

Cotton On Group's Natalie Wills leads with heart

 By [Lauren Hartzenberg](#)

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Natalie Wills thrives in the world of retail, inspired by the industry's opportunities for human connection and brand impact.



Natalie Wills, Africa country manager: Cotton On Group. Source: Supplied

She's worked at big-name retail brands such as Edcon and Nike, across buying, merchandising and sales functions, and currently runs the show as Cotton On Group's country manager for Africa, steering the regional performance and enviable growth of the group's brands - including Cotton On, Factorie and Typo.

Wills sees retail as more than "just a job" and aims to inspire her team members to feel the same, nurturing their professional development and their love for the brand.

Here, Wills chats about what's drawn her to build a career in retail, her views on inspiring leadership, and her tried-and-tested tips for climbing the corporate ladder.

Natalie, what are your core duties as country manager for Cotton On Group Africa?

I am responsible for the end-to-end leading of my team across all customer touch points, which includes a full retail team and all support functions for the Africa business.

I keep everyone clear on our group strategy, delivering our vision of “The Good” in market and our purpose to make a positive difference in people’s lives. I engage and provide insights to our global team on our African marketplace, our customer, our strategy, and what we can do to drive a sustainable and growing business in market.

My team, their development, wellness and energy have a direct impact on each and every person that works for us. I focus on ensuring that my team is inspired and energised, love our brands and enjoy coming to work each and every day, and that they are always ambassadors for our group and what we stand for. That they are connected to, understand and are measured against all key metrics relating to their function and the engagement of their teams.

My performance is measured on all key metrics relating to the P&L, plus the engagement of our team.

■ ***You’ve previously held positions at Edcon and Nike, and now Cotton On. What’s kept you attracted to a career in retail?***

I’ve always loved working in an environment that is fast-paced and challenging. The world of retail never stops and I just love it! Being connected to great brands that resonate with me is so important.

And ultimately it allows lots of time to connect with people and have an impact on those around you every day. I feel I’m always learning something new every day, about myself, other people and about the environment we operate in.

■ ***At the recent Cotton On campus launch, it was clear that you are a revered leader among the company’s employees. What do you view as the qualities of a great leader?***

Great leaders inspire others around them. The leadership style I have thrived with the most is entrepreneurial, balanced, thought-provoking and thoughtful. You have to know when to switch off, enjoy the moment and have fun too. Great leaders know it’s not in the doing themselves, but in allowing those around them to thrive.



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■ ***As we recognise Women’s Month this August, do you think the retail industry could benefit from more female leadership?***

Absolutely! As an industry that has been male-dominated for a long time in senior positions, it’s wonderful to see female retailer leaders beginning to rise.

■ ***What are your top tips for climbing the career ladder in your field?***

- Put your hand up and get involved: I always took on extra, with no expectation of reward, but to keep learning and to build a name for myself.
- Learn how to connect and talk to people: Conversation skills are really important. You don’t have to be extroverted and for this to come naturally, but you can teach yourself to converse better.

- Prepare and plan for moments: For example, a presentation, a coffee connect, a project.
- Don't make your career everything: Find a balance as happiness in your off-time will naturally lead to positives in your work life.
- Be patient with yourself.
- Build relationships with people: Lots of people have similar skills, but your relationships with people will be the key difference.

■ ***In your view, where does the value lie in a diverse, inclusive work environment? And how does Cotton On work to achieve this?***

Many minds and individual thinkers create such great value in any business. I firmly believe that we all have different skills, strengths, opportunity areas and ideas. Coming together can be game-changing, and drives innovation and the ability to keep moving forward. None of us have all the answers and we are always learning.

Driving an inclusive environment where everyone has a voice is so important and I would never want to work in an environment that doesn't embrace this. I am passionate about our value of belonging at the Cotton On Group.

It is vital for each person to feel they have a place, a voice, great value to add and that no matter who you are, it's valued to be yourself and to be different. We talk about this openly with our team and we share people's stories – it's just who we are as a group.



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■ ***How do you maintain a work-life balance?***

I have to laugh at this one, as sometimes I've done a great job at this and other times not! When my children were younger, the best way I found balance was to be incredibly organised. I'd leave work at a time that meant I got good quality time with the kids at home, then when they went, to bed I'd find time to catch up on anything that needed to be wrapped up for the day.

I've always made time to switch off and rest from work – putting my phone down strictly every evening helps to disconnect and switch off. It's not easy, but I find that at times when the balance is heavily weighted on one side, you just need to plan and look forward to the time you can take a break. It's never going to be perfect; everyone has to find what works for them. And as a woman, don't be too hard on yourself ... it's incredible what we can do!

■ ***What impact do you hope to make in the retail industry?***

For me, it's all about the people ... the team I work with. Their growth and development make me feel like I'm living my purpose. I hope to inspire people that they can make a great career in retail, not just a job, but that they can work their way up and create a meaningful career.

ABOUT LAUREN HARTZENBERG

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