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CIGFARO Women's Day Seminar

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THEME “From Representation to Influence: Empowering Women to Shape the Future of Government”

TOPIC

Executive Leadership Journey: Preparing Women to Lead Government Institutions

Programme Director;

Chairperson, Ms Mhloti Shirinda;

Leadership of CIGFARO;

Distinguished guests, colleagues and fellow women leaders;

Good morning.

It is a privilege to join you as we commemorate Women's Month under the powerful theme: **“From Representation to Influence: Empowering Women to Shape the Future of Government.”**

This theme challenges us to move beyond counting how many women occupy leadership positions and to ask a more important question: **Are women shaping the decisions, systems, cultures and outcomes of the institutions they lead?**

Representation matters, but it cannot be our final destination. Our presence must translate into influence — influence over policy, budgets, governance, organisational culture, service delivery and the development of future leaders.

Executive leadership is therefore not simply about a title or position. It is about **stewardship**. It requires technical competence, but also judgement, character, foresight, resilience and an ability to understand complexity.

I would like to frame the executive leadership journey through five interconnected disciplines: **systems thinking, Stoic leadership, anticipatory thinking, thinking awareness and temporal awareness**, while drawing on insights from Stephen Covey's *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People*, Peter Senge and colleagues' *The Dance of Change*, and Douglas Forbes' *Human Pin Code*.

SYSTEMS THINKING: SEEING THE WHOLE

Government institutions do not function in isolated parts. Policy affects finance; finance affects capacity; capacity affects implementation; leadership shapes culture; and governance ultimately influences service delivery and public trust.

Systems thinking teaches us to look beyond the immediate event and understand the relationships producing the outcome.

Peter Senge's work reminds us that meaningful organisational change requires us to see how our own decisions and behaviours contribute to the systems we are trying to improve.

For executive women leaders, this means learning to ask deeper questions:

What is really driving this problem?

What is it connected to?

What unintended consequences could this decision create?

Who else must be part of the solution?

Leadership is not only about fixing what is visible. It is about understanding what lies beneath the problem.

This is where representation becomes influence — when women are able to connect policy, people, finance, governance, ethics and service delivery into one coherent leadership perspective.

STOIC LEADERSHIP: MASTERING OUR RESPONSE

The Stoics taught a simple but powerful principle: distinguish between what is within your control and what is not.

Leadership will bring criticism, resistance, pressure, uncertainty and difficult decisions. We cannot control every circumstance, but we can control the quality of our response.

This aligns with Stephen Covey's first habit: **"Be Proactive."**

For women leaders, proactivity means refusing to allow circumstances, criticism or workplace dynamics to determine our values or behaviour.

Leadership requires **self-mastery**.

We must learn to manage our reactions, assumptions, fears, impatience and emotions before we can effectively manage institutions and people.

A mature executive can face disagreement without becoming disrespectful, exercise authority without humiliating others, and remain firm without losing compassion.

The higher we rise, the greater the need for composure, resilience and integrity.

ANTICIPATORY THINKING: PREPARING BEFORE THE FUTURE ARRIVES

Covey's second habit offers another important leadership principle: **"Begin with the end in mind."**

Executive leadership requires us to think beyond the problems of today.

We must ask:

What kind of institution are we trying to build?

What capabilities will government require five or ten years from now?

How will digital transformation, artificial intelligence, cybersecurity, climate change and fiscal constraints affect public institutions?

How are we preparing our people for that future?

Anticipatory thinking is not about predicting the future perfectly. It is about scanning the environment, identifying risks and opportunities, and preparing institutions before challenges become crises.

A good leader does not only ask whether a decision solves today's problem. She also asks: **What future will this decision create?**

When we appoint people today, we are building future capability.

When we approve budgets today, we are funding a future.

When we mentor a young woman today, we may be preparing a future executive.

That is the responsibility of anticipatory leadership.

THINKING AWARENESS: UNDERSTANDING HOW WE THINK

Executive leadership also demands **thinking awareness** — the ability to reflect on our assumptions, biases and mental models.

