

'Women can own powerful leadership roles' says Charmaine Houvet



By [Evan-Lee Courie](#)

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With over 24 years of telecommunications experience working with governments, private and public sector across Africa, Charmaine Houvet is a member of the Presidential Commission on the Fourth Industrial Revolution (4IR) and the Senior Public Policy Director of Africa at Cisco Systems.



Charmaine Houvet, Senior Public Policy Director of Africa at Cisco Systems

As a chairperson of the South African Women in ICT Forum board and the South African Communications Forum (SACF), Charmaine is passionate about female and community development and serves on various boards and trusts whose objectives include the transformation and the advancement of women in the technology industry.

As we wrap up [Women's Month](#) in South Africa, Charmaine Houvet, who is the Senior Public Policy Director of Africa at Cisco Systems, shares her journey with us.

■ You're the Senior Public Policy Director of Africa at Cisco Systems. Tell us more about your role

My role is charged with advancing issues that support Cisco's robust corporate and technology policy agenda. This includes working with government and an ecosystem of stakeholders across the continent to shape policies that foster innovation and digital technologies.

I also support Cisco's Country Digital Acceleration program that partners with governments worldwide to invest in their digitisation agendas with the objective of improving their economies and citizens' quality of life.

■ Do you have any role models? If so, who?

I entered the working world at a time when there were no people who looked like me or who could relate to my journey, therefore my role model who I constantly fell back on was my grandmother who raised me on a social grant in extremely difficult times.

“ I was also fortunate to be supported and encouraged by remarkable women in the community, many who did not complete their school education but displayed exceptional qualities of wisdom, resilience, strength, courage, persistent

hopefulness and resourcefulness. ”

The consistent messaging given to me by my grandmother and the women in the community was that education was my ticket out of poverty. I resonate strongly with the saying that it takes a village to raise a child.

■ **You have a successful career spanning over two decades. Tell us about your journey.**

I was born and raised in Wentworth a township in Kwazulu-Natal, during the era of apartheid. I was not familiar with the corporate world and could not access resources to seek guidance around a career path. As I was about to leave school, I literally worked my way through the phone book and called potential employers – telling them that I truly needed to earn some money to support my family. With good fortune on my side, a call centre I called was recruiting, interviewed me the next day, and then gave me the job! Everything seemed to grow from there as I continued to educate myself whilst working full time.

Before starting my remarkable growth journey with Cisco, I was privileged to have worked with private and public sector organisations, serving in diverse and transformative roles in leading ICT companies. It was when I was preparing for a sabbatical after these jobs that Cisco reached out to me. The rest, is truly history.



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■ **Cisco has certainly recognised the value in supporting African startups and small businesses. What is Cisco doing to support female entrepreneurs in the region?**

Yes, we certainly have acknowledged the importance of this type of support and have been working unwaveringly to empower the female leaders of tomorrow.

“ Our corporation has been committed to assisting female entrepreneurs overcome a variety of challenges for many years now, from balancing work and play to installing their first network. ”

Cisco designed EDGE (Experience, Design, Go To Market, Earn) incubation centres whose objective is to share business knowledge, help develop Small, Medium and Micro Enterprise (SMME) partners in the digital age, speed up their entry to market and as a result, create new jobs for the local economy.

“ An initiative that will however always be close to my heart, is that of the GirlCode ZA story. Three powerful young Black women founded a non-profit association which strives to empower women and young girls through teaching them how to code and design, also hosting annual hackathons to apply their knowledge to working solutions addressing community challenges. ”

Cisco continues to promote similar programmes of this nature across the continent. We are excited to initiate more programmes that will pave the way for the brands, businesses and leaders of the future.

■ **You're a successful female leader. How do you keep a work-life balance?**

One of the contributors to my life-work balance aspiration, revolves around ensuring mental wellness.

“ The maintenance of one's mind has proven to be one of the most foundational practices that I decided to invest in. I

have suffered severe burnout in the past, so I am mindful of the type of projects I engage in. ”

I engage in simple actions like getting involved in passion projects, and being intentional with the types of engagements I expend my energy on.

Self-care routines are important to me (meditating, vacation, volunteering for community events, praying and fasting), these all contribute significantly to my well-being. Human connection and interaction with my phenomenal group of friends is however invaluable, we have been friends for decades. We call ourselves “The Friendships crew”; we eat, pray, play and vacation together. By being intentional with my time, and being kinder to myself I have adopted a survivors' mentality - understanding that life is a marathon not a sprint.

■ **What can be done to help drive females in leadership?**

Gender balance happens in companies only if it is intentionally led by the CEO and EXCO. There must be visible commitment from the top, to full spectrum diversity and pay parity with sustained action throughout the organisation. A fact based transformation strategy is required with strong CEO, EXCO and Board support that steers clear of emotive and anecdotal reasoning.

“ *I have also found authentic collaboration and storytelling (sharing our journeys and extending our networks) to be one of the best practices when driving female leadership across different regions. Choosing to understand and support another woman's story and then creating a new one together is, I believe a recipe for greatness.* ”

The Cisco Empowered Women's Network, for example, partnered with Connected Women to explain the value in collaboration. Both of these groups are quite mighty on their own but are, in fact, stronger when brought together. This, was how Women of Cisco was born. By merging our internal and external-facing identities, we got the opportunity to expand our reach with a single, strong platform for women and their allies.

It is, therefore, key for women to continue working together in order to own powerful leadership roles around the world as well as create new ones.



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■ **What advice do you have to share with the future generation of women in tech?**

Expanding one's skill set and then strengthening it is imperative for the future of women in tech. This can be done through attending events, educational courses or programmes and finding a committed and empowering mentor, coach and most importantly sponsor.

“ *Identify a leader/s who will speak up for you when you are not in the room and invite you to boardrooms and sessions where you would not usually have access.* ”

We spend a significant amount of time, effort and costs to attract talent into the workplace but once there we do little to motivate, grow, nurture and retain this talent.

As the world continues to adjust to our new reality, these actions and practices have doubled in importance. An example can be seen from Cisco's Girl Power Tech event – where participants were tasked with developing technology-based solutions to effectuate change relating to three impending social challenges. The challenge was held on 21 August 2020 and was closely linked to the current Covid-19 pandemic, encouraging 'hackers' to use new technology to solve problems or create new opportunities under three topics: Saving Lives; Saving Education and Saving Businesses.

It is through these types of events and practices that we prepare the future generation of women in tech as well as prepare the world for its new prodigies.

■ **As we celebrate Women's Month in South Africa. Do you have any words of encouragement for all the women out there?**

As Zozibini Tunzi (current Miss Universe who hails from South Africa) has stated: *"We should be teaching young girls to take up space. We must encourage our girls and women to normalise "taking up space and cementing yourself." It is also important that we involve and listen to the young women; as they are already today's and will be leaders of tomorrow.*

Covid-19 has brought on the most challenging balancing act for so many women, with working mothers probably being the hardest hit during these complex times.

“ *It is therefore important that we continue to be kind towards each other for we are all carrying some type of burden. Empathy, gratitude and trust are vital currencies in life, but more so during this pandemic.* ”

What works for me is doing my best to always pay it forward, staying curious, and sharing my knowledge and journey with others with the intention of showing that the table is big enough for us all.

Lastly I try to focus on what I can control with my stakeholders understanding that I need to collaborate and partner effectively to help me along my life journey. I don't always get it right, and when I feel like giving up...I remind myself that my super power is that there is only one me and no one can be me and that what is meant for me will never pass me.

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