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POWERFUL IMMIGRANT WOMEN

Inspiring characteristics that strong immigrant women professionals have in common – **Merilee Kern**



Being an outsider in the workplace is tough. It's doubly so if you're both a woman and an immigrant because it can make your professional life a great deal more difficult. And when you're trying to lead a team on top of having any perceived 'outsider' status, it can seem impossible to achieve a sense of engagement and respect to make professional headway.

But the outlook isn't nearly as hopeless as

it may appear, says Managing Director and Chief Compliance Officer of Legacy Franchises of Citigroup Chinwe Esimai. She is the first to hold this title in the bank's history. The same ingredients that might initially seem insurmountable disadvantages for outsiders can become the fuel for their success instead.

Esimai, who is a Harvard educated lawyer, spent 17 years in Nigeria before arriving in the US. Today, she leads global initiatives to

Merilee Kern (MBA) is an internationally regarded brand strategist and analyst. She is also the creator and host of the Savvy Ventures business TV show that airs on FOX Business TV and Bloomberg TV (she can be contacted at www.TheLuxeList.com and www.SavvyVentures.tv).

that nearly all of them possess certain traits that helped them excel in the modern American business environment – and beyond, in many cases. She hopes that ambitious immigrant leaders, both men and women, can take inspiration from these attributes.

BEING UNIQUE Some people spend time and effort trying to stand out. Others don't like attention. But as an immigrant, you don't have such a choice.

You speak another language. Maybe you have an accent. You're almost certainly used to different food, 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.

How can you take advantage of what makes you different?

For one, ensure that you aren't holding yourself back. Remind yourself that you deserve to be there, and be confident in your own experience and judgement. If you're in a situation where you find you have special insights 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 that influential leaders rarely get to where they are by simply repeating what everyone else does or amenably agreeing with what others say. And they certainly don't apologise for their own distinct thoughts.

NO SELF-DOUBT It goes without saying that immigrants or any perceived workplace 'outsiders' face certain obstacles because of their unique circumstances.

If you identify with these labels, you might not expect that the limits imposed by your own mind can be chief among them. But there's a particularly common trait among immigrant women that those who break through have aptly transcended.

Often, immigrants tell themselves that they don't have the qualifications or language skills to speak up or volunteer for a project. If you have a similar 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.

And it's an essential mindset to learn because your willingness to face challenges you've never encountered so that you can overcome them is crucial to your growth – both as a professional and to elevate to team leadership status.

But self-limiting behaviours are about more than simply a lack of confidence. They are labels we apply to ourselves to justify certain actions we take or don't take. Esimai observes: "All the great leaders I know

engage in regular and rigorous self-examination. They're constantly thinking about where they want to be, what they want to achieve and how to get there."

Do the same for your professional approach and overall goals, and take a hard look at the labels you put on your own character – whether they're negative or even self-inflating. Are any preventing you from being an effective leader?

SELF-DEFINITION There's no shortage of people trying to put you into neat, nicely labelled boxes.

Whether you're an immigrant or a perceived outsider for some other reason, some may immediately make disparaging judgement calls about your level of education, ability, experience or other key factors needed for professional growth.

Being a woman comes with its own set of assumptions, of which ladies likely need no reminder.

Many people you meet, both professionally and otherwise, will often tell you how you should act and who you should become. This unsolicited advice will come from coworkers, bosses and family members.

The clearest way to discern which feedback fits that description is already knowing where you want to go, how you intend to get there and believing you can make it.

Those doing something unusual must have thicker skin and dwell a little less on what people think of them.

After all, it's been found that only 13 percent of immigrant women pursue a profession.

Former CEO of PepsiCo Indra Nooyi once lamented that her decision to attend Yale resulted in her family believing that sending an unmarried young girl to the US alone was scandalous. But she stuck to her vision and became one of the world's most powerful executives.

UNIVERSAL TRAIT A universal trait among the top leaders that Esimai engaged with is their keen ability to work with other people to achieve their goals.

You notice your own self-limiting behaviour sooner when you have a friend who can give you that extra pair of eyes – a mentor or coach who has already walked a similar path to yours can give you the hope and inspiration that you can walk it too.

Reach out to others. Tap into your unique advantages without apology. And yes, believe that you can do it.

combat corruption and is a regular speaker at international events. 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," says Esimai, adding: "There's this instant kinship because of the shared experience and realising that we've all faced the same challenges."

However, what was particularly striking about the expat powerhouses Esimai met is