Every leader interprets the world through experience. But if we never challenge our assumptions, experience can become a limitation rather than a strength.

We must continuously ask ourselves:

What evidence am I using?

What might I be overlooking?

Whose perspective is missing?

Am I solving the problem or defending my position?

Covey captures this in Habit 5: **“Seek First to Understand, Then to Be Understood.”**

The higher one rises in leadership, the fewer people may feel comfortable saying, “You may be wrong.”

That is why strong leaders deliberately create space for challenge, honest feedback and intelligent disagreement.

Douglas Forbes' *Human Pin Code* adds another useful dimension by emphasising self-awareness and the understanding of different human behaviours, strengths and weaknesses.

The leadership lesson is simple: **people are not the same.**

What motivates one person may not motivate another. Some people require detail, others thrive with autonomy. Some respond quickly; others reflect before acting.

Effective leadership therefore requires us to understand people beyond their job descriptions.

Importantly, when we mentor younger women, we should not expect them to become copies of ourselves.

Our responsibility is to help them become the strongest, most ethical and capable versions of themselves.

TEMPORAL AWARENESS: LEADING ACROSS TIME

Executive leadership also requires what I call **temporal awareness** — understanding our responsibility to the past, present and future.

We honour the **past** because women before us opened doors through courage, sacrifice and persistence.

We must lead effectively in the **present**, because communities experience government today. They experience whether services are delivered, whether resources are protected, whether institutions are responsive and whether leaders act ethically.

But we must also protect the **future**.

Our legacy cannot be defined only by what happened while we were in office.

The true test of leadership is whether the institution remains capable when we are gone.

Peter Senge's *The Dance of Change* reminds us that sustainable transformation depends on building learning organisations and strengthening capabilities that extend beyond individual leaders.

Our responsibility is therefore not to make ourselves indispensable.

It is to build strong systems, develop people, preserve institutional memory, establish ethical cultures and prepare successors.

FROM REPRESENTATION TO INFLUENCE

If women are to move from representation to influence, we must do five things deliberately.

We must **shape strategic agendas**, not simply participate in them.

We must **influence resource allocation**, because priorities without resources remain intentions.

We must **mentor and sponsor other women**. Mentoring gives guidance; sponsorship creates opportunity.

We must **shape institutional culture**, because culture is determined by what leaders reward, tolerate and correct.

And we must **prepare successors**, because leadership that does not develop others eventually becomes institutional weakness.

As women leaders, we must widen the path as we rise.

CONCLUSION

Ladies and gentlemen,

The executive leadership journey is a journey of expanding responsibility.

Systems thinking teaches us to see the whole.

Stoic leadership teaches us to govern ourselves under pressure.

Anticipatory thinking teaches us to prepare before the future arrives.

Thinking awareness teaches us to examine how we interpret people and problems.

And **temporal awareness** teaches us to honour the past, deliver in the present and build for the future.

Stephen Covey reminds us to **be proactive**, to **begin with the end in mind**, to **seek first to understand**, and to continuously **sharpen the saw**.

Peter Senge reminds us that sustainable change requires learning, reflection, systems awareness and the courage to challenge old assumptions.

Douglas Forbes reminds us that understanding ourselves and others enables us to lead people with greater awareness and intention.

And perhaps the executive leadership journey can therefore be summarised in six imperatives:

Know yourself.

Govern yourself.

Understand others.

Understand the system.

Anticipate the future.

And have the courage to lead.

Our presence in government matters.

But our contribution must matter even more.

Let us therefore move beyond representation towards meaningful influence.

Let us become women who do not merely occupy leadership positions, but improve the institutions we lead.

Women who do not simply enter decision-making rooms, but improve the quality of the decisions made inside them.

Women who build strong systems, ethical cultures and capable people.

And women who leave behind institutions that are stronger, more resilient and more responsive because we were privileged to serve them.

The future of government is not something we must wait for. Through the decisions we make today, we are already creating it.

May we lead with courage.

May we lead with wisdom.

May we lead with foresight.

May we lead with humility.

And may we always remember to lift others as we rise.

I thank you.

Ke a leboga.

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