Q&A

Onyebuchim Obiyemi
Director & Head | Investment Banking
CardinalStone Partners Limited

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?

Having spent over 16 years in investment banking and grown through the ranks, I have learnt that no meaningful career or institution is built alone. You may move quickly on your own, but sustainable success requires people who support, challenge and create opportunities for one another.

I have always been passionate about giving younger professionals a chance. Sometimes, what someone needs is not another course or another piece of advice, but a senior person saying, "I trust you with this. Go and do it." That opportunity can be transformative.

For me, building support networks means sharing knowledge, making introductions, recommending talented women and, importantly, giving them exposure to situations where they can demonstrate what they are capable of. I benefited enormously from experienced professionals who taught and challenged me, and I see it as my responsibility to create that same environment for the next generation.

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?

I have experienced both, and both are important. A mentor gives you perspective; a sponsor creates opportunity. A mentor may advise you on navigating a difficult client or career decision, while a sponsor puts your name forward when an important opportunity arises and is willing to put their credibility behind you.

Because I have grown through the ranks, I understand the importance of someone giving someone that first opportunity to demonstrate that they're ready for more responsibility.

Today, I try to create those opportunities for younger professionals, particularly by giving them real responsibility, rather than artificial exposure. Put them on the transaction. Let them work with the client. Give them ownership of part of a pitch. Let them observe how experienced bankers think through a commercial problem.

How can financial institutions in East and West Africa move past superficial 'diversity quotas' to build environments where young women are genuinely fast-tracked into front-office, revenue-generating deal roles?

We need to move beyond headcount and focus on access to meaningful work and commercial responsibility.

In investment banking, you can quickly tell whether an institution is genuinely developing its young professionals. Who is working on transactions? Who is sitting with clients? Who is involved in structuring and presenting? Who is learning to develop relationships and originate business?

You cannot build a strong investment banker through classroom training alone. Some of the most valuable learning comes from executing transactions alongside experienced professionals who are willing to teach.

Young women need access to live transactions, clients, senior bankers, and progressively greater responsibility. I strongly believe in institutions where people learn by doing, and by working alongside experienced investment banking professionals. If we want more women in senior front-office roles, we must give them the opportunity to develop the skills those roles require.

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?

One of the most important pieces of advice I give younger bankers is to develop commercial awareness early.

Early in a career, it's natural to focus on technical execution – getting the model right, producing a good presentation, or understanding valuation. Those fundamentals matter, but as you progress, the question becomes: "Do you understand what the analysis means?"

I encourage younger colleagues to understand the client, industry, competitive landscape and, most importantly, the commercial reason behind the transaction.

I have seen people take this advice and move from simply completing tasks to anticipating what the client or senior banker needs next. That is when technical competence starts becoming genuine investment banking judgement.

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?

I encourage young women to focus less on 'networking' and more on building a reputation that people want to associate with.

Be curious. Know your market. Understand your clients' businesses. Have an informed perspective. Be dependable, and follow through. You don't need to attend every social gathering or become someone you are not.

Some of the strongest professional relationships I have built have come from working together on difficult transactions, solving problems under pressure, and seeing how people perform when things don't go according to plan.

Build relationships across levels and institutions, and bring value before you ask for value. Share an insight, make an introduction, or help solve a problem. Over time, those relationships become far more valuable than a collection of business cards or LinkedIn connections.

After more than 16 years in this industry, one of the things I value most is seeing younger professionals grow, take on responsibility, and eventually become the people creating opportunities for others. That is how we build stronger individuals, stronger institutions and, ultimately, a stronger African financial services industry.

CARDINALSTONE