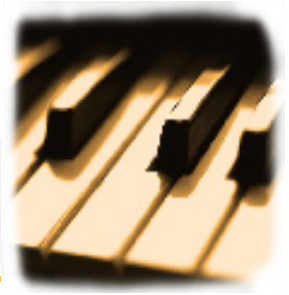


# Stepping up: Stories of successful women business leaders in Kenya



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The outpouring of positive energy, laughter, joy and tough love was more than we expected, when our colleague and friend, Evelyn Mungai, invited us to facilitate a roundtable for women business leaders in Nairobi.

Though Evelyn is too modest to describe herself as an extraordinary over-achiever, her own story is courageous one. Widowed at age 34 she went on to open a recruitment agency to support her family — and build the skills of intelligent, industrious women who had “the right stuff” to meet the needs of the burgeoning post-colonial East African business community.

When a few of the best and brightest young women in Evelyn’s secretarial pool confided that they were doing office work because there was not a design school in East Africa, she again saw an unmet need and an opportunity to make a difference. Evelyn stepped up, and opened an institute for fashion design.

From there Evelyn has branched into many other areas of business and real estate development — and has enriched her life by enriching the lives of those around her. Her business empire is now in its second generation, with a daughter, son and daughter-in-law who share her business acumen, her courage and her passion to make a difference.

As Evelyn and other successful Kenyan women talked about “the road that took them to the top,” we could hear about the role that uplifting leadership played in their successes. “Truly effective leaders don’t need to be strident and push others out of their way to get ahead,” one participant said. “Instead, they find ways to bring people on board with them for the betterment of all.”

In Hebrew, we explained to our participants, there are two ways to translate “courage.” One is *chutzpah* — that nifty energy that will get you what you want, focusing on your own individual advancement, even if you have to push others out of the way. “*Ometz lev*” is a different energy. Literally, the Hebrew means “strength of heart.” This is the energy of true uplifting leaders. It’s about engaging the people around you, and getting them to challenge themselves to grow to meet the changing needs of their world. It’s about enriching others, not just enriching yourself.

Equity Bank was the corporate sponsor of our women’s leadership roundtable. Mary Mamae, a member of Equity Bank’s Board of Directors, talked about the role that “*ometz lev*” has played in their success.

Ten years ago, Mary recalled that a good client came forward and asked the bank to loan a friend the capital she needed to start a small business. The client said, “My friend supports herself and two children as a tea girl (selling drinks and snacks to office workers). She has an idea for a business and needs a loan to cover her children’s school fees, until the business gets up and running. Don’t ask her for collateral. She has never had a bank account and she has no equity of her own. I believe in her and I’ll pledge my own securities to cover the loan.”

Equity Bank has been a pioneer in the area of micro-finance loans. Sixty percent of their loans go to women entrepreneurs. So they loaned the woman 10,000 Kenyan Shillings (about \$125 USD) to expand her tea business by selling blouses and other accessories to her office worker clientele. She quickly paid off the loan and took larger and larger loans, building a thriving business.

While her first priority was seeing her children attend good schools, this business owner has herself completed a business degree, now employs many dozens of employees. Her most recent line of credit was 100 million KSh — over \$1.25 million USD.

Kenyans commented with pride that lending practices are so conservative in Kenya that the collapse that western institutions have experienced could not happen here. So, this woman's success isn't a result of easy money or handouts. It's the result of hard work, adding value, keeping her word and astute business judgment.

And, for this entrepreneur and her network of friends, it's the result of the courage to step up — and the courage to encourage someone else to step up.

Despite the micro-finance loans that institutions like Equity Bank make available to women entrepreneurs, Kenyan society doesn't make it easy for women to get ahead as entrepreneurs, corporate executives or government officials. Though the law guarantees equal rights, it can be difficult for women to claim their rights because of entrenched patriarchal beliefs and familial or tribal norms.

Take property inheritance for example — which has a significant impact on the lot of widows like Evelyn and our friend in the tea and blouse business. A woman generally doesn't inherit anything from her parents. If she is widowed, her husband's property goes to his family of origin, leaving her with very little from the estate. The statistics show there's a glass ceiling for women who aren't entrepreneurs. Though women won the right to vote and stand for election in 1963, they still only represent about 4% of positions in the government. And the "C" suite in many Kenyan corporations is only slightly better.

At our women's roundtable, we identified these and other "moments of truth" that test the courage of women who have families to support — and who seek fulfilment by actualizing their talents and potential. Some of the moments of truth are familiar to those of us who run small businesses or hold positions of responsibility in corporations and government agencies outside Africa. Other moments of truth are specific to East Africa or to women of a particular tribe in Kenya. Other moments of truth, thankfully, are memories that women of our generation have — and are not difficulties that our daughters or granddaughters have to face.

As a result of having had a hard time with getting their voices heard, some mature women told stories of how they'd gone too far and ended up coming across as strident and inflexible. One woman commented, "Maybe that was needed then as we were breaking ground, but it left me with a reputation of being difficult to deal with. I was afraid of being too soft and then not being taken seriously." Another woman added, "I felt that way, too. So I decided to become the most knowledgeable person in my field and then everyone would have to listen to me. Then it wouldn't matter if I was a woman." The recipe for success these women choose was chutzpah. It got them to one level of success, but they paid a price that they were re-evaluating. And they were looking for better options.

In our women leader's roundtable, we presented uplifting leadership as a better option — the "ometz lev" to strengthen your own courage whilst strengthening courage in others. "Ometz lev" wasn't totally new to our participants. In our roundtable, we recounted times when we've touched others in this way — as wives and mothers, friends and confidants, daughters and sisters and cousins. In our personal lives, we rediscovered that we each have that capacity to inspire "ometz lev" in our own unique way.

What was the take-away for these women leaders? As many of our other workshop participants have discovered, both in Kenya and elsewhere, both in women's leadership roundtables and mixed-gender groups, we already have the capacity to show "ometz lev." We have personal and professional relationships where uplifting leadership comes naturally. We know how to do it. Yet, it's a brave new world to take those skills to a higher level when working with investors, board members, key customers and higher-ups in corporations and government ministries. And it requires a special level of finesse and emotional intelligence when the people we need to uplift don't start by dealing with us as if we're worthy of a 10,000 KSh or 100 million KSh investment, even when we know that we are.

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Dr Louise (Yochee) Klein is director of The Courage Institute's executive coaching practice. Louise has personally coached thousands of executives at various levels to bounce back after they have hit the wall and embrace new leadership challenges with a higher level of courage — and has equipped internal HR partners and external coaches to function as courage mentors. Her clients have included ITI, Janssen OrthMcNeil, PrediX, Millennium, GE Financial Services, Methodist Hospital, Solvay and Quintiles.

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