

Sakina Nosarka talks boundary-pushing leadership and driving a culture of inclusion

 By [Lauren Hartzenberg](#)

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Sakina Nosarka, the highly-regarded head of retail for Old Mutual Properties (OMP) and incoming CEO for OMP, has just taken on the [additional role](#) of South African Council of Shopping Centres (SACSC) president, working to spearhead innovative solutions that cement the retail landscape as a key contributor to South African society.



Sakina Nosarka, new SACSC president. Source: Supplied

With more than 15 years of experience in retail property in particular, Nosarka takes pride in the retail industry being a prominent employer of women in SA, and cheers on the growing female leadership within the property industry at large. At the same time, she reminds businesses that they have a responsibility to drive real and meaningful company-wide change that paves the way for a more inclusive professional environment.

We chatted to Nosarka for [Women's Month](#) to learn more about her passion for property, what inspiring leadership looks like to her, and building back better in post-pandemic retail.

■ ***Sakina, congrats on your appointments as SACSC president and Old Mutual Properties CEO. What's first on your to-do list in your new roles?***

Listen, listen, listen and really hear so people feel heard and know that their input is both important and valued in order to solidify the business foundation by being a uniter of our culture.

At the same time, the way in which I communicate is just as important. I will focus on sharing the strategic intentions of the business and in doing so approach stakeholders and strategic team leaders with the same three pertinent questions:

1. What should we start doing?
2. What should we stop doing?
3. What should we continue doing?

■ **How would you describe your climb up the corporate ladder?**

As author Tony Robbins said, “setting goals is the first step in turning the invisible into the visible.” By nature, I have been unafraid to push boundaries and have an insatiable thirst for knowledge. I have welcomed change and have been inspired to walk the path that few have walked before me.

I have focused not only on my personal growth but my want to contribute to an industry that revolves around growth, sustainability and innovation which has been a contributing factor to my own personal success.

My passion for property has enabled me to focus on leadership, strategic thinking, and having an innovative mindset while using my negotiating skills and networks to find solutions.

“ *It's more than just a position, it's a mindset, it's a way of life, and it's inspiring to be able to shift and adapt with this wave of unpredictability to find working solutions that keep our assets attractive and bustling.* ”

You need your finger on the pulse and your mind constantly exploring ways to innovate and be solution-driven. You also need foresight to ensure our offerings continue to resonate, which ultimately translates into feet in-mall and the economy of retail property pulsating and evolving.

I have been intent on developing my abilities and leading extended teams with conscious humility, creativity, motivation, vision, empathy and integrity, while encouraging every team member to see themselves as custodians, which I believe reinforces unity and a sense of pride.

Evolution is at the core of what I – we – do both professionally and personally.



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■ **With Women's Month being observed in South Africa this August, who are the women who have had a particularly positive influence on your life?**

The most important is my mother – my greatest support and supporter. I wouldn't be where I am today, without her advice and unconditional love.

I have been lucky enough to have worked with some phenomenal individuals, but especially female leaders in SA who have shown me that you can participate at the highest level with integrity and have a good work life balance. Passionate about property, having access to this incredible platform will enable me to contribute towards transforming the industry and

inspiring young women to discover how incredible and rewarding it can be.

In a global context, I admire Angela Ahrendts who is a dynamic and stylish businesswoman. As CEO she transformed Burberry, the iconic British heritage fashion house, into a luxury global brand and nearly tripled revenue from \$1bn to more than \$3bn before moving to Apple.

■ **As we emerge from the Covid-19 pandemic, how are you feeling about retail industry recovery, particularly within malls and retail centres?**

The pandemic was an unprecedented time that required resilience. As a community we came together while being forced apart, as property owners and tenants we collaborated and supported each other. The new norm placed greater emphasis on web between property owners and tenants; the more we worked together, the larger the audience, the higher the footfall and the greater the bottom line.

“ As we emerge from the pandemic, we enter a phase of rethink and rebirth - a time to unveil and become something that potentially serves as inspiration to a consumer that we may not have reached pre-pandemic. ”

We are essential. We provide a service. We bring an experience. We enable dreams. We contribute towards an economy. We inspire. We navigate the brick-and-mortar rebound set against the backdrop of this incredible and fast-paced online and digital pandemic trend. We shift in the very essence of what retail was, to an opportunity of what we could be.

