

Lee Naidu, Baker McKenzie's new managing partner

By  Shan Raddiffe

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Lerisha 'Lee' Naidu - partner and head of the Competition & Antitrust Practice at Baker McKenzie - was recently appointed managing partner at the global law firm's Johannesburg office. Here, Naidu chats to us about her new role, her journey so far and the challenges she's faced along the way.



Lerisha 'Lee' Naidu, new managing partner of Baker McKenzie Johannesburg

Naidu (37) describes herself as coming from a "truly loving and conscious family" with "devoted parents whose lives were characterised by sacrifice for the betterment, not just of their children but of future generations (as one had a career in education and the other in social work), a wonderful and highly talented brother, a best friend that ultimately became a sister and a multitude of other close friends, family structures, members of the community, teachers, lecturers, mentors, sponsors, advocates, advisors."

“ Our stories are always the product of a collective effort. ”

"I started out my career wanting to become a human rights lawyer and an advocate for change, but I soon came to understand that the transformative project is not confined to NGOs and civil society groups. My parents always encouraged awareness, discourse and frank debate. They invested in our education and travel locally and abroad. I have also had the benefit of support and mentorship throughout my career from inspirational leaders in the industry that shaped my approach to legal work and my view of the world. I would say that where I am today has been the product of a group effort."

When she was only 32, Naidu was appointed as one of Baker McKenzie's youngest partners, and is the youngest member of the Johannesburg office's management committee. She is a Chambers and a Legal 500 ranked practitioner and has previously been listed as a Mail & Guardian Top 200 Young South African, as well as an Avance Media Top 100 Influential Young South African. Naidu's election as managing partner will see her serve in the role for a three-year term, effective 1 July 2022.



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📌 ***Congratulations on your appointment! Tell us a bit about what your new role entails...***

If we were to narrate the technical job description, it would be to foster strategic growth of Baker McKenzie's practice groups in the local and regional market, contribute to the building of office profile and maximise alignment and integration with the global firm. To achieve this, I hope to be integral to the project of fostering an empowering and enabling workplace culture, out of which we will deliver teams of world-class lawyers to our clients and conscious contributors to our society. We are committed to being the best employer in the local market, ensuring that our team is happy, thriving and that all our employees are able to show up at work every day as their full and authentic selves.

📌 ***What excites you most about your new position?***

There is so much to be excited about as we chart a renewed African presence for all to see. I am eager to offer perspectives on an atypical, distinctive and out-of-the-box approach to law firm leadership that places people-centricity, innovation, passion, compassion and empathy, authenticity, innovation, drive, ownership and agency, global citizenship, social conscience and empowerment at the heart of its business model. Driving high performance and fostering people-centricity are not diametrically opposed realities – in fact, one is an enabler of the other. I hope to tangibly bring this approach to bear in a manner that drives innovation, high quality output, client partnership and notable business growth.

📌 ***What goals are you hoping to achieve as managing partner?***

In no particular order, I hope for the following:

- To be regarded as the employer of choice in the local market, cultivating a culture of shared values, people-centricity and excellence;
- To build our brand and profile in a manner that ensures that it is synonymous with dynamic, innovative, multi-dimensional, out-the-box and solution-driven legal support that engenders trusted advisor status;
- To be renowned for our legal capabilities in South Africa, sub-Saharan Africa and globally;
- To ensure growth of the office, both organically and through a deliberate lateral hiring project;
- To cultivate an environment that fosters leadership at all levels and consequently, widespread impact;
- To feel fulfilled.



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📌 ***Why is it important that the industry has young females, such as yourself, in leadership positions?***

Identity is intrinsically multi-faceted. Age and gender are but two components of the overall mix. What the industry desperately needs is to succeed, not despite difference, but because of it. Diversity of thought, approach, style, prioritisation and perspective often arise from the mix of diverse identities. And a representation of diverse identities is intended to achieve exactly that – not window dressing or tokenism, but the ability to bring unique perspectives to the table in an effort to enhance existing systems, processes and strategic approaches. Representation is also symbolically important – it demonstrates that access to leadership positions are not just attainable, but part of the journey towards success (because diversity is a business imperative and equally part of its success).

