

FROM SMALL-TOWN BEGINNINGS TO THE C-SUITE

CFO Barbara Makhubedu learnt the value of support, determination and relationships from a very young age, and uses those same values as she leads finance at Liberty Two Degrees. She explains how she has navigated change using these pillars. By Puseletso Mompei.

Barbara Makhubedu's journey from a modest village family business to a CFO role is testament to the transformative power of perseverance and the profound impact that sponsorship can have on professional growth. Her story serves as a beacon of hope for aspiring professionals, reminding us that with dedication and resilience, even the loftiest of corporate heights can be scaled.

Barbara grew up helping out in her parents' general store, selling a wide array of items, from groceries and clothing to building materials. It was here that she took her first steps into the world of business. As a young person she learnt the value of hard work, customer service, and dealing with diverse inventories. "My upbringing in the family business instilled in me a deep appreciation for family support, entrepreneurship and the importance of customer relationships," she reflects.

These formative experiences instilled a strong work ethic and interest in accounting and finance.

Barbara's teachers recognised her aptitude for accounting and economics and encouraged her to follow a career in the field. Despite the challenges of her final year in a village where schools had been shut down, Barbara's determination and the support of her parents and a few teachers allowed her to secure admission to the University of Cape Town. She enrolled in an accounting programme, focusing her studies on accounting and economics, laying the foundation for her future endeavours in the finance world.

A guiding hand

As Barbara reflects on her career, she emphasises the critical role of sponsorship.

"Sponsorship is like having a guiding light in your career. It's about having someone who sees your potential and helps you navigate the path to success but is also prepared to advocate for your capabilities in the room where you are not present," Barbara explains.

For Barbara, sponsorship is not just about connections; it's about having people who genuinely appreciate her work, results, and authenticity. In her early career in the energy sector, where expectations were high and there were few female leaders, Barbara's sponsors helped her find her voice and her seat at the table while maintaining her authenticity as she climbed the corporate ladder. "Authenticity is key in any leadership role that one embarks on. It's about staying true to your core values and who you are while adapting to new roles," she advises.

Throughout her career she relentlessly pursued excellence, consistently aiming to do her best whilst using her circle of influence to create opportunities and platforms for young professionals and women to realise their growth aspirations.

Navigating change

Barbara's early career move took her to Shell, a massive organisation, where she had to take on her first role of scale in finance leadership as the deputy country controller. She had to lead a large finance function



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in a multinational organisation operating in a complex environment.

“Transitioning to a leadership role at Shell was both exciting and challenging. I had to navigate uncharted waters in a complex business, whilst leading a large team and learning quickly,” she says.

“Stepping into a leadership role requires courage and resilience – believing in your abilities, even when you have doubts, have a good support structure and be open to feedback,” she advises.

Barbara's journey took an international turn when she accepted an assignment in The Hague (Shell Group headquarters at the time), marking a courageous move for her and her then seven-year-old daughter. Uprooting her life and working in Europe for a few years was an exciting and daunting prospect. However, she recognised that this was a necessary step to grow and broaden herself for an aspirational CFO role in South Africa.

“Embracing change and stepping out of your comfort zone can lead to incredible growth. It’s a leap of faith,” Barbara says. In Europe, she focused on building networks and sharing her story, particularly with senior female leaders who provided invaluable guidance and support. She navigated being in a challenging role and parenting in a foreign country. Although the initial months were not easy, she realised that these experiences were vital in preparing her for an eventual return to the South African market, but also an opportunity to provide great international exposure for her young daughter and fulfil their passion for travel.

It was during this time that she reinforced her view that facing challenges head-on and seeking support from your network helps with pursuing personal and professional growth. “It is important to realise early on that you cannot do it all alone,” Barbara advises.

Pursuing aspirations

When the opportunity to return home arose, Barbara was faced with a pivotal choice. She could continue her expatriate life in Europe or seize the opportunity she had diligently worked towards of taking on a CFO role

in South Africa. Despite her initial nervousness, Barbara made the critical decision to cut her assignment short, and accept the offer of taking on the CFO role for Shell South Africa's downstream business.

“Sometimes, you have to make tough choices to pursue your aspirations both in your personal or career space,” Barbara says. This move marked another instance of good sponsorship in Barbara's journey, as the most senior leaders in Shell Group provided the best sounding boards for her when embarking on her role as CFO at Shell SA.

“I am grateful for the roles that these formidable leaders played in my journey, and I do my best to do the same for the young professionals that I have been privileged to work with,” she says.

Barbara emphasises the alignment of values as crucial to her career choices. Raised by parents with strong values and a strong work ethic, she believes in serving organisations that align with her personal values. This alignment was one of the reasons she continues to have the sense of belonging at L2D, where values resonate strongly. “When your values align with the organisation’s values, it’s a recipe for success in having a meaningful and impactful contribution in what you do,” Barbara reflects.

She is proud of L2D's initiatives, which include corporate social investment programmes, bursary schemes, partnerships with organisations in townships and internship programmes, have provided employment to numerous individuals, offering them a chance at a brighter future. “Making a difference in someone's life, no matter how small, is a step towards a better future,” Barbara emphasises.

Balancing work and family

Barbara's focus on her career doesn't overshadow her commitment to family. She is a mother to a now 17-year-old daughter and one of seven siblings – and she ensures that she spends quality time with her family. As her daughter prepares for matric next year, Barbara provides unwavering support.

“Balancing work and family will always be a challenge, but it's essential to find ways to integrate the two and cherish the moments with family and find joy in doing the things that feed your soul,” she says.

Outside of work, Barbara enjoys going to the bush and unwinding with her family, relishing simple activities and the joys of travel.

A quote that resonates strongly with her and one she lives by is from Maya Angelou that says, “People will forget what you said, people will forget what you did but they will never forget how you made them feel.” ●

