

## Advancing for Leadership in the Diaspora

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Many years ago, as I was sitting my CPA exams, I had no idea that this would put me on a road to a different country - and ultimately, the Senate of Australia. Since then, I have accepted the challenge to learn to adapt to a new culture. It wasn't easy. There were many things to learn along the way and almost every day presented a new set of issues. But I believe that this made a leader out of me. My first career was that of an accountant. I have held that career both in Kenya and in Australia and have been successful in both countries. I enjoyed my time as an accountant. It helped me to move to Australia as many of you have as well.

When I came to Australia with my young family in 1999, there were hardly any other Africans to be seen! Not so long ago, people I knew would say to me, "Oh, I saw your husband at the shops!" It wasn't him at all, it was another African man but they assumed it must be my husband because there weren't many of us around! Now I pass by and exchange smiles with many African people on the streets every day, even if I don't know them.

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I want to talk to you today about how to advance for leadership in the diaspora.

- It is about knowing who you are and where you came from.
- It is adapting to culture
- It is the freedom to be empowered
- It is setting your own goals and thinking big
- And it is about getting out of the box.

I grew up in a very humble home in a village called Hiriga in Central Kenya. As the first born child in a family of ten children I was raised with very little material wealth. I didn't even own my first pair of shoes until I was well into my school years! Yet the love and sense of community that I experienced as a child growing up was worth any hardships I encountered. I thought we were rich because my father said so. We never had a poverty mindset.

In 1999, as a wife and mother of three daughters we left Kenya, leaving behind all we knew. Armed only with faith for a better future and a determination to overcome whatever challenges

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we would face, we settled in Australia. Our move was not without its ups and downs. We had to find jobs, we missed Kenyan foods and our former lifestyles, and we were always converting every dollar to Kenya shillings. Garage sales became my husband's favourite shops as we tried to make ends meet. Even now my husband can furnish a whole house with well under \$200.

As migrants, we sometimes desperately seek ways to maintain our old lifestyle. As Kenyans, when we buy an item from the shops, no matter how low-priced the item is, we don't think twice about haggling. Or when Christmas is just around the corner, we cannot buy a goat and keep it ready to be slaughtered on Christmas morning. Anti-animal cruelty activists would protest! In fact the penalty is a jail term.

So, having a healthy appreciation of our roots – but being willing to adapt - is a strong foundation for advancing leadership.

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Today, my message to you is that the best way to advance for leadership in the Diaspora is to transcend culture. We can do this in the big things and the small things.

Engage with culture. I had to understand the new culture I came to when I moved to Australia before expecting my host culture to understand me.

I learnt that this shows respect to my host culture. It does not mean I agree with everything in the new culture, it just means we can communicate effectively. It begins to create a culture of honour.

But let us for a moment reflect on the culture we are engaging with.

Where we come from, the majority of the people are black Africans. But here, in Australia, seemingly all of the world's races are represented! We have encountered and interacted with

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other cultures such as, Britons, Australians, Europeans, Asians and Africans from all over the world living and working together – in the main, harmoniously.

The problem is sometimes we are so locked into a particular way of thinking that we are hindered from progressing and enjoying what Australia has to offer. When I left Kenya in 1999, all I knew was that at the age of 55, I would have retired and gone somewhere in the countryside and probably wait to die there. In fact I remember when we arrived here we said that we would only be here for ten years. We are still here and very settled.

Who would have thought at the age of 50 in Australia I was to go back to school and start a new career as a lawyer, an action that led me being in the Senate at the age of 54? The trick is never stop renewing yourself and taking on new opportunities.

We cannot afford to be trapped by the “old ways of thinking” that have conditioned our mind.

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Have we forgotten that a man in Kenya does not go to the kitchen or even change diapers? I have heard many stories of mothers who have come to visit their children here and are shocked to see their sons doing traditional women's roles. And a few of them are even buying their wives flowers!

We are united in a common purpose of leadership in the Diaspora. Geographical boundaries no longer hold us back. We are free to aspire to be whoever we want to be. We have freedom to achieve the best we can be.

By taking that freedom, we can experience new beginnings and integrate well in a new culture. This does not mean leaving behind our own identity; no – it means being able to experience the best of where we are - and where we came from. And that is very empowering.

What should we do with this freedom? We have the opportunity to be a good example of tenacity to the rest of the world. Simply by leaving your old life behind and coming to a new country indicates that you have a strength and resilience to achieve great things. But it goes further. We have all started and

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adopted a way of life which was very new for us at first. I remember arriving in Australia many years ago and being in awe of what I first experienced. Even now, simple things like the freedom of going to a park and enjoying the beauty of nature give me great pleasure. Climbing Mount Lofty just outside of Adelaide is another one of my great joys.

My father often told his children to aim for the sun so we might land on the moon. I knew I had to do something to turn the dream into reality. It became clear to me at an early age that I needed to value the power of education and give myself options for the future. Without these goals, I would have been in true poverty – that is the poverty of not being able to choose my own destiny. I might not have had many possessions but I had a free mind - and the power to dream.

In Australia, it was possible for a barefoot girl from Kenya, who grew up living in poverty, to one day become involved in politics. In Australia, even a farm girl can become a Federal Senator! It is possible in Australia that a person of another culture can be free

to express themselves. In Australia we are free to choose to belong – no matter where we came from.

How do we conceptually escape “the box” which keeps us from understanding and revelling in all the benefits that come from transcending culture?

When I think of my “box” I know for sure;

- “My box” had no place for an O-level education – I had been cut-off having got 28 points when the cut off for national schools was 30 points. My parents made sacrifices to make sure I was where I needed to be!
- “My box”- had no place for A-level education: There was no money for school fees and I had to travel for a day and a night to get to school.
- “My box”- had no place for becoming an Australian Permanent Resident and subsequently a Citizen. I accidentally met a High School friend on the streets of Nairobi who told me about Australia looking for professionals.
- “My box” had no place for being employed at the Auditor - Generals Department, four months after landing in Australia



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- “My box” had no place for starting an International Students recruitment Agency.
- “My box” had no place for becoming a Senator 20 years after arriving in Australia.

But my life, like yours has become transformed by the power of thinking “outside the box”.

## CONCLUSION

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As part of the Diaspora, we bring many wonderful strengths to both our nations. Our challenge to advance leadership is always how best to retain the most valuable aspects of our roots while embracing the changes we need to thrive in our new environment.

I trust that I have given you a few ideas from my own experience to accomplish that.