and relationships often influence opportunity, supporting another woman requires more than advice. It requires active sponsorship and advocacy.

What is the most rewarding piece of tactical advice you've ever given to a junior female colleague that you watched her successfully put into practice?

At one of the investment banks where I worked, a junior colleague was anxious about her performance. Her fear of mistakes caused her to second-guess her abilities, hold back from challenges, and shrink herself. I encouraged her to 'do it scared'. I reminded her that every unfamiliar task becomes experience once completed. She did not need to wait for confidence before acting; confidence would come with experience as she took on unfamiliar work, asked questions, and learnt.

Over time, I watched her stop shrinking herself, contribute openly, and approach assignments with greater confidence and trust in her ability to learn. Her improvement was evident not only in the quality of her work, but also in how she carried herself. She earned a promotion within the year. Watching her turn that advice into growth and tangible career progress was deeply rewarding.

Building a deal pipeline relies heavily on networks that are often built in informal spaces. How can young women build authentic, high-value networks on their own terms?

Personally, I have realised that many of the relationships I built informally and organically have created opportunities for me, broadened my perspective, and expanded my knowledge.

I believe authentic networks are built intentionally. For me, this means being intentional about fostering relationships and being present for people, not only when I need something. I accept invitations, attend events, meet people, and follow up afterwards. An introduction may create a connection, but consistency and reliability are what build trust. Over time, these small interactions can develop into genuine and valuable relationships.

For young women, it's important to nurture relationships. Start with people whose work you respect: be curious, show up, stay in touch, honour commitments, share information, and join professional associations. Also, look beyond your immediate market. Some of the most valuable opportunities emerge through regional networks that span different jurisdictions.

As more women intentionally support, sponsor and advocate for one another, I believe we will not only increase female representation in African finance, but also influence how institutions are built across the continent.

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