

Inspiring Women

Episode 62: Rona Matthew

Laurie McGraw :

Welcome to Inspiring Women with Laurie McGraw. I am your host, Laurie McGraw. I have spent the past 30 years in leadership and over the years I've come to learn one thing. Women need women and not just any women, but inspiring women. Tune in every week to hear from women at the pinnacle of their careers and from others who are just starting out. Episodes can be found at inspiringwomen.show or subscribe on your favorite podcast app. Thanks for listening. And I hope you will be inspired.

Laurie McGraw :

Rona is a product marketing manager at TikTok. She graduated with a marketing degree from Howard University. And after that, she decided to explore a different career path and moved to South Africa. She was there for about eight years. She worked at the design agency. Launched her own brand consultancy, and after eight years she made a pivot into tech. Now Rona attended Columbia Business School while working in product marketing. She worked for big brands like Spotify, IBM, Unilever, others. And today she's at TikTok. And Rona, I am so excited to be speaking with you today.

Rona Matthew :

Thanks for Laurie. Thank you for having me.

Laurie McGraw :

Well, fantastic. I know we're actually, you're in Jamaica. We've got like, a great round the globe kind of thing where it's speaking to here. Why don't we start, like I always do on Inspiring Women with, what are you doing today? What is your day to day in your current role at TikTok?

Rona Matthew :

Oh, today I'm working from the beach, as you mentioned, I'm in Jamaica, which is nice. But yeah, I'm actually a senior product marketing manager at TikTok. I've been there for about a year and a half and I cover our branded hashtag challenge.

Laurie McGraw :

What does that mean? And I've actually watched a number of both your podcasts and interviews that you've done Rona. I mean, it seems like you're really trying to build brands and do it from a business angle. I am not a TikTok user. I'm not into doing the little dances and figuring out how to go viral, although I'd love some tips, but you're on the business end.

Rona Matthew :

Yes. Yes. So I work on the advertising side of the business. So I work with the team that's helping brands land their own kind of identities and connect with users on the platform. So the

branded hashtag challenge is one of our marque products. It's probably one of the most unique products that we have and effectively advertisers get a chance to create different concepts and engage with the community of users on TikTok and get them to participate and co-create with their brands. And we get crazy numbers. I mean, we're seeing like two billion views for one campaign. So it's really a unique product, but yeah, on the advertising side of the house, we work directly with the monetization teams and help advertisers activate on TikTok.

Laurie McGraw :

Well, I really want to sort of dive into a little bit of this combination of technology, and social media, and marketing. But before we head into that Rona, I want to back up and get a little bit more about your background. So you started with a degree from Howard, then you moved to South Africa, then you, after years there starting your own company, then coming back and going into business school and pivoting to tech. Can you walk us through a little bit of the career journey and some of those choices along the way?

Rona Matthew :

Sure. It's almost crazy hearing other people talk about my story, because it is kind of an adventure, but just to back up in terms of like how I ended up in South Africa. So you mentioned, I went to Howard. My best friend is an American girl who actually grew up in South Africa and she invited me to go visit the country. This was back in like December 2008, going into 2009. We were supposed to go for vacation for New Year's Eve. I went there and honestly I loved it. I changed my flight to return to the states like three times. I did not want to come back. I just really fell in love with Capetown, Johannesburg, Durban and being in a place where I was part of the majority, which was a really unique experience being around black enterprising people really building a new and innovative economy.

Rona Matthew :

And it was just really inspiring for me. So after I graduated that following May 2009, I decided this was a place where I wanted to be. So I actually moved to South Africa instead of facing the housing crisis and moving to New York to work in Madison Ave. I thought maybe let me try something different. And if I succeed fantastic, like great. If it doesn't work out like no one will know, no one will care. It's so far away, like what's the worst that can happen. So I took that risk. I moved to South Africa. I ended up working at a design and branding agency first as an account manager, worked my way up to the head of client services and ended up pitching and working with companies like South African Airways and Ghana Oil and worked along like Nigerian and Ghana as well.

Rona Matthew :

But eventually I realized, I'm working within this small business. I feel like I'm doing so much. I'm stretched. I have like 10 different roles. I can kind of do this on my own. So I thought, let me start my own company. So I started Brand Pulse. I was a brand consult and did everything from helping founders and small businesses with their business plans, create their corporate identities, create their first website, create their first campaigns, help them design their offices, et cetera, and recruit, and recruit customers as well as also working with telcos. And helping them source content and entertainment content for their mobile networks. And I kind of dabbled in other

things along the way. Tried and failed to launch a music streaming service. But yeah, all of those different experiments led me to realize that I really just love working with brands and helping them realize themselves in different ways and working with founders, and musicians and artists, and also helping them monetize their ideas.

Rona Matthew :

So all of that kind of led me to realize, it's time to come back to the US. I had spent eight years in South Africa and I really just wanted to upskill and re-enter the US market and thought, what better way to do that than going to business school? I can gain a new network, try different things and really figure out like, what am I trying to do here and give myself that two years to just really focus inward. So that's what I did. I went to Columbia Business School. Had the time of my life. I learned so much. It was truly a transformative experience. And while there I interned at Spotify, I was a PMM intern. And eventually after I graduated, what July 2020, I landed my gig at TikTok. So it was kind of, it's been a bit of a rollercoaster, but I think ultimately I just, I've been trusting my instincts along the way.

Laurie McGraw :

Well, it also sounds, it sounds a bit like a story book. So I want to sort of dig into a couple of these things here. So first of all, being inspired by people from a vacation and then having the, I don't know, courage to just say, Hey, this is the community that I want to be around. Other black entrepreneurial enterprising individuals, creativity, having artists and founders be the types of people that inspire you and then having the courage to start your own business. Now 40% of new businesses are started by women. So that's not necessarily a small number, but at a young age to be able to do that seems like it comes with some courage and everything else. So Rona, as you think about those things, did you have a career vision for yourself when you started out or are you just learning it along the way? You say you're trusting your instincts, but did you have early instincts that sort of led you to a direction? Just wanted to get a little bit more on that.

Rona Matthew :

It's hard to say that I had like a big vision. I mean, I started off as a biology major at Howard, so I thought I was going to be a plastic surgeon or dermatologist. I later realized, oh, I think I don't really love my science classes as much as I should to really end up in the medical field. So what do I love? I started off as a dancer. I started with ballet, tap, and jazz. So I've always been within art, the artistic field, within the fine arts community and thought, well, maybe I should start a dance studio one day. So what do I need to do that? So I went and studied business. So thought that was kind of like a catchall for me to figure out what I wanted to do and eventually start again, a fine arts studio.

Rona Matthew :

So, no, when I graduated from Howard, I really wasn't sure what I wanted to do, but as I worked at this design and brand agency, and as I worked within the advertising space, I realized I actually really loved it. I got to lean into my desire to understand people, what drives them, what gets them to buy things and do things. So the real consumer behavior behind advertising and the psychology behind advertising, I just started to really enjoy. And it's kind of just led me to this idea of being a leading woman in marketing and entertainment. So that's kind of like the broad

vision. I think, as I work within like tech and with startups, I've also realized that helping artists, and brands, and creators monetize and sustain their careers is actually something that I really, really love to do. It just makes me happy. So why not make money doing [inaudible 00:09:27]. So, yeah, I don't have like a huge career vision, but I see myself working alongside creators in the long term.

Laurie McGraw :

And you're doing it and it seems like you've done it in a couple different, already couple different angles. And now obviously at TikTