

# Transformation is a team sport: Lindiwe Sangweni-Siddo, COO at City Lodge Hotels explains

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As the hospitality industry evolves and faces new challenges and opportunities, City Lodge Hotels' forward-thinking chief operating officer (COO), Lindiwe Sangweni-Siddo, shares key insights into how transformation, inclusivity, representation and diversity work together to build strong, connected teams and organisations that are successful and profitable.



When Sangweni-Siddo sat on the City Lodge Hotels' executive committee for the first time some eight years ago, she was struck by the fact that despite being surrounded by professional, experienced, friendly people, none of them looked like her – she was the only Black woman around the boardroom table amidst an all-male exco. As with many industries, optics like this have been typical in hospitality. It's a legacy challenge that is slowly but surely being corrected.

"I have worked in the hospitality industry all my working life, so the issues of too few Blacks and women in management are not new. Some of these challenges also exist elsewhere in the world and are not unique to South Africa. Throughout my career, I have tried to be present in the moment, aware of the circumstances in which I find myself at each stage of my journey, and to build inclusivity and diversity from there," she explains.

"When you're the only person who looks a certain way, you are always alive to the notion that you don't only represent yourself; you're speaking on behalf of many other people who look like you and are underrepresented in the different situations you find yourself in. When different topics are debated, you're speaking beyond just yourself; you're also representing Black, Indian, Coloured and White women. Our stories as women are similar, so this is not just about Black women," she notes.

"It was startling for me in the beginning. I may have been having lunch in the staff kitchen, laughing, eating and enjoying light moments together, but what stood out was that I was still the only Black woman. I acknowledge that there are a lot of good men – my White male colleagues – who also support transformation and gender equality. However, for inclusivity to occur, the beliefs and behaviours must trickle down from the top, from the board to the executive, to senior management and staff," she adds.

During the time Sangweni-Siddo has been with City Lodge Hotels, she has seen significant changes including the appointment of five women – Black, Coloured, Indian and White – to the executive committee. This is a result of a

deliberate and targeted human resources recruitment strategy.

City Lodge Hotels has a diverse board with good representation. When Sangweni-Siddo joined the group, the board was already positioned for transformation, which let her know she was amongst good people. She was instrumental in setting up a transformation committee, which she chairs, made up of the heads of each department who are involved in furthering the five key elements of transformation, namely:

- Ownership
- Management control
- Skills development
- Enterprise and supplier development, and preferential procurement
- Socio-economic development

“The committee meets every six weeks to share the latest developments in their departments, making it more than just a tick-box exercise – I sit with forward thinkers who want to see progress. The progress seen in our B-BBEE score (Level 3) is the result of the willing hearts and minds of the individuals who sit around that table and discuss and implement what we need to do about the five elements of B-BBEE, including topics such as employment equity at senior levels across all race groups, and our preferred suppliers from whom we procure products and services,” Sangweni-Siddo explains.

In its quest to transform its preferred suppliers' list, City Lodge Hotels is working with several small to medium businesses that were carefully selected by the hotel general managers as well as some recommended by South African Tourism Services Association's (SATSA) Incubator Programme. As small enterprises and suppliers, these are Black-owned businesses that require mentorship and assistance to grow in exposure and distribution of products and services to the group's hotels across the country. A few of the 17 SMMEs currently benefiting from support include:

- **Asmara Coffee:** Collaboration between Nobuhle Magwentshu and the TriBeCa Coffee group processing and supplying quality coffee
- **Forest Fairies Sweet Company:** Manufacturer of a range of unique, artisanal confectionary, owned by Thejes Khan
- **Organic Matters:** Committed to ethical waste disposal and preservation of the natural environment across various industries
- **Roska Artisan Ice Cream:** Manufacturer of quality ice cream made from fresh and ethically sourced ingredients by husband-and-wife team Kamal Manilal and Roshni Morar
- **Top Class Landscaping and Projects:** Horticultural and landscaping business specialising in innovative, efficient, eco-friendly and cost-effective services owned by Sibusiso Phungwayo and Kamohelo Bojabotsheha



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It takes the backing of City Lodge Hotels' support office and procurement department as well as involvement from its 59 hotels for this project to work. The team has leapt at the opportunity, illustrating how transformation soon becomes a team sport. For Lindiwe, being a Black woman COO, it's about seeing how many more women get to become the trailblazers they should be because they are given the space, resources and opportunities to grow.

She furthers: “When you have a group of individuals and you're all the same age, speak the same language and are the same race, the likelihood of you all thinking alike is high. When you embrace diversity and inclusivity, you're more likely to be aware of and in tune with everyone else. For example, young people keep us alert and awake to what is happening, and older, wiser people hold institutional memory, skill and experience. As a mainstream hotel group, we embrace cultural diversity because it reflects broader society and the many different people who stay at our hotels.”

Sangweni-Siddo adds her background, upbringing, exposure and culture into the mix, while embracing the many different factors that make her colleagues equally unique. She says knowing more about different religious celebrations, such as Ramadan, enables the team to recognise them sensitively and effectively in the hotels so that all guests feel welcome and included.

“The awareness of being a Black woman has always been with me, so I try to live in the moment and let that dictate how I show up and what the task at hand is. At City Lodge Hotels, it’s about making the circle bigger, seeing more representation in all management platforms, allowing others to be heard so there is no one dominant voice at the table, and considering everyone’s point of view,” she says. “We’re talking about what wine to offer on our menus, which company to clean our carpets, which sheets to put on our beds. We want to know where the wine comes from, who makes it, and whom City Lodge Hotels enriches by purchasing it.”

City Lodge Hotels is invested in inclusivity, finding opportunities for B-BBEE procurement and support, and creating opportunities for those important linkages that allow businesses to grow through the right connections.

“The employment of women in senior positions has been very exciting. Our Advanced Development and Deployment Programme and succession planning have been successful, ensuring individuals who have the potential are fast-tracked and given management opportunities through well-designed personal development plans, and they’re thriving. We are committed to transforming senior management across the organisation and in the past financial year, four Black general managers were appointed, two of whom are women,” she adds.

Succession planning is critical to ensuring an organisation is future-ready, and Sangweni-Siddo reports good momentum on this front at City Lodge Hotels. Future Black general managers and assistant general managers are identified and readied for promotion when opportunities arise.

This Women’s Month of August, Lindiwe lists the key qualities that have helped her rise to the top:

1. **Grace:** Lean on your faith, whatever that may be, as grace, fortitude and strength get you through the tough times.
2. **Gratitude:** Take nothing for granted and always be grateful for everything you have. It is so important to acknowledge what you have as it has all worked to get you where you are today and where you want to be.
3. **Affiliations:** Surround yourself with people you like to be with and people who like being with you, where respect is mutual and you empower each other.
4. **Teamwork:** Solutions come from working with others as you cannot do it all yourself. Different team members bring different strengths to the table, and weaknesses are minimised.
5. **Self-awareness:** Be present in the moment, taking everything in. Know your own abilities and be conscious of what others bring to the table.
6. **Hard work:** Whatever you put in you will get out – hard work underpins success.

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