

Ignoring the glass ceiling: Attitude, education, and mentorship is key to creating strong women leaders

By [Claudette Thorne](#)

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We've all heard about the glass ceiling. It's that invisible - but very real - barrier to climbing further up the corporate ladder; with women and minority groups typically the ones who hit their heads against it the hardest.



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While it is heartening to see that times are starting to change, faster change is needed to help drive tourism forward. This is all the more so given tourism's position as one of South Africa's critical growth industries, contributing nearly R140bn to the national economy and creating about 1.5 million jobs.

As it currently stands, women make up a majority of the tourism workforce, but very few of those women hold leadership positions. We need to find innovative ways to drive the change we want to see if we are to bring more young women into the industry and help them grow into leaders.

I believe that there are three key areas we can focus on to mould young women into future leaders: encouraging a can-do attitude geared towards success; passing on the necessary skills through education, and mentoring them to reach their full potential.

I have always found that attitude acts as a key differentiator for success – which is why I believe firmly in hiring for attitude rather than only on skill. Skills are, of course, a critical component in the ability to succeed, but they can be taught on-the-job if need be. However, the right attitude needs to be present from day one.

Tenacity and confidence are the most important parts of this attitude – and crucial to thrive in the complex and challenging environment of travel. Young women working in the field will need to be tenacious to handle the challenges thrown at them, and confident in their ability to overcome these – I have certainly found that these traits have stood me in good stead as I've navigated my way through the industry.

The power of education and mentorship

Having a can-do attitude with the confidence to succeed is a solid start, but you'll also want to back up those soft skills with education as well.

This is more so as not only our industry, but the world around it is changing rapidly. Where once our customers used to identify as 'travel agents', now they increasingly think of themselves as technology companies. Equipping yourself with the skills needed to navigate our industry's ongoing digital transformation is important. Similarly, the commercial skills I've developed through my education and across my career have stood me in good stead.

There are several institutions and programmes available to help pass on these skills. The Culture, Art, Tourism, Hospitality, and Sport Sector Education and Training Authority (CATHSSETA), for example, is committed to education and training within tourism, and continues to prioritise the skills development of women within leadership roles.

Creating a pipeline of female talent will take more than just passing on hard skills through education, though. It will also require mentorship to hone women into strong leaders – helping them develop the critical skills needed to navigate the working world.

“ Don't risk tripping yourself up over a glass ceiling by worrying too much over it. Instead, spend your energy in empowering yourself with education; seek out mentors invested in your development; and have confidence in what you've achieved. ”

Personally, I've benefited tremendously from actively and unashamedly seeking out knowledge from the colleagues around me who are better than I am in various areas. Taking those lessons on board helps me stand on the shoulders of giants, so to speak.

And while I have been fortunate to have strong mentors in my own career, none of them are female. I strongly believe that we female leaders have a responsibility to do what we can for gender parity. As soon as we come into a position to be able to do something about it, we must. That's why I actively mentor multiple colleagues – many of them female.

Ignoring the glass ceiling

These three factors are interlinked and interdependent when it comes to ignoring the glass ceiling. It is important for young women to be confident enough in their own skills and education that they can comfortably admit that others are better than them at certain things - and to use it as a learning opportunity. It is also vital in being able to address discrimination when it happens.

I've experienced it in the past, when a male colleague was promoted over me – a decision I felt was not justified. Knowing I had the skills and had achieved the results to back me up, I was able to have a frank discussion with my boss at the time to address the issue.

So, if I could offer my advice to women in travel: don't risk tripping yourself up over a glass ceiling by worrying too much over it. Instead, spend your energy in empowering yourself with education; seek out mentors invested in your development;

and have confidence in what you've achieved.

These three essential ingredients are what the industry needs to develop the strong female leaders of the future.

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