
The Powerful Leadership of African Women



By Lucy Quist , INSEAD

Six women leading the way and inspiring others to realise their potential.

African women are powerhouses in their own right. I felt this statement come to life when I saw the number of African women representing businesses at the [UK-Africa Investment Summit](#) held in January. Skilled in equal measure, they are leaders who contribute not only to the growth of their region but also to the growth of the world.

Reflecting on International Women's Day 2020 and its theme of Each for Equal, I thought of the many African business women I know. I have had the privilege of interacting with some of them in person and I have read a lot about the others. What they have in common is that I continue to be inspired by the way they impact the world for good.

As INSEAD Professor Henrik Bresman and MIT Professor Deborah Ancona have [written](#), "There is no single way to lead, and no leader is perfect." Each leader must discover their unique strengths, experiences and values so they can build on them. With that mind, let me introduce six illustrious

African women in business and what I have learnt from them.

Women who inspire and impact for good

Freda Duplan recently retired as managing director of Nestlé in Pakistan and is currently board chair of Zenith Bank Ghana. Previously, she was MD of Nestlé in Ghana. These two roles are the pinnacle of a career spanning 27 years at Nestlé. A woman after my own heart with a STEM background, Freda and I met around 2014 or 2015. She is a business leader known for coaching her teams to grow and deliver consistent results, whatever the metrics. Freda taught me that leadership is about calm and consistent confidence. It requires the focused ability to see clearly and make decisions firmly anchored in your values.

Daphne Nkosi is the executive chairman of Kalagadi Manganese (Pty) Ltd, which is the first African-woman-founded and predominantly African-women-led mining company in the world. I still marvel at the vision it took to found this company. When I met Daphne, she explained the importance of deliberately empowering other African women in business. While she set about finding the right women to lead the business, success remained the imperative. From Daphne I learnt that governance cannot be compromised. Here is a woman who has built a business that will certainly survive generations because of the solid structures she put in place.

Joy Doreen Biira is a journalist, presenter and commentator. I met her in Switzerland when she was moderating a summit focused on attracting investment into Africa. Joy is a voice of the African story and today she places emphasis on sustainability in business. Building African prosperity requires not only the positive projection of the continent, but an insistence on ensuring that the path to prosperity does not negatively impact our societies and communities. This imperative cannot be left to a few sitting in board and deal rooms. It is an imperative for all Africans. Joy epitomises the voice of the African woman and uses it to empower her people to take ownership. From Joy I learnt to own my voice.

Chimamanda Adichie is someone I look forward to meeting one day. I first learnt about her work in 2007. A colleague mentioned a great book she was reading and asked whether I had read it. I said no, so she gave me her copy to read. That book was *Half of a Yellow Sun*. I could not get enough of it and noticed that many commuters in London were reading it too. I quickly bought its predecessor, *Purple Hibiscus*, which was also a literary feast. Since then I

have read all her books. Chimamanda is African, but she is a writer and thought leader for the world. I have no doubt that her work serves as a window into Africa for business leaders on every continent. She has told us why we should all be feminists – in our own context. The greatest lesson from her that I apply to business is that a single story is dangerous. I believe we cannot view people and therefore business through a pre-defined lens of success. The metrics of business success have to be contextual and we should look beyond limiting yardsticks such as short-term profitability. I believe it is an approach that businesses around the world must consider if they are to truly create inclusive workplaces.

Chinwe Esimai is the chief anti-corruption and bribery officer at Citi. With her training in law, she is laser-focused on ensuring that the firm's business is protected. I was fascinated to meet a woman who talked with clarity and certainty about the impact of preparation on her career. Chinwe talked about the importance of being her authentic self as an African woman in global business. I don't think it is lost on her that as a Nigerian, many would not consider her the right candidate for the role. Maybe, as Chimamanda says, it is dangerous to look at people through a single lens. I learnt from Chinwe that it is fine to embrace all that I am as an African woman and present that to the world. We do not have to edit who we are – our intelligence and skill are enriched by the power of our experiences.

Joyce Aryee represents versatility. She was the first woman to head Ghana's Chamber of Mines. She was also previously a minister of state in Ghana. Her service to nation building is in both the public and private sectors. Today, she continues to coach and guide business leaders all over the world. Her ability to take her leadership competence from one assignment to the next demonstrates that African business women are not restricted in what they can successfully engage. I have known Joyce for many years and perhaps the one thing I continue to marvel at is the fact that she still sends me a personal letter every time I take on a new challenge. She demonstrates that African women lead with a strong desire to pull up the next generation of leaders.

These women are just a few of the powerhouses that represent the broader world of African leadership. We must look beyond the headlines that present us with a single version of an entire continent to see the business leaders of the countries that are making progress in creating real African prosperity through its people.

Find article at

<https://knowledge.insead.edu/leadership-organisations/powerful-leadership-african-women>

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