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Female Leader, Audette Exel AO, Founder & Chair Adara Group

16/4/2018 | Posted by Jade Collins in [Female Leaders](https://femeconomy.com/category/female-leaders/) (<https://femeconomy.com/category/female-leaders/>), [it](#), [\(/#facebook\)](#), [\(/#twitter\)](#), [\(/#google_plus\)](#).

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Audette Exel AO is the Founder and Chair of [Adara Group](https://www.adaragroup.org/) (<https://www.adaragroup.org/>) and a Non-Executive Director at [Suncorp](https://www.suncorp.com.au/) (<https://www.suncorp.com.au/>). Audette founded [Adara Group](https://www.adaragroup.org/) (<https://www.adaragroup.org/>) 20 years ago in 1998, with the vision of bridging the world of business and the world of people in extreme poverty. Adara Group's unique business model sees two Australian corporate advisory businesses, Adara Partners and Adara Advisors, generate revenue with the sole purpose of supporting non-profit international development organisation, Adara Development.

Adara Development is focused on improving health and education for women, children and communities living in poverty in remote Uganda and Nepal, helping tens of thousands of people annually. If you multiply that figure over 20 years, it quickly becomes apparent the positive social impact Audette has wrought through her vision and leadership.

Audette's early career was as a lawyer specialising in international finance. Prior to establishing the Adara Group, she was Managing Director of Bermuda Commercial Bank (1993–1996), Chair of the Bermuda Stock Exchange (1995–1996) and served on the board of the Bermuda Monetary Authority (1999–2005).

Audette was awarded an honorary Order of Australia in 2013 for service to humanity in Uganda and Nepal, and in 2014 was recognised by Forbes as a 'Hero of Philanthropy'. In 2015, Audette was inducted into the Australian Businesswomen's Hall of Fame, and was a recipient of a World Class New Zealander Award. In 2016, she was named Australia's 2016 'Leading Philanthropist' by Philanthropy Australia.

WHAT ARE SOME LESSONS YOU LEARNED AS ONE OF THE YOUNGEST WOMEN IN THE WORLD TO HAVE RUN A PUBLICLY-TRADED BANK?

There have been a million lessons during my business career, some more painful than others, and many I have had to learn over and over again.

Having the incredible chance to be the Managing Director of a Bank when I was just 30 was a huge and quite terrifying responsibility and opportunity. Luckily the team working in the bank were incredibly capable, and I had a board and a Chairman who backed me, and helped me every step of the way.

One of the biggest things I learnt from that time was that leadership is about uncorking the brilliance that already sits inside an organisation, rather than trying to impose on people from atop them. I was so young when I was given that role and so inexperienced that I had no choice but to listen and learn from the team inside the bank – from the receptionists, the tellers, and even from the courier, Alvon, who had plenty of great ideas and opinions to share. People generally know what the best way forward is. Often they are just waiting to be asked and to be listened to. And respected. It sounds simple, but just being respectful of every individual and of a team makes a huge difference to how an organisation operates.

I think that time for me was also a learning about taking on big scary new challenges, and always being prepared to jump through doors that open, even if you have no idea what is on the other side. I was terrified in the early days – but when the offer was made, I knew I had to step out of my “insecurity cage” and just do it. I am so glad I did. It was a total privilege to work with that group of people, and you cannot substitute the learning that comes when you not only advise a balance sheet, you manage one.

THROUGH THE ADARA GROUP YOU PROVIDE SPECIALIST CARE TO WOMEN AND CHILDREN IN UGANDA AND NEPAL. WHICH PROJECTS HAVE HAD THE BIGGEST SUSTAINABLE IMPACT ON THOSE COMMUNITIES?

When I began this work almost two decades ago, I thought that if we could have an impact on the life of one woman or one child, then that would make everything worth it. I am immensely proud that 20 years on, Adara’s projects directly impact the lives of tens of thousands of people each and every year.

We work across two areas of specialty – maternal newborn child health and remote community development, and we think about our work across two frames – service delivery and knowledge sharing. Our service delivery and projects are in Nepal and Uganda, but because of our knowledge sharing pillar, the impact is much wider than the service we support and provide to individuals and communities.

