

Suhana Gordhan's advertising journey (Part 2)

 By [Jessica Tennant](#)

14 Jun 2018

Raizcorp hosted entrepreneurs and ad people on Friday morning, 8 June, for the second talk in the Loeries Creativity Series at its offices in Sandton. This time, Loeries chair aunty and creative director at FCB Africa, Suhana Gordhan shared her thoughts on the power of creative thinking, what creativity means to her and lessons in leadership she's learnt along her journey in advertising from the boys' locker room to the beaches of Nicaragua, everything from: feelings of fear, doubt and inferiority, consciously turning these into hunger, trust and vulnerability; dealing with dictators; running in high heels; and what it's like to be a woman of colour in the South African context.



Suhana Gordhan presenting at the Loeries Creativity Series, hosted by Raizcorp.

In part two, I cover the second half: how she's learnt to deal with dictators; that running in high heels is the best way to learn to walk in heels, metaphorically speaking; and how growing up during Apartheid and being a woman of colour in South Africa has affected her career and caused her to contribute to transformation in the industry.

In case you missed it, read part one [here](#).



#Loeries2018: Suhana Gordhan's advertising journey (Part 1)

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From innocence to inferiority

When she thinks back to her [LeaderSurf](#) experience, Gordhan thinks it's strange that she had never tried to learn how to surf having grown up in Durban. "Well firstly, Indians just didn't do it. It was a thing, you didn't surf. But also, my dad was very protective and he'd take me to the ocean, hold me in the water, and as soon as a wave would come, he'd lift me up onto his shoulders. So, I never had that feeling of being thrown into the deep-end, and when I think about it, I think it's because of the time that we lived in, our circumstances. Maybe that's what brown people had to do, we had to be protective."

She remembers growing up in Apartheid, seeing the paddling pools she wasn't allowed to go to. "They were clean and looked better than ours, and I'd say to my mom, 'Why can't we go there?', and she'd tag and pull me along and say, 'That's not for us.'

"As I grew up, I started to think about this feeling I always had as a woman of Indian descent. There was this stone-like feeling in my heart, and I couldn't understand it. I'm ashamed to say it took me up until quite recently to analyse this feeling, and that was that I was inferior." This stayed with her for a long time, into her career, but it also allowed her to work from a vulnerable place.

“Because it's a negative thing, the feeling I had, and it's the things that weaken you that actually give you empathy, and any creative person will tell you that empathy is the thing that gives you more creative power because it allows you to identify with other people; it allows you to put yourself in someone else's shoes.”

From bl*w jobs to real jobs

Looking back at her first job in advertising, she says the historical nature of the ad industry at that time was a boy's locker room. "It was kind of sweaty and crassy, and you know, it was kind of a place where as a young person in advertising I saw and heard things that maybe I didn't want to see and hear."

It was her first week at a big agency, fresh out of ad school, and her boss at the time said, 'Oh, you're a vegetarian, doesn't that mean you don't give blowjobs?' And you must remember, I was fresh out of college, so I was completely gobsmacked. I didn't know what to say, and I came up with all these inadequate words, and I actually should have said to him, 'Ya, you know, I am a vegetarian which means I don't tolerate sexist pigs.'"

This sort of behaviour carried on, and men like these in leadership positions made her early years in advertising difficult because they constantly stood in her way. They advised her on what to wear and questioned why she was working on car advertising, saying she should be selling tampons. "This was the mindset at the time, and it was not that long ago (2001)."

Her experience at university was not in congruence with that of working in the industry. "I was studying feminism, gays and how women's bodies are politicised, so I came into this industry thinking all of this is relevant here, but no, I had to tuck it under my sleeve and pretend that I wasn't one [a feminist] because of the times that we lived in."

After a short break, she found a new agency to work at, where she met her creative director at the time, who was a different kind of man. "He was somebody who had a gentle way about him. He found a space for me to be creative and ways to uplift me and let me grow.

He was also the one who promoted me to creative director. I felt it was before my time, and I think that he knew that too, but he realised that if he put me there, I'd grow into. It felt like running in heels, and I always say to my sister, 'If you want to learn how to walk in heels, you must just run in them first, then you'll be fine.'"

This is something she believes everyone in positions of leadership should do for the young people in our country, both men and women: create a space for them to grow and shine a light on them.

Dealing with dictators

During her years at Black River FC, she had the opportunity of working on the Nandos brand, which she considers a privilege. "It's such an amazing company and they make the most brave and engaging work out there." During that time, she got to do something she had never done before, and that was to piss off a dictator, none other than Robert Mugabe. They did this with their 'Last Dictator Standing' ad, not intentionally of course.

"If anyone doubts the power of advertising, then you should hear this story because we thought we made an ad to try and sell chicken, but this ad reached Robert Mugabe, and he sent his militant youth group to threaten to close down the Nandos in Zimbabwe. That was quite a terrifying moment, and we pulled the ad of course and tried to do some other ads to replace it, but those were pulled as well, and still, Nando's made their December sales for that time. So, if anyone doubts effective creativity, it's there."

