

High heels and hard hats: How to lead like a woman in a man's world

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Farana Boodhram has made her mark in the male-dominated fields of mining and transport in South Africa and has been recognised for her achievements by being selected for a prestigious Vital Voices leadership fellowship last month.

Mining and transport entrepreneur Farana Boodhram, 43, jokes that it has been suggested that if she were to start a blog she would have to call it "High heels and hard hats" – such are the contradictions of being a woman working in an industry dominated by males in South Africa.



"I love my heels, and embrace the fact that I am a woman," says Boodhram, founder and CEO of mining company Avita Mining and transport organisation Talmin

Logistics. But her daily reality is likely finding herself down a mineshaft as often as in a boardroom.

At Avita Mining, Boodhram contributes to community development by employing and training people from underprivileged communities in the mining belt of Mpumalanga. She is also involved in various projects that empower women in mining and was responsible for designing and patenting a world-first safety garment that women can wear underground.

"Existing overalls leave a woman very vulnerable as they virtually have to remove the entire garment when utilising ablution facilities underground," she explains. Her overall has been customised in order to maintain the dignity of the user.

It is this passion for empowering women and communities that has been the driving force behind her career as an entrepreneur – that and a belief in turning ideas into reality. After 11 years of working in corporate banking, the birth of her child inspired her to start her very first business, supplying baby goods and products to businesses and individuals in the Mpumalanga area.

Later, the foundation of her transport and logistics company – Talmin Logistics – came about when a local mine withdrew transport allowance for employees. She stepped in to help get personnel to their place of work in an affordable and efficient way. The company rapidly expanded when it won a contract for the transportation of coal to various Eskom power stations.

These achievements brought her to the attention of the international Vital Voices development agency and led to her being selected as one of only 60 women in the world to be awarded a prestigious VV Grow Fellowship earlier this year.

Vital Voices is a global NGO founded by US presidential candidate Hillary Clinton, with a mission to "invest in women who

changing the world.” The Grow Fellowship, now in its fourth year, works like a business accelerator for women entrepreneurs – particularly small and medium business owners working in emerging markets.

“These businesses and the women who lead them have the potential to be a powerful force for building prosperity through GDP growth and job creation,” states a press release on the Vital Voices website. “But while the potential for economic contributions are significant, women business owners face challenges in accessing the support services they need to grow such as access to networks, training, financing and markets.”

The one-year intensive programme, which got underway in June, aims to plug this gap and includes customised business skills training, technical assistance, leadership development, and access to 12 business management and leadership courses through Harvard Business School Publishing’s online platform, Harvard ManageMentor (HMM).

Boodhram is no stranger to investing in her leadership potential, having just completed an Executive MBA at the UCT Graduate School of Business (GSB). She enrolled on the programme thinking that she could use the qualification to further enhance her career – “After all, an MBA drastically increases credibility in any industry.” But she soon realised that the value of this prestigious degree was much more than the piece of paper she would receive. “The Executive MBA has been a unique experience that has allowed me to be pleasantly surprised by what I found on the other side of my self-imposed barriers,” she says, explaining that it is different to a traditional MBA because it takes a more holistic approach, incorporating mindfulness as well as design thinking into the concepts of leadership and business.

What she liked especially was the recognition of Emotional Quotient (EQ) in matters of business. “It is rare to find a course that acknowledges the power and acumen of emotions, as well as instinct in business,” she says.

Following your instincts and staying true to your values and who you are, she believes, are key to personal excellence and success in any industry, more especially if you are a woman working in a male-dominated industry where too often women get misled into thinking that they have to “be more like a man” to succeed.

Boodhram is unashamedly herself, high heels and all, and her values and ethics shine through everything she does. It is illustrative of who she is, for instance, that when she had to travel to Cape Town for her two-week modules at the GSB during her MBA, she would cook meals for her family and freeze them, to ensure that there was a home-cooked meal for them every day while she was away. She does not see this as a sacrifice on her part. “I only get one chance to be a great mother and wife and it’s a challenge I want to succeed in,” she says.

“My family are my first priority. I will drop anything in a heartbeat for them. For me, there was never a choice between my family and having a career. I am of the belief that if you keep your ethics and morals right, everything else falls into place.

Boodhram says that having a strong inner compass (and a positive mental attitude to boot) can also help you overcome obstacles and challenges, both, in your personal life and career. And she certainly has had her fair share of obstacles.

“But those have been my greatest learning lessons, the ones that have forced me to swim,” she says. And with the Vital Voices Grow Fellowship, she is hoping to learn a few new strokes.

“I am sure it is going to be a fantastic learning experience,” she says.

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