

Shireen Chengadu



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Growth mindsets and big goals

Richfield's group chief academic officer Shireen Chengadu wants to leave a legacy of transformation behind her.

A lifetime in education has not soured Shireen Chengadu on learning, aspiring, and the education industry. If anything, she's even more fired up to use education as a tool, she tells SABSA. "I am an advocate of education, all avenues of education, because it holds the opportunity to unlock human potential - especially in a country like ours," she says.

Shireen holds a Bachelor of Pedagogics (Arts) from



University of Durban Westville, a Bachelor of Education (Honours), a Masters in Education from the University of Natal, and an Executive MBA from the Graduate School of Business, University of Cape Town (GSB). She started her career as a high school teacher, and later joined the University of Pretoria's Gordon Institute of Business Science (GIBS) in 2002. There she held various executive roles, culminating in executive director of the Centre for Leadership and Dialogue and Enterprise Development Academy at GIBS. She also served as acting Director of University Relations, University of Pretoria, and started her own leadership advisory practice Chengadu Advisory, as well as serving on various boards. In August 2020 she joined Growth-Ten Holdings and Richfield Graduate Institute of Technology as group chief academic officer.

"I don't define myself by one thing. I'm multifaceted, and my career has been a rich, textured one," she says. "I am constantly reinventing myself, always thinking of the next thing. I love 'disrupting' myself. Just when everything is working beautifully, I think 'okay there's something more I can and must do'."

Coalface of solution-finding

These multiple roles are all part of Shireen's preferred state of keeping busy and contributing. She is, she explains, "determined to be part of creating solutions for our wicked problems at a macro, meso or micro levels, intersecting business, government, or society".

The executive education space, too, can contribute to change, she says. She wants to see SABSA members – especially newer ones – learning from this community of practice, connecting the dots and helping each other out – not as competitors but collaborators.

She says: "I am always driven; Any problem is not intractable. You can always find a solution."

It's an outlook she learnt early, from her first role models and mentors: "My mom and gran were two of the strongest women I know, women who raised us to perfection. I know that sounds arrogant, but I say it anyway. They taught us the value system that if you stick to your true north, nothing is impossible, and impossible is nothing."

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~ Shireen Chengadu



Mentors for life

This was not the end of the mentors and coaches in her life, though, she says – not by a long shot. “I have been blessed in my career to have many mentors and coaches, and that’s why I mentor now too.” This group includes many illustrious names, such as Gill Marcus, Nick Binedell, Roelf Meyer, Bonang Mohale, Dr Craig Nossel, Prof Cheryl de la Rey . “More recently I’m also blessed to be in a two-way-type mentorship, a mutually beneficial mentor-mentee dual role with Sedise Moseneke.”

She continues: “My mentors come from every walk of life, and many were totally different from me in terms of race, gender, class, identity, and geographic location. And they are still my mentors today. You are never too old to benefit from mentorship.”

“When I had a doubt in my head that whispered ‘maybe not you’, they would say ‘yes, you’.



Dream big

With examples like that, perhaps it’s not surprising that Shireen has immense career goals for herself and stretch targets for Richfield and Growth-Ten. “I dream big and set big, hairy, audacious goals (BHAGs),” she says. “Firstly, I’d like to create a legacy that will say ‘because she lived, my life has changed’.”

This is something she has been building up to throughout her career, and can be unpacked in many ways, she says: “I am part of a big group and contributing to the success of that business, and at the same time I’m creating a personal legacy of breaking down some of the ‘them and us’ structures in our world”.

This includes the divides between genders, between haves and have nots, and so much more. “I also want to create generational wealth. Historically 90% of this country’s wealth sits with 10% of the population, and I want to unlock that and open doors for those previously unable to create generational wealth. I want women and groups outside of the privileged

ranks to know that they can do this, and I use myself as an example of ‘if I can, you can’.”

Within “I can”, though, there has been much learning and growth, Shireen argues. “I am seated at some of the decision-making tables today not because it was easy. In fact, I love that it was hard and challenging, because it made me far more confident in myself and hungry for new knowledge.

“When I entered business schools 20 years ago, it was not the domain of people who looked like me. As Maya Angelou says, challenges are opportunity for growth.”

Her other goals include finishing her PHD which was paused while she co-wrote and co-edited a peer reviewed book – “not because I need the credentials,” she adds, “but because I don’t like to leave things unfinished.”

Rich-field of opportunity

She has equally big dreams for Richfield that launched its MBA in 2020 and had its first two intakes in 2021. As group chief academic officer, she has influence over some 24 campuses and thousands of students. She's excited about the potential for change, as well as the dynamism of the exco and board of Growth-Ten, she says.

"We all come from different spheres and that's how you create dynamic businesses, by bringing different minds and approaches to the table. I believe we are on a trajectory to create a fantastic business, to build on what was here and take it to the next level."

That's in education, and beyond, she emphasises. "We want to be a nexus of progress and development, creating a community around us that we help uplift. This is in line with a model of responsible shared value, moving beyond good intentions to action."



Digitally equipped

One means of upliftment is digital tools and digital capabilities— from the students, to staffs at all levels, to the executives on the courses. Richfield wants to equip students, delegates and staff with both digital devices and capabilities that level the playing fields, and a to build on that new mindset of partnering for progress.

"Technology has really made connectivity across the world so much easier, and with that comes a whole new perspective. The other thing that we are doing, that I am so proud of, is incorporating the digital and emerging technologies into the MBA itself. Any good MBA includes the foundations and disciplines of business, but here we have included digital capabilities, emerging and disruptive technologies from robotics to IoT, deep machine learning, AI, big data, etc etc. In other words, you get the disciplines and foundations of business, but also the digital capabilities that make businesses go." A perfect marriage, I call it.

"In fact, I wanted to sign up for the MBA again. Things are evolving so quickly, and it is exciting to see this levelling effect."

Quick fire questions:

Q. What are you reading right now?

I'm currently re-reading a number of books – like Shantaram (Gregory David Roberts), Why Nations Fail (Daron Acemoglu and James Robinson), and The Moment of Lift (Melinda Gates)– because of what's happening in our country, and in the world.

Q. What book (fiction, non-fiction, business) had the greatest impact on you?

Long Walk to Freedom by Nelson Mandela.

Q. Who is your personal hero?

Nick Binedell, my late mom and gran (I still hear their voices of wisdom), my sisters who are such fierce women, and my family - we are a tight-knit group!

Q. Where will I find you on a typical Saturday morning?

In bed, taking it easy with a cup of coffee. I run like mad all week, so Saturday morning is my catch-up time. My hubby is my best -he serves my coffee and breakfast in bed.

Q. And what is your top bucket list destination?

Next on my list is Budapest and Prague.