



BUSINESS & INDUSTRY VIEWS

Look beyond the title

Why building competence and influence matters more

By KIRSHNI TOTARAM

THE QUICK TAKE

While impressive titles can be attractive, they do not necessarily equate to success

A focus on building your competence and influence will serve your career better in the long run

Leadership qualities take time to develop and often involve learning from tough experiences along the way



Kirshni Totaram is Global Head of Institutional Business.

I HAD THE incredible privilege of spending a few days in Paris during the Olympics – truly a once-in-a-lifetime experience. It was a breathtaking blend of French flair, an electrifying atmosphere, and an awe-inspiring showcase of competition and athleticism at its finest. What stood out too, though, was the immense compassion, respect, and camaraderie on display – not just amongst the athletes but the spectators too. These qualities play a huge part in unifying us as a globe but are often overshadowed by the hustle and bustle of everyday life.

A few other observations also hit home.

First, I was struck by the increased focus and recognition women’s sports are finally receiving. Big names like Simone Biles (arguably the face of these Olympics), Sha’Carri Richardson, Femke Bol, the US women’s basketball team, Faith Kipyegon, and many others were major drawcards at the games. This recognition comes after decades of struggle for equal prominence and respect from global sporting bodies. Yet, it also reminded me that the work is far from finished and highlighted just how deeply entrenched the historic dismissal of women’s sports has been, even in developed countries like the US.

What made the moment even more impactful was witnessing, for the very first time, the inclusion of a dedicated family area in the Olympic Village. This allowed parent athletes to connect with their children and families, which is a significant step forward in recognising the importance of balancing elite competition with family life.

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Second, what struck home quite strongly for me was just the sheer difficulty of earning a medal. Many things can go wrong, and the opportunity to seize the moment is often fleeting. Athletes like Shericka Jackson and Noah Lyles are prime examples of how illness can extinguish a dream despite many years of hard work, discipline and dedication. The achievement of winning a medal, of any colour, should never be taken for granted or dismissed as anything less than extraordinary.

In the week leading up to the Olympics, Netflix released a two-part documentary on Simone Biles called “Rising”. In the documentary, she talks about the importance of defining success for yourself as a personal measure of progress and achievement. This idea resonated with me as I witnessed the joy and heartbreak at these Olympic Games.

RESETTING OUR MEASURES OF SUCCESS

What is success? Is it simply making it to the Olympics, or does it require winning a medal? And what about athletes like Akani Simbine, who ran a personal best and the fastest non-medal time in history yet didn’t make it onto the podium in his solo event? How should he gauge his career? These are the questions that challenge our conventional understanding of success and remind us that the journey each of us walks is unique, it is valuable in its own right, and deeply personal to each of us.

Having spent 30 years navigating the complexities of the corporate world, I’ve witnessed tremendous change, faced numerous challenges and, most importantly, seen significant progress. With the passage of time, I have also been able to detect patterns and trends evolving around me. One issue that is increasingly standing out to me, and which I believe is crucial for the next generation – especially for women – is the misguided notion that chasing titles, particularly C-suite positions, early in one’s career is the ultimate measure of success.

Let’s face it, titles are seductive. They come with a sense of prestige, recognition, and validation. They look great on your LinkedIn profile. We see people with big titles – CEO, CFO, COO – and think, “They’ve done well. They’ve arrived. I want to be like them.” For many young professionals, particularly women who are eager to prove themselves in male dominated industries, the lure of a title can be overwhelming. It seems like a fast track to success, proving that you’ve made it.

I often encourage women to “take the shot” – and I mean it. But I feel that it’s important to stress that this focus on titles is not what I mean and that this focus can be misleading, even detrimental, early in your career.

Here’s the reality: Titles don’t equate to competence, influence, or fulfilment. They don’t guarantee that you’ll be respected, happy, or even that you’ll feel successful.

When I first joined Coronation about 24 years ago, there was a gentleman who started shortly after me. We both joined the fixed income team at the same time. He later became one of Coronation’s senior portfolio managers and partners. We affectionately called him ‘Steady Eddie’ because he was far calmer than many of us enthusiastic youngsters.

Before joining Coronation, he had been the CIO of a boutique investment firm that had faced significant challenges. He came to Coronation as a quantitative analyst, a role significantly more junior than what he had held before. I remember asking him why he took a role that seemed like a step down. His response has stuck with me ever since: “It’s better to be on the bench of Manchester United than in the starting lineup of a second division team,” he said. Being an avid Liverpool supporter myself, I clearly bristled at the mention of Man United, but the essence of the message was clear.

That simple statement encapsulated profound wisdom. He had the humility and insight to make a strategic career choice, even if it meant temporarily stepping back to move forward in the long run. It also underscored the importance of being part of a strong, resilient team where your growth and opportunities can flourish over time.



SUCCESS IS EARNED, NOT BESTOWED

So, what should you focus on instead? I believe the answer lies in shifting your mindset from “What title do I want?” to “What impact do I want to make?” Early in one’s career, it’s far more valuable to focus on growth – personal and professional. Seek out opportunities that challenge you, push you out of your comfort zone, and allow you to learn new skills. Embrace roles that may not come with a fancy title but that offer you the chance to learn, lead projects, influence decisions, and build relationships and networks. I worry that much of the anxiety and focus I see in many younger women in the workplace is on ‘title-chasing’.

Remember that the hands-on experience you gain as a junior in an organisation is invaluable. It builds your competence and deepens your understanding of complex situations and materials. This foundation is essential because it equips you to make difficult decisions and judgement calls, which are crucial skills as you eventually step into leadership roles.

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Another critical aspect to consider is the power of influence. Influence doesn’t come from a title; but from the respect, trust, and credibility you earn over time. These qualities are built by consistently delivering results, being a team player, and cultivating strong relationships with your peers, mentors, and subordinates. Your ability to influence others, regardless of your title, will prove incredibly valuable as you progress in your career. Influence is the key to leading change, driving innovation, and inspiring others. It’s often what truly defines leadership, even if your influence is invisible to the broader public.

Let’s also be clear and explicit about what success truly means for each of us. Success isn’t about climbing the ladder as quickly as possible or being a boss. With the passage of time, I have learnt that it’s about building a fulfilling career that allows you to grow, learn, and make a meaningful impact on those around you. It’s about finding work that ignites your passion and importantly, aligns with your core values.

A title may grant you perceived authority, but it doesn’t automatically make you a leader. True leadership is earned through experience, credibility, and a proven track record – qualities that take time to develop and often involve learning from the tough lessons along the way.

As women, we often face immense external pressures to prove ourselves and to be “good enough” in the eyes of others and society. We carry the hopes and dreams of those who came before us, and that can be a heavy burden. But true success comes from within. It’s about being proud of the work you do, feeling valued and respected, and knowing in your heart that you’re making a difference. It’s about defining success on your own terms and living that reality with purpose and conviction.

Don’t get lost in the race for titles. Focus on your growth, building your influence, and creating a career that is meaningful and fulfilling. The titles will come in time, but they should never be the sole driving force behind your career decisions.

Choose your path wisely, and remember, as I was reminded in Paris this year – there are no shortcuts to true success. It is earned through dedication, perseverance, and the courage to pursue your own definition of the impact that you choose to make on this world. +

*This article is an edited version of Totaram’s speech at Coronation’s 2024 Women’s Month event.



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