NONHLANHLA MBELE - LEADERSHIP BEYOND THE BALANCE SHEET: A JOURNEY OF STRATEGY, INNOVATION AND EMPOWERMENT

1. You've held senior finance leadership roles across state-owned and listed companies. How has this journey shaped your approach to financial stewardship and executive decision-making?

The journey has shaped my approach to financial stewardship in a way that I always have to spend the first 100 days in the new company, to assess the business's understanding of financial management, including financial reporting, compliance and cost control, and if there is an appreciation of what would be the impact if there is or lack there of, of ownership, accountability and responsibility of all costs and revenue drivers, to identify and address the gaps that could have an impact on decision making by the executive committee and subsequently the financial performance of the company.

This approach always enabled me to craft a high level plan that will support the short and long term financial goals of the company as well as the company's overall strategy.

2. At Trans-Africa Projects, you oversee finance in a sector driven by engineering and infrastructure. How do you balance financial performance with long-term sustainability and innovation in such a technical industry?

In this industry the ultimate financial strategy should be to maintain a healthy cash position and a strong balance sheet in ensuring sustainability. Spend should always be directed towards innovation to unlock and sustain competitive advantage. It is however not always easy to navigate given the rising overhead costs that need to be absorbed by the engineering projects to improve the bottom line. Regular review and analysis of the critical financial KPIs is a must. Prompt decision making is critical.

3. You founded MBN Accountants & Business Consultants before moving into corporate leadership. How did entrepreneurship influence your perspective on leadership and corporate finance?

It made me realise that in order to scale up, I needed to hire great people, give them direction and support, and get out of their way. Deliverables and KPIs need to be clear and corporate culture needs to be conducive to support "work-life balance".

An understanding of how operations translate to profit maximization was heightened as I had experienced it first hand as an entrepreneur. As a result, before moving to corporate leadership, I had fully positioned myself strategically as a management consultant for small and big companies and have seen how effective leadership looks like in real time.

4. Your academic pursuit at the University of Cambridge in Sustainable Finance is remarkable. How has that experience reshaped your view on the evolving role of finance in addressing climate and ESG goals?

As a CFO of a consulting company specialising in power generation and high voltage services, the qualification helped me to understand how investment capital flows to support UN's Sustainable Development Goals in our industry and how finance is directed towards reducing negative impacts or augment positive impacts to climate and the ESG implications thereof.

Finance role comes into play in assisting the company by assessing which projects to undertake, the impact on the shareholder value especially when trying to balance how much short term shareholder returns can be sacrificed to deliver what the world needs to be environmentally and socially sustainable while the business creates long term sustainable returns.

5. As CFO, how do you drive business strategy beyond numbers — ensuring that finance supports innovation, agility, and growth?

I always ensure that a proper financial strategy is derived from the company's short and long term strategy that would have already identified growth prospects, especially those that would require innovation. In most cases it is important to understand and align with the operational executives on strategic items that would require agility and factor those in the financial strategy, operational budgets and long -term financial forecasts . In so doing, finance ensures that the company is able to implement its long-term objectives.

Nonhlanhla Mbele

CFO: TRANS-AFRICA PROJECTS

6. The finance function is undergoing digital transformation globally. What technologies or approaches do you believe are redefining the role of CFOs today?

The best way to break down silos in the company, I believe, as a CFO, is to bring data together to make faster, sharper and strategic decisions. Be it Financial data, HR data or Operational data. In my current role this was the biggest challenge the company had, and I was lucky that I walked in the middle of a long standing project of implementing the new ERP system.

My challenge was getting the buy-in and the understanding that automated systems that are cloud -based will give us that one view and that we will have dashboards and reporting that are automated.

We then, in the current financial year, implemented the ZOHO ERP System that is perfect for our business environment. It took a lot of customisation to fit well with the engineering consulting services. We are 6 months in and 95% complete. We test run the system 2 months before the implementation and had to roll out all modules in stages. It is starting to come together and giving us that single view we want and it has shown in the improved decision making process.

7. You've worked across diverse industries — aviation, healthcare, entertainment, and now engineering. What universal lessons in leadership and risk management have stayed with you throughout your career?

I learned it is important to be decisive in order to give the best direction and supervision. But, always take time to think, but not too much time. This enables me to assess the risks, consult and assess different scenario analysis, even when I need to make a decision in five minutes.

8. Leadership is as much about people as it is about performance. How do you nurture talent and develop high-performing teams in your departments?

