

Expat Leadership: Lessons All Professionals Can Learn From Successful Immigrant Women

By Merilee Kern, MBA

Being an outsider in the workplace is *tough*. Doubly so if you're both a woman and an immigrant, two characteristics that can make your professional life a great deal more difficult. And when you're trying to lead a team on top of having any type of perceived "outsider" status—people who share an upbringing you weren't part of or set of meaningful experiences that you don't have—it can seem impossible to feel the kind of engagement and respect to make professional headway.

But the outlook isn't nearly as hopeless as it may appear, says Chinwe Esimai, Chief Anti-Bribery Officer at Citigroup—the first to hold the title in the bank's history. The same ingredients that might seem at first to be insurmountable disadvantages for outsiders can instead become the fuel for success. Esimai has both been through it herself and seen it done amongst others in seemingly compromising professional circum-

stances.

Esimai spent 17 years in Nigeria before arriving in the U.S. A Harvard-educated lawyer, today she leads global initiatives to combat corruption and is a regular speaker at formidable international organizations like the United Nations. Throughout her career, she has met extraordinarily successful (and fundamentally extraordinary) aspiring female immigrants who have aptly leveraged their ostensibly prohibitive backgrounds to propel themselves forward in the workplace.

"It's like being struck by lightning when you meet these women," Esimai said. "There's this instant kinship because of the shared experience and realizing we've all faced the same challenges."

However, what was particularly striking about the expat powerhouses Esimai has met is that nearly all of them possess certain traits that have helped them excel in the modern American business environment (and beyond in many

cases); ones that she hopes ambitious immigrant leaders today, both men and women, can take inspiration from.

Things Professional Immigrant Women Have in Common

- We All Have That Instinct To Blend In. They Ignore It.

Some people spend an obscene amount of time and effort trying to stand out. Others don't like attention. But as an immigrant, you don't get that choice. You speak another language. Maybe you have an accent. You are almost certainly used to different foods, holidays and music. Ultimately, you carry a unique viewpoint that can't help but draw attention and the first instinct of many is to downplay this difference, to hide it.



Chinwe Esimai, Chief Anti-Bribery Officer at Citigroup.

Except this can be a huge mistake. The truth is that successful immigrant leaders *need* to stand out in some way, and it's been determined that powerful women tend to be even more assertive than men. Developing the confidence to do that means drawing from experiences unique to you and, most of the time, that's a byproduct of how and where you grew up.

"I would not be able to lead the

initiatives I have against bribery and corruption if it weren't for my experiences making me the person I am...It'd be impossible," Esimai said. Few of my peers understood how normalized some of these practices were and this gave me a unique perspective on how to develop solutions."

How can you take advantage of what makes you different? For one, ensure that you are not the person holding yourself back. Remind yourself that you deserve to be there and be confident in your own experience and judgement. This *will* radiate outwards and affect how others see you. If you're in a situation where you find you have special insight into a problem, and nobody in the room is saying what you think should be said, silence your inner critic and go for it!

Remember, influential leaders rarely get to where they are by simply repeating what everyone else does or amenable to agreeing with what others say. They certainly don't apologize for their own distinct thoughts.

ActionNet founder and Taiwanese immigrant Ashley Chen cites the quote that pushed her to build her \$360 million business: "Action without vision is a nightmare, and vision without action is only a daydream."

- They Excise Self-Limiting Behaviors (And Excuses).

It goes without saying that immigrants or any perceived workplace "outsider" faces certain obstacles because of their unique circumstances. If you identify with these labels, you might not expect that one of the biggest of these can be the limits imposed by your own mind. But, there's a particularly common one amongst immigrant women that those who break through have aptly transcended.

"Shyness is an epidemic," Esimai laments. "There's nothing inherently wrong with being shy, but it often stems from a lack of self-confidence that is almost always undeserved."

Often, immigrants tell themselves that they don't have the qualifications or language skills to speak up or volunteer for a project, cutting them out of valuable opportunities to advance their career. Studies find that doubts based on these self-inflicted stereotypes persist even when professionals are explicitly told otherwise.

If you have a similar shyness problem, remind yourself that you *don't* need to fit every qualification for a role or project. You will learn what you need as you go. One of the best pieces of advice Esimai ever received was, "What you don't

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