Sustainability is a hot topic in both the development sector and the business sector as it enters into the hybrid world of business for purpose and private sector and not-for-profit partnerships. We are a bit contrarian in the way we think about it at Adara. For us, long-lasting change comes as a result of access to resources, to capacity building and training, and by supporting communities as they navigate through significant behavioural change over decades. We work hard across all three of those pieces of the puzzle – and thus we stay for decades onsite at our projects.

On top of that, as mentioned before, we believe every single life counts. We can't reduce human social service delivery to a set of matrices or data points. That's a real risk if sustainability and scale become dogma and mantras, rather than solid guiding principles.

There are countless stories I could share with you – stories of everyday bravery of communities, to the amazing journeys of the many heroes we work with on the ground. So, here is just one example to bring the Adara work to life.

When I first drove down the dusty dirt road to Kiwoko Hospital in Uganda in 1998, I was shocked to see mothers and newborns dying from conditions that we would never consider life-threatening in the west. Twenty babies a week were dying of entirely preventable causes in the hospital compound, from things as simple as jaundice. They just needed UV light, but without the tools to save these lives, many wouldn't make it. Medical staff would resort to standing outside with babies in their hands, trying to catch rays of sunlight. If it was a cloudy day, as it often is in rainy season, babies would die.

20 years on, thanks to our deep partnership with Kiwoko Hospital, they have developed one of East Africa's leading neonatal intensive care units. More than 1,000 babies are treated in the ward every year, and we have seen survival for the tiniest babies (those weighing <1.4kg) increase from 31% to 80% between 2005 and 2017.

Together we have demonstrated that it is possible to deliver high-quality, holistic newborn care in remote settings, and we are now scaling this expertise across Uganda. Much of that work has global relevance.

That's just one example – of our tiniest clients – and every single one matters to us, to Kiwoko Hospital, and to their families and their communities.

IN YOUR OPINION, HOW HAS SUNCORP'S BOARD DIVERSITY BEEN VIEWED WITHIN THE BANK BY FEMALE EMPLOYEES AND INFLUENCED THEIR LEADERSHIP OPPORTUNITIES?

Suncorp (<https://www.suncorp.com.au/>) lives its diversity policy – it is so much more than a set of principles on paper. I think all staff of Suncorp know that and see it in action every day. Both policy and practice at Suncorp underpin the belief that a board which has talented and diverse members is a key competitive advantage. I think it is a fantastic thing to work for a company that recognises that every person brings their own distinct capabilities, experiences and characteristics to their role, including the board, and that diversity makes the board more creative, flexible, productive and competitive.

So, I think that diversity at all levels, including at the board level, is respected and valued inside Suncorp. One of the impacts of that is demonstrating that there is significant opportunity to work at all levels of this great company, including at board level, regardless of gender.

We are very proud at Suncorp of our diversity and progress with gender balance. Women are extremely well represented at the most senior levels of the company. That is a hallmark of a great place to work, and a great business.

HOW HAS THE INVESTMENT BANKING INDUSTRY CHANGED SINCE THE GLOBAL FINANCIAL CRISIS AND WHAT FURTHER CHANGES ARE REQUIRED?

Hundreds of millions of people were massively negatively impacted by the global financial crisis, from one end of the world to the other. It was a crisis born of the business sector, untrammelled greed and lack of balance in risk-taking and regulation. The role of the investment banks in the lead up to the crisis is well documented. The result cast a great stain on business in general, and banking in particular, and really jumpstarted the conversation about the obligations of business to think beyond profit.

Through all the pain – much of which is still being worked through – this was an important moment for our economy and our world, and the capitalist system more generally. It is wonderful to see action and conversations shifting to a much deeper thinking about the obligations of business and the financial services sector, including multi-stakeholder models, and to more and more businesses beginning to look at the wide-range of stakeholders that are affected by their actions. We are seeing the rise of the social economist and the social economy, and of a whole new way of doing business coming with it.

I am in the lucky position to see the very best of the financial services and investment banking industry through the lens of our most recent business, Adara Partners (<https://www.adarapartners.org/>). In 2015 Adara launched a new business platform – the Adara Partners Panel – to allow the leaders of the financial services industry (including investment banking) to give advice at the highest levels of excellence to corporate Australia, with all fees generated benefitting our work with people in need in the world's most remote places.

I have been blown away to see some of the most respected men and women in corporate Australia join the Adara Panel. They work as volunteers, entirely outside of their home firms. They work in pairs and co-lead advisory mandates at the highest levels of Australian corporate and business life. They have one aim: to generate revenue to support people in need, by giving the best possible wise counsel and senior advice to our clients.