People are assets. Treat them with the professionalism and respect they deserve. Enable them to perform to the best of their abilities, give them tools, flexibility, clear deliverables and timelines and step out of their way. Always emphasize the importance of emotional and mental balance to your team and encourage rest. I always get the best performance from my team when I apply these.

It is also important to invest in their growth, encourage personal and professional development, that creates trust and in return you get high-performing teams.

9. What are some of the key challenges women face in executive finance roles today, and how have you navigated those challenges in your own journey?

I don't think most challenges women who are Finance Executives face are gender related, rather are " finance role" related. The finance function is often left out of operational decision making processes until it is late and you are the one who needs to provide solutions to help the company to avoid adverse financial losses. I have always made it my goal, throughout my career, to ensure that internal controls are designed to include Finance and/or Procurement from the inception. This ensures implementation of financial governance, budgetary controls and the overall financial strategy to ensure that companies are sustainable.

10. Having managed both internal controls and strategic initiatives, how do you maintain the balance between compliance rigor and innovation freedom within an organization?

It is important to understand the level of understanding and discipline employees have around the company's bigger picture and why and how certain decisions are made. Where these lack, I normally engage employees in a rich and transparent two-way dialogue focused explicitly on why and how certain decisions are made. I use these dialogues to emphasize the importance of discipline and why controls are enforced and will only be eased to allow ideation/innovation when employees are disciplined critical thinkers to improve their own ways of working to reach financial, governance and operational goals of the company.

11. Your experience also includes board-level leadership as a Non-Executive Director. How has this broadened your understanding of governance and strategic oversight?

Good governance requires a careful balance between being sufficiently involved and not overstepping into operational management. It is easy for NED to blur the line between oversight and management. This is always catastrophic as it undermines the authority of the executive team, which could potentially lead to confusion, inefficiency, and conflict within the company.

12. What leadership principles or philosophies guide your decision-making in moments of high pressure or uncertainty?

Over the years I have learned that it's important that I always remain calm but probe in detail the matter at hand to gather information and explore options. When I need to make decisions under high pressure, I always trust my instinct and have been blessed to always revert to it. I honestly think it's because on my total dependence and reliance on God.

13. Looking at South Africa's evolving economic landscape, what role do you think financial leaders should play in driving sustainable growth and ethical transformation?

Finance professionals have an influence to encourage companies to direct capital investments towards sustainability and drive an understanding around the transition companies need to make from " sustainability - as - usual" to " sustainability - as - the - world needs" and hold companies accountable to enforce ethical transformation and report accordingly as required by the profession and accounting and sustainability reporting standards. This will ensure that the S.A. business community contributes positively to sustainability issues and it forgoes short -term returns in order to generate financial value by monetising system value creation, i.e. by delivering what the country and ultimately the world needs.

14.You've often been described as a mentor and lea der who empowers others. What lessons do you aim to impart to the next generation of finance professionals — especially young women entering the field?

Firstly to remind them to always remain humble and embrace the finance profession as a profession not a personality. Secondly, to never compromise the profession's principles no matter the pressure in order to sleep well at night. Hard truth, embrace not being liked, it helps to do your job without fear or favour and always look at it as you doing things right, especially in an environment where there is lack of discipline around governance.

15. As you reflect on your journey — from article clerk to CFO — what personal or professional milestones stand out to you as defining moments of growth and transformation?

The first milestone that was a defining moment for me was in my first year of articles when I was recognised as a top rated clerk. This was when it dawned on me that authenticity is key. I had shown up as me and with the same work ethic my family instilled in me and the faith that never failed me. This unlocked all the professional growth and transformation that followed as I never looked back and continued to uphold the same personal principles.

Having had leaders that believed in me and judged me based on capabilities was my other milestone. These were men and women who respected me as a professional and valued my professional expertise and created environments that only propelled my growth and career transformation. I will be forever grateful to them.

Biography for Nonhlanhla Mbele

Trans – Africa Projects (Pty) Ltd Chief Financial Officer who leads and oversees the company's financial strategy in all its offices in South Africa, Mauritius and Mozambique. She provides strategic guidance to the company's Executive Committee and the Board on key financial and regulatory issues on long term strategic plans.

She has over 13 years of Board and executive level experience. An expert in Sustainable Finance, IT strategies around automated ERP systems and ICT environments, and Procurement management. She is passionate about developing managers in becoming exceptional business leaders.

She is a Non-Executive Director for SmartHR Management Systems, Missio Dei Education and RiskCape Financial Services – Upliftment Fund.

Industry exposure: Gaming, Medical, Content and Broadcast, Records and Information management, Aviation, Business Consulting and Engineering (Current).