This experience made her think about dictators. She thought that was the last time she'd ever experience dealing with such people, but she was wrong... "You will always face dictators in life... people that you have to stand up to, and what I've experienced over time is that they take different formats: people that have had to fight instead of helping me support them in the very thing they should be supporting, fighting against me; I've had women dictators that I've had to challenge. Why? Because I've said something or questioned something that they don't like; and I've received a formal complaint from one of my clients, because I questioned her; I've had conversations with heads of organisations over the telephone, and you realise that because you're on a telephone, it's not recorded so you can say whatever you want to say."

"Wow, these dictators are not just in Zimbabwe, and the hard lesson was that the way to deal with them is to just stand firmly in your power and find your voice over and over again, because you're going to make them uncomfortable, but if you just stand firmly, eventually they can't shake you or change who you are."

A woman of colour, a village of aunties

About two years ago, Andrew Human, CEO of The Loeries, approached Gordhan to become the Loeries chairperson. She was terrified at the prospect and doubted whether to take on this responsibility. The question in my mind was: "Am I going to be seen as someone who is just in this role because I'm a woman and because I'm a woman of colour?"

"Everyone around me, my family, friends, superiors and all the people I consulted, said, 'Don't see it like that. Take it and

do it so well that nobody will ever question why you're in that role.'

"You know, you've heard that thing of: 'People are one day going to figure out that you actually don't know what you're doing, you're a fake.'"

No matter how accomplished you are, those little voices at the back of your head speak this negativity to you, she acknowledges. She mentioned this at LeaderSurf, and one of the ladies on the course said, 'Well, I'm the CCO of my company and I have that every single day, but all I do is I leave it outside the boardroom door and I walk in and shut those voices out. I know they're going to be there when I step out again, but I leave them outside.'

This and what [Simon Sinek](#) says about purpose and finding your 'why' has stuck with her and its led her to look at the people in her life, the way they uplift her and the things they've done for her. In so doing, she realised there was something she needed to do and that was to find her purpose and way of using this role to do something meaningful. "As part of my tenure, I decided to focus on transformation, but specifically around women because our industry is lacking so much in young women."



Open Chair 2017 | Zuzi Seoka, [Photography](#).

Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, author of *Dear Ijeawele* is one of her favourite writers. In the book, she tells her friend how to bring her daughter up as a feminist, and she said, "Surround her with a village of aunties, women who have qualities you'd like her to admire." As 'chair aunty' she found she resonated with this.

The chairperson of the Loeries is allowed to bring two people onto the committee, so she chose two industry stalwarts, two women she knew would share and support her vision. "So, together with Andrew, we formed [Open Chair](#). It's a kind of organisation that just creates face time for young women to speak to older and more senior people in the industry, and to talk to them about *everything* because that is what's lacking. Everyone's so busy. You don't have access to mentors. It's just kind of a networking event that takes the form of speed dating."

“What really fascinated me about the event is that you think women are going to ask about sexual harassment, you know, the typical issues women face, but they weren't asking those questions, they were asking about the future of AI in our industry, how to grow a brand, etc., and that was really refreshing.”





Looking back, she's grateful she took on the role. "There were times when it was hard and I felt, 'Maybe I shouldn't do it and tell Andrew I can't anymore, it's too much work,' but someone – a friend of mine and a colleague, a young man of colour – said to me, 'You can't do that because we're all watching you and do you realise how important it is for someone of colour and a woman to stand up there? It gives us all hope, so stay.'

"That's when I realised what Chimamanda was speaking about: the danger of a single story. My story is knitted together with the stories of others, and I knew why I had to stay. So, that whole experience was for me a lesson in hunger. As soon as I found my hunger, my purpose, my why, it became much more fascinating, much more interesting to me, and when you persist beyond doubt, doors just start to open up."



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FCB, the agency she works for, has a 'never finished' philosophy:

“At FCB, we believe the best part of a brand's story is never finished. The part that always asks what can we do better. And always wonders what's next. What's out there. What's waiting to be discovered. And it's not just the story of a brand or an idea. It's the story of all of us. Always moving forward. Always looking back. Always a work in progress.”

"We laugh about it because it sounds like how our lives are in advertising. We're never finished, always working really late and long hours, but actually 'never finished' is about making a legacy and developing something that can last and that we can continue to build on."

This is something Gordhan believes in, and that's why the next part of her journey is to keep doing what she does. "Maybe in different ways, and I don't know where the journey will go next, but I know I have a village of aunties with me..."

For more on the Creativity Series, visit [Loeries.com](#). Follow Gordhan on Twitter [@SuhanaGordhan](#), and find out more about LeaderSurf [here](#).

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