

CHANGING THE NARRATIVE

Kume Luvhani achieved success early on, testimony to the power of her highly individual approach to life.



Kume Luvhani

She's a classic *rara avis*, the rare bird that breaks accepted stereotypes. At 32, she's already been a director of a major bank and is the Co-founder and Executive Director of her own company. While she believes female role models have a role to play, she says it's much more important to choose a mentor who doesn't look like you.

In a sense, Luvhani began her career at 14, when her entrepreneurial father began taking her to board meetings during school holidays. "I hated him for that at the time, but now I'm grateful," she laughs. That early exposure gave her a head start when it came to making her way up the corporate ladder, and it also inspired her goal to be a director before she was 30.

She studied finance at university and ended up doing her articles at Absa Corporate and Investment Banking. In what she describes as a 'pivotal moment', she realised she was in the wrong career. "Although I had initially pursued the CA path, it did not match my personality type," she says. However, she is quick to recognise that a good understanding of finance has stood her in excellent stead as everything in business (and life) is about money and people.

Having decided that finance was not for her, Luvhani resigned from the bank, but the COO persuaded her to join the IT team, where she found her niche. It's also where she met Peter Rix, then the CIO at Absa Corporate and Investment Banking, with whom she developed an enduring relationship. The two stayed in touch as she worked her way up through the bank.

Having become head of Strategy for Technology and achieving the coveted directorship, her entrepreneurial genes made themselves felt. One of the projects she had worked on with Peter was a complex migration into the cloud, and they both saw a gap in the market for a specialist cloud company to help corporates design and then implement this crucial transition. Their company,

Vaxowave, is two years old and is already working with most of the big banks. She's proud of the fact that it became a Microsoft Gold Azure Cloud Platform Partner in just 18 months. But, she stresses, Vaxowave is technology-agnostic, a stance embodied in the company's strong partnership with Amazon Web Services, Arista Networks and multiple leading cloud technology providers.

Luvhani also says her parents—both have their own businesses—believed in her and gave her the self-confidence she needed to succeed. She says she is constantly amazed at how many people, especially women, create the wrong impression because they are too quiet, too self-deprecating.

"I've always worked hard and spoken up," she says.

Hard work, of course, is what turns self-confidence into achievement. Luvhani calls it 'paying one's school fees', meaning that you have to learn the ropes and prove you have both the intellect and staying power needed. Such an attitude is particularly important when it comes to overturning entrenched age and gender stereotypes.

Luvhani has been able to achieve so much in such a short time—she is only 32, after all—because she is a unique combination of realist and idealist. The realism shows in her acceptance that gender/youth/race bias is present in all of us; the idealism is in the vigour with which she sets out to embody the overturning of that bias. "If you show them you can do the work, they often change their thinking," she says. "In the end, though, you have to stay true to yourself." ■