

Leadership Lessons From a Women in Tech



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She is an MBA graduate from Wits Business School, where she obtained a distinction on a thesis on Strategies to improve women's representation in leadership roles within male-dominated industries; and uses the findings from her research to help aspiring women leaders across Africa to break through the glass ceiling. She has served as the Executive Director for the Strategic African Women In Leadership (SAWIL) to expand the SAWIL footprint to the rest of the African continent. She won numerous awards for her contribution towards gender equality transformation, including SAWIL Trailblazers Awards 2020 and a nominee for Inspiring Fifty South African Women In Tech 2021.



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With our commitment to the empowerment of women in data, we look at the journey of a Women-in-Tech for this month's issue of Talk Data To Me. Moloko Komane, Head of Customer Value Management and an MBA graduate, will be speaking about female empowerment in data and what this can mean for the data community at [DataFest Cape Town](#), 7 & 9 November 2023. She shares her insightful and inspiring account of progression to a leadership role within the technology field, as a working wife and a mother of two. Here is her story....

Where it all began

Women constitute much of the South African population, however, that is not reflected in the percentage of female representation in the STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics) field, nor in the representation of woman leaders within the technology sector. I conducted research in the past to gather information pertaining to what makes a woman-leader successful in this industry, and it was through the application of those findings that I got to this point in my career. Like most people within the technology field, I started my career as a specialist, and it took me a good eleven years before progressing to my very first leadership role. My journey was nothing short of educational and today I will be sharing some of the eye-opening findings, from an expedition of a women navigating the leadership labyrinth of the tech world. Let's go straight into the key lessons that made a difference in my career.

Authenticity

It is easy for women to lose themselves in the heart of a male-dominated organization or data science department, in an attempt to fit in.

"If you want to be someone, be YOU!"

People will not follow someone they do not trust, and if you try to be someone that you are not, people will see right through you, and you will lose their trust. This, however, does not mean that we cannot learn from others; learning agility is in fact one of the factors that makes leaders successful. While we can study leadership traits from other leaders to learn from them, we should be cautious of falling into the temptation of trying to be someone else. It is worth knowing that women who remain true to themselves in male-dominated industries are more successful because of their authenticity.

Confidence in your own potential

The skills that make you successful in a data specialist role are different from the skills you need to succeed in a leadership role. Although it is an advantage for a leader in data science to have the technical know-how, those skills are not enough to help you lead successfully. Relying on technical skills before pursuing leadership roles will only delay one's career progression to leadership. The one mistake I made along my journey was being my own stumbling block. In the past, I used to apply for a role only if I had the experience to complete 80% of the described responsibilities listed in the job description.

That did not serve me very well, because the required skills on the job specs were different from my technical skills. My approach had to change! I had to start assessing whether I would be successful or not in a role based on what I am capable of and move away from looking at only my past experiences.

Leaders are appointed on potential, so it is imperative to believe in your ability to do something that you have never done before. The only way to progress from a data specialist role to a leadership role, is to take a leap of faith and challenge yourself to do something that you believe you have the potential to succeed at.

Going the extra mile and delivering more than what is expected

Believing in one's own potential is but one side of a two-sided coin, the other side of the coin is having other people see that same potential that you see in yourself. Those willing to take a chance on you need to have the confidence that you have what it takes to deliver and therefore, creating visibility of what you are capable of is of the utmost importance. We work in a highly competitive field and the reward for doing your job is not a promotion, but your salary - if you want career acceleration, then you must go beyond your call of duty. This can be achieved when one takes on roles outside of their working areas to improve visibility of their work; moreover, this will expose them to potential mentors and sponsors. Mentors and sponsors can be the major catalysts for promotion.

No man is an island and the same applies for women in tech; we all need a helping hand from mentors and sponsors. The only way a person can sponsor you is if they've had an opportunity to see you in action, therefore raising your hand to do something out of your work gives you that visibility. It doesn't have an immediate pay-off, but it is an investment - it will help you to earn the trust of others, and that's how sponsors give you opportunities to showcase your skills.

Being the captain of your own ship

A mentor will help you to develop a skill, a coach will help you to become the best version of yourself, and a sponsor will open doors for you to showcase your capabilities, but when it comes to one's own career development, no one can drive this better than yourself. Taking ownership of my own career development made it possible for me to grow within the data field. I have, however, learnt some tough lessons along the way - I was focusing all my energy on utilizing just the classroom training for career growth; I got stuck in a place where I felt like I was ever learning with no indication of when I would ever be learned. So many of us make the mistake of focusing purely on courses to grow our skills, and classroom training constitutes only 10% of the learning model; the rest of the learning comes from mentors and coaches (20%) and from putting our lessons into practice (70%). Changing focus to strive for putting most of the things I've learnt into practice, made it possible for me to break out of the perpetual training turmoil that I had gotten myself into.

The progression of women in data into leadership roles is not dependent on their organizations. Companies provide the tools you need to succeed but it is what you do with those tools that will determine how your career pans out. Most companies provide access to online and classroom learnings, bursaries for anyone wishing to further their studies, mentorship programs and platforms for women, in order to create an environment that is conducive for growth.

Moreover, the organizations have strategies in place to improve gender diversity. We have the tools, and it is up to us to make use of the opportunities at our disposal. It is like living in the land of milk and honey, and all you need to do is milk your own cows and create your own beehives.

Food for thought!

As for the final words, I would like to leave you with a message that “When it comes to having a successful career in tech while building a family, a woman can have it all! Just not all at the same time.” Several women I’ve met who succeeded in building both a career and a family did not try to do it all at once. Some started off with a focus on building a family, enjoying the company benefits like maternity leave and family responsibility-related provisions, with an understanding that this comes at a cost of career growth. They later got to a point where they focused on accelerating their career growth and making the necessary sacrifices to achieve that. The other group held off marriage and having children to first focus on accelerating their career growth; it was only when they reached a pre-set level in their careers that they changed focus, and made less sacrifices so that they could focus on building a family. Both groups ended up having it all, just at different times. The one thing they had in common was a realization that there was a trade-off between home and work responsibilities, and one needs to prioritise one over the other at different times in their lives.

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