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Bridging worlds

26 Feb 2015

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Photography:

Video:

Authenticity, courage and 'throwing yourself through every door that opens' have been at the foundation of Audette Exel's extraordinary achievements in international finance and community-driven humanitarian development. Find out how she's successfully bridging the two to solve some of the world's toughest challenges.

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From her position as one of the youngest women in the world to run a publicly listed bank, Audette Exel's early career has not only shaped her professional path but paved the way to her status as a leader in community-driven international development.

Exel was only 30 when she stepped into the role of Managing Director of Bermuda Commercial Bank. "It really was an extraordinary time," she says with a touch of amazement. "I hadn't managed anyone other than a personal assistant before!"

"I couldn't pretend to know things I didn't know. I couldn't feign experience, so I had to be deeply respectful and participative with the team. Very early on I promised them 'I will learn from you and I will listen to you', and that was one of the most incredible lessons for me because when you get down to every level of an organisation you find an amazing depth of talent all the way down to the mail room.

"Everyone has an idea or something to contribute and I think as a leader, it's about giving them a voice, unleashing that talent and getting your own ego out of the way."

In a career that has taken her from Sydney and Hong Kong to Bermuda and Wall Street, Exel has won numerous accolades for both her business leadership and philanthropic work, demonstrating her ongoing personal drive as well as her commitment to talent. She was elected a Global Leader for Tomorrow by the World Economic Forum, was a recipient of the Economic Justice and Community Impact Award, and was named the 2012 NSW Telstra Business Woman of the Year.

Exel was also named one of The Australian Financial Review's 100 Women of Influence in 2012 and in 2014 named in Forbes' Heroes of Philanthropy. So far this year her accolades already include being named one of the 25 most influential people in the non-profit sector in Pro Bono Australia's Impact 25.

A self-described "contrarian" with social activist roots, Exel was not content with conventional success. Guided by her core values of humility, compassion, integrity and passion, in 1998 she founded Adara Advisors (formerly ISIS Group), a corporate advisory 'for-purpose' business that supports the operational costs of its charitable sister organisation, Adara Development. Together they bridge the for-profit and non-profit worlds as the Adara Group with Exel remaining heavily involved as Chief Executive Officer of Adara Advisors and Chair of Adara Development.

This unusual business model has been highly successful and has seen Adara Advisors provide up to A\$8.3 million towards the Adara Group's development programs by the end of 2014.

With operations in Australia, Bermuda, UK, US, Nepal and Uganda, the Group's development programs help more than 30,000 people living in poverty each year.

All Adara programs are undertaken in partnership with local communities. In Nepal, these programs span health, education, community infrastructure construction and anti-child trafficking initiatives. In Uganda, Adara partners with Kiwoko Hospital, a rural hospital, to provide long-term sustainable support for community-based healthcare including specialist care for newborn babies, maternal health and HIV/AIDS. Watching a set of triplets thrive after being born prematurely at the hospital, ranks among one of Exel's happiest achievements.

Exel continues in her deep-seated belief in the power of business to affect positive social change. In fact, she is adamant that to make a difference, "business and power must hold hands with non-profits and development".

The Adara Group is helping to do just that, receiving a steady stream of enquiries from around the world from people and organisations interested in implementing a 'business for purpose', or similar social business model. By sharing their knowledge, Audette and her team, are on the way to delivering their dream of moving from supporting tens of thousands of people in need to supporting hundreds of thousands.

"Business is being redefined in front of our very eyes," Exel says. "It's not just a narrow path for wealth creation but is now being seen for its potential as a positive tool for change in the world and that's unbelievably exciting."

Exel continues to advocate for the collective impact governments, corporates and non-profits can make when they work together to solve some of the world's toughest challenges. Her keynote address at the Nexus Australia Youth Summit in Melbourne in October 2014 was met with rapturous acclaim from the 250 philanthropists under 40 in attendance.

"The traditional divisions between business, non-profits and governments are changing like never before," Exel says. "The next generation is unleashing the skills of business in new ways that are going to make the world a profoundly better place."

Exel attributes her own entrepreneurial spirit to her upbringing in New Zealand by two parents who gave her

unconditional love and complete permission to fail.

“All my life, no matter what I did, I knew they’d still love me and that the sun would still rise if it all went wrong,” she says. “The thing is, even if you do fall on your face, what’s so bad about failure? I talk about failure constantly because failure has informed all my successes.

“Being authentic and true to yourself is the best thing you’ll ever do because people respond to authenticity. Figuring this out has helped me so much in business.”

While proudly calling herself a hybrid “Kiwaussie”, Exel says it was her tertiary studies in Australia at the University of Melbourne that opened her eyes as well as career doors.

“Studying at Melbourne University opened my eyes to a completely different world,” she says. “It introduced me to a whole new way of thinking and helped me enormously in terms of getting doors open and getting into the top-tier law firms.”

After completing an Arts/Law degree, Exel’s law career began at Allen, Allen and Hemsley in Sydney, followed by a stint in Hong Kong with UK law firm Linklaters. She quickly developed a reputation as a specialist in international finance, which took her to Bermuda. Her first role was at the Bermuda Commercial Bank, before moving on to chair the Bermuda Stock Exchange for two years and finally spending six years on the board of the Bermuda Monetary Authority, including Chair of its Investment Committee.

Determination and humour, Exel says, immensely helped her fledgling career. She chuckles. “When you’re young and female, people underestimate you and even though I started off feeling quite defensive about it, being underestimated is possibly the greatest advantage you’ll ever have in business, especially when you’re negotiating.

“When people don’t have their guard up, you can achieve amazing things.”

Exel believes that you should not only step through every door that opens, but throw yourself through it. “Courage isn’t the absence of fear, but pushing through anyway” she says.

“In the end, your actions in life speak louder than anything else. I want to get to the end of my life and think ‘Yep, you gave it your best shot to be the best person you could possibly be’.”

Adara Group
University of Melbourne