

Female leaders in travel share their secrets for success

 By Jenna Berndt

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In celebration of Women's Month this August, three accomplished female leaders from South Africa's travel and tourism industry share some of their stories and advice for other female employees and leaders. Each tale is unique, and they're all-powerful.



Image source: [Gallo/Getty](#)

Here, Teresa Richardson, managing director of The Travel Corporation in South Africa, parent company of guided holiday brands including Trafalgar, Cost saver, Contiki and more; Sue Garrett, general manager marketing and product at The Flight Centre Travel Group and Dr Nomvuselelo Songelwa, chief executive officer at Jurni, travel and tourism data management company in South Africa shares their secrets for success.

How did your career in the travel and tourism industry begin?

Richardson: I started working at Holiday Tours in 1983, as a junior consultant. I knew the travel industry was for me when I was sent off on my first 'recce' trip to Mauritius for three weeks!

Garrett: After two years of working in London, I returned to South Africa in 1996. I knew the travel bug had bitten and made the decision to switch career paths when I saw that Flight Centre had opened operations here. I [had] used Flight Centre in London and Australia for all my bookings... the rest is history.

Songelwa: I joined South African National Parks in 1996 as an environmental education coordinator. Although I was dealing with the strategic planning and responsible tourism frameworks of national parks, you have to be customer-friendly and consider stakeholder engagement. You cannot divorce the aspect of managing parks from tourism. So, tourism became part of what I was doing.

What are the most important lessons you've learnt in your career so far?

Richardson: After 35+ years in the industry, I've learnt to enjoy the ride. It's often a roller coaster one, so you have to love what you do. That is what makes it a pleasure... Self-awareness and having an innate understanding of how others react and what motivates them is the most valuable skill you can have. It's one I'm continually working on.

Garrett: There have been so many leadership lessons learnt over the past 23 years. The most important ones for me would be [to] surround yourself with great people, take calculated risks knowing that you may fail (but fail fast, admit to it, learn from it and never give up trying), put your people and their needs ahead of your own, stay humble, open to learning, determined and disciplined in every aspect of your life.

Songelwa: Always bring your strong points to the table. You must bring your authenticity, your own identity, your femininity and your womanhood into the board room without emulating your counterparts.

Rules and policies are good and necessary, but it's more important to look after your people. It's about understanding human nature, why people do certain things.

Any tips for women working their way towards a leadership role?

Richardson: Leadership is a true test of your values and tenacity, as there will be times when you will need to make unpopular decisions... You need to earn the respect of your peers and show support for your current leader. That way, when an opportunity arises, you would have already earned the trust of your team. This makes the transition to leadership so much easier. What comes easy won't last long, and what lasts long won't come easy.

Garrett: One of the many reasons for my leadership success comes down to the leaders I have been privileged to be led by. I allowed myself to be stretched beyond what I thought was my breaking point, but each one of them taught me I could go further. I am a firm believer in finding a mentor that will challenge you. But don't take it as a sign of disbelief in your ability.

The right leader will have spotted your potential before you have, and they are driving you to reach it. So often, I have witnessed women in leadership feeling that they are being challenged unfairly. And I guess sometimes this is the case; but the majority of the time, the challenging is to better you. It's all in the way you view it and deal with it.

Songelwa: As a woman, our careers are not career ladders. They are jungle gyms. If you look at my career, there has not been one linear field. Instead, it was a jungle gym where I had to go from one end to the other.

I've learnt that the only thing I have in my life is my name. It's important to leave a legacy. If you want to do that, it's not what you say that is important but what you do. Wherever you go, you're writing your book.

Consistency is very important. You can talk to anyone I have worked with; they will all know exactly who I am. They will hate me or they will love me, but it will be for the same reasons. I'm consistent and true to myself.

What unique challenges have you faced as a female leader?

Richardson: Over the past five years, I've seen more male CEOs get in touch with their empathy skills. Empathy goes a long way, especially in tough times, and I'm seeing that in leaders more and more. My gender has not presented me with

any unique challenges.

Garrett: I certainly was challenged far more early on in my career, but I feel that this may have also been age-related coupled with a 'female' question mark. I was only 27 when I took on my first MD (managing director) role in a very male-dominated, executive environment. I don't feel that I ever showed signs of intimidation, but I played more to the fact that I could be moulded to lead. This approach gave me the confidence to grow my skills and make my mark.

Songelwa: Of course, as a woman, you will always be questioned. In the tourism sector, in the conservation sector, and even now that I'm in the technology sector, people always question me because the very first thing that they see is a woman.

People will question your competence, your emotional intelligence, your maturity. But what is important is that you are always true to yourself. Because if you're true to yourself and are comfortable and content with the decisions you make, you can defend your decisions at any time.

People will come to you, both men and women, because they have certain perceptions. It is very important to stand your ground.

Any parting words for other women in business?

Richardson: Women are unique in what they bring to the table. We must never forget the value of our female energy, creativity and compassion. Your success can be achieved by your own rules, so you need to build a life that you're proud to live.

Garrett: It is a tough and competitive world out there, and to be recognised as a female leader for your ability, rather than as a token, is not easy. There certainly are times that the glass ceiling becomes very apparent. But, instead of using it to limit your potential, see it as an opportunity to break through using your smarts and determination.

Songelwa: The problem that we have as a society is that we portray women as a homogenous group. A lot of people are calling for a narrative that changes this, and that says: first and foremost, we are human. Women are never homogenous.

But let's share the lessons that we have learned, in particular as women leaders, [with] younger women... We also need to groom our sons to become people who respect women, and we need to respect where we come from. Your background doesn't determine your destiny.

ABOUT JENNA BERNDT

With a curious mind and a love for travel and tourism, Jenna Berndt has over nine years' marketing experience in the travel industry. She is currently a brand owner for leisure travel brands at Big Ambitions, a specialist Cape Town-based travel content marketing consultancy.

Jenna has a journalism degree specialising in graphic design, a keen eye for visual and written communication and is focused on achieving brand goals through content creation and PR, marketing strategy, SEO copywriting and social media.

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