📌 ***You feel very strongly about tokenism and how this is not the approach to take when addressing inequality in the***

workplace. How do we encourage equality and transformation in the workplace without forcing it?

Transformation must, in my view, be intentional, particularly given its urgency. Having said that, leadership without clout and genuine decision-making power, which is more akin to rubber stamping, surely falls short of authentic transformation? Tokenism, for me, is opportunistic – it is about exploiting aspects of one's identity to achieve a facade of transformation, falling dismally short of achieving transformation itself and maintaining the concentration of pre-existing power structures. I am strongly against tokenising individuals for the sake of appearances – transformation in leadership, deliberate as it ought to be, must be meaningful and authentic to be defined as such and to be celebrated as progress.



#WomensMonth: 'Speak your truth even if your voice shakes' - Lerisha Naidu, Baker McKenzie

Shan Raddcliffe 24 Aug 2021



■ How is it you maintain your individuality in the corporate law firm experience of on-the-clock, by-the-book power suits?

I was once advised by a senior partner, who adopted a somewhat caring and gentle tone when he delivered the following message to me – *“Lee”, you have an incisive legal mind and no doubt, can go very far. But won't you consider wearing heels every now and again to complete your professional aesthetic? Your personal image must also closely match your work product.*” His comment instantly invoked in my imaginative mind a real-time fashion show, where an animated version of my work product, a yellow exam pad, had been confidently posing on the catwalk with a luminous pink clutch bag and some hot stilettos. I snapped out of it quickly, nodded acquiescently with gratitude for the advice. Impressionable and out of touch with who I truly was at the time, I purchased a pair of leather pumps with a kitten heel and gave it my best shot for no more than a week. Those that know me well will find that difficult to imagine. In wearing them, my thought was that law firm life was not for me because it forced me to be something that I was not.

The experience was ultimately a gift because it compelled an uncompromising approach to authenticity. *“Be who you are, Lee, or leave”* - those were my choices. And because I found the work stimulating and the connections meaningful, I chose to be unapologetically me. I can't say it wasn't terrifying, uncomfortable and sometimes even unnecessary, but it represented the leap of faith that is perhaps one of the more self-defining decisions of my career to date. And it now helps that I am part of a firm that celebrates authenticity with pride.

■ What is your vision of the law firm of the future?

Baker McKenzie has long propagated the idea of the new lawyer: the innovator oozing passion, dynamism, enthusiasm and authenticity, not afraid to cultivate friendships and camaraderie in partnerships, exploring ways to always do things differently, finding practical solutions for clients and always seeking to think outside of the box. Through our diversity, our global approach, our values-based culture and our collective vision, we hope to differentiate ourselves as new lawyers in this market and region, journeying with our people and our clients alike.

Our vision is to build a foundation of shared values that are not just espoused but lived, and that underpin everything that we do – from collaborating with our clients and partners, building high-performance teams, encouraging social impact, maximising learning and development, fostering innovation and thinking outside of the box and engendering spaces of excellence, underpinned by inclusion, diversity, collaboration, friendship, genuine belonging and fun!

Our vision is to find commonalities in the visions of our clients so that we journey with them, not just as a service provider, but as a true and trusted partner. Our vision is to have meaningful relevance, both locally and regionally, including on important macro issues such as sustainability, youth empowerment, innovation, social justice, equality and transformation.

And in this context, that the hymn sheet version of our shared vision should be situated - we will collectively strive to be the global law firm of choice in sub-Saharan Africa, bringing value to our clients and people, to the country and to the region.

ABOUT SHAN RADCLIFFE

Shan Radcliffe is the editor of Bizcommunity HR, Education and Legal.

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