Since we launched Adara Partners (<https://www.adarapartners.org/>), we have completed multiple mandates, including a complex commercial problem-solving mandate for an ASX 20 company and strategic negotiation advice for the Football Federation of Australia's broadcast rights. We have just completed a mandate for a great Aussie company as an independent advisor on their capital raising and we are in the middle of a complex advice mandate advising

the board of an ASX100 company. We have been appointed to several Federal and NSW Government Panels including the Department of Treasury and the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade.

It is extraordinary to see the industry engage with us, and the commitment and excitement of the Adara Panel around using their mastery directly for purpose. It fills me with hope – and I think the construct has much wider application than just Australia. So, watch this space!

WHAT HAS BEEN YOUR GREATEST CHALLENGE?

I have fallen on my face a million times, and cried a lot of tears amongst the incredible joy that [Adara \(https://www.adaragroup.org/\)](https://www.adaragroup.org/) has brought to my life. But the obstacles I have faced are nothing like the obstacles that are faced by the 850 million people who get up every single day and live in extreme poverty, or people living without love or with mental illness or maybe living in fear of violence. Those challenges are life and death – operating in a complex world, putting food on the table to be able to eat twice a day, staying safe, often in places without rule of law, getting to school or work when you have to walk for hours, trying to stay healthy when your water source is polluted or the crops are failing.

So, my challenges are tiny compared to others.

In that context, if I looked at the biggest challenges I have personally faced, they would be around holding onto a vision that is out of construct when there is a loud voice of “No!” all around. Believing in myself and others. Trusting my instincts. And finding the right people to be part of the journey – and backing the great ones 100%, while staying clear of others that lack integrity. I have had to recognise that power and money corrupt people, and watch out for that.

I guess the greatest challenge of all is recognising and being OK with my own failings and my own limitations. I have had to understand that my work will never be enough – that it is just a tiny contribution.

And that every single day when I fail or I don't do as well as I had hoped, I need to go to bed, get up the next day, and get back at it again. Because it really, really is worth it.

WHAT ARE YOU MOST PROUD OF?

What a big question! How to match pride with humility – which has to stand at the centre of everything, so we don't lose our way?

I guess I am proud of doing my best even when my best has not been enough. I am proud of refusing to listen to voices of fear and negativity. I am proud of being brave when inside I was terrified.

Mostly I am hugely proud of being part of the [Adara \(https://www.adaragroup.org/\)](https://www.adaragroup.org/) family and their dedication to saving lives. I am proud of the Adara business model. I am proud of the way we have demonstrated over the last 20 years that it is possible to use the power of business to help people in need, to bridge worlds and change lives.

I also think I'm proud of what is yet to come. Never in our history has [Adara \(https://www.adaragroup.org/\)](https://www.adaragroup.org/) been so well positioned to deliver lasting change in the world's poorest communities. We have big plans as we move forward to scale our global health work, and to make a significant contribution to ending preventable newborn and maternal deaths. Our remote community development work continues to touch lives in the most faraway places. We now have a deep understanding of service excellence, which has provided a platform to train, to build capacity, and to share our learnings and mistakes widely. As we make plans for the year ahead, we are taking Adara to the next level, using all the knowledge we have gained through years of deep service to vulnerable communities.

I heard a quote the other day that said a legacy is "...planting seeds in a garden you never get to see." This really resonated. My hope is that other people take what I have done and do it bigger, better and smarter than I have. And I hope that this work with [Adara \(https://www.adaragroup.org/\)](https://www.adaragroup.org/) lives on in different forms long after I do – we already have a beautiful garden that is beginning to flourish, and I dream that it will continue to grow and grow. But in the end others will decide what happens next, not me, and I am completely cool with that.

WHAT'S ONE PIECE OF ADVICE FOR FUTURE FEMALE LEADERS?

Take a deep breath, leap out of the cage that society and those around you have constructed for you, and do amazing, beautiful, and wild things with your life. Leadership is a massive privilege, and our fractured world needs every single one of us to do our very best – we must not squander the chance to make change.

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Posted by Jade Collins - Femeconomy Founder

Mother, wife, daughter, determined dreamer. Lover of books. Background in Human Resources leadership in global organisations.

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