It is how we define how online retail finds a home with its brick-and-mortar big brother that matters. It is capturing the die-hard online consumers who don't put their smartphones down, who browse the offering. The success is in merging both in a symbiotic way and finding the magic in the combination of a consumer online experience merging with a tangible way in-centre.



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■ **What do you think could be done differently within South African retail spaces to accelerate recovery?**

Innovation, reconfiguring the experience, recreating the offering and refocusing are the underlying formulas to augment reality using technology to reinvent unique in-store experiences. This narrative needs to continue with “friends of the brand” who are in essence appointees and influencers of the market through which we connect with our audience and engage through tactile, live brand experiences in-centre.

This conversation is alive and robust on social media and while it defines at the same time it redefines. It is not constant. It is forever evolving. It is in real time. It is integral to our growth both as a brand and a tenant, a shopping centre or a precinct.

Consumers are looking at life through a new normal and distinctive lens. Different generations have different priorities, none more or less valid, and each as important as their undisputed values.

“ Consumers are not only shopping through the lens of aesthetics and desires, but with their conscience and heart. Ethical retail is not a trend, it is a defining reality. ”

Consumers, brands and property owners must align ever more clearly on the environment and sustainability tapping into emotion, focusing on human connection while constantly concentrating on discovery and community.

Brick-and-mortar retail continues its metamorphosis into high-touch, sensory-driven experience with the concept of a “day of shopping” making a profound comeback where a leisure outing includes browsing, shopping, dining, and socialising.

■ ***Do you feel there is enough of a female voice in the industry that you work in?***

I am proud to say that the retail sector continues to be one of the largest employers of women in South Africa, providing a source of both livelihoods and income to many families and dependents. Growth and change comes from challenging our own ideas and preconceptions. We need to test our thinking and create opportunities for female leaders.

South Africa is benefitting from greater female empowerment and gender equality, more women have become involved in the industry and have risen to become leaders who have made their mark.

The property industry is seeing a healthy increase in female leadership, with a larger number of women in management positions today than 10 years ago.



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■ ***How do you decompress when work responsibilities feel overwhelming?***

Having a good work life balance is essential to success professionally. When I need to take time out and step away from the pressure of work, I turn to my family, my husband and two incredible boys, who keep me on my toes!

My other passions include reading, shopping – both locally and internationally – where I find inspiration in beautifully crafted and quality goods. Travelling opens one's eyes to new experiences, creates a narrative and aids with personal and professional growth.

At the end of the day, what is life if we don't challenge ourselves to explore, to move beyond our comfort zone, to lean into our experiences and evolve while feeling overwhelmed?

■ ***What is your hope for future generations of women in your field?***

My hope for future generations is that women know their worth, be resilient and focused while knowing the importance of attaining their goals. Persevering while staying true to themselves, to their values. Trusting their instincts.

Know it is okay to be driven; it's important to be authentic, it is not a weakness to be kind. Aspire, dream big, be open to learning and evolving.

More awareness and conversation on gender is surely a good thing, but is this "noise" masking a lack of real action and progress? Attracting and developing more women in leadership roles requires company-wide change, driven from the top. OM is a good example of this.

“ Retention, succession, addressing the skills gap while committing to inclusion are some of the ways organisations can challenge the status quo. ”

My experience has taught me that if companies address culture as a priority in their business, we would accelerate progress...quickly. While the industry encourages women to raise their hands higher, we must place equal focus on employers taking action to actually fix the problem.

Creating an inclusive environment is about more than just policies and hiring practices, it's an ongoing process and

tradition of expectation that everyone shows up and brings their whole self to work each day, feeling valued, heard and able to make an impact while progressing their careers.

The single most powerful thing an organisation can do to promote more women leaders is to create a culture of “conscious inclusion” building the desire, insight and capacity of people to make decisions. Lead, think and act with the conscious intent of inclusion for everyone. Our economic growth, workforce participation and future generations depend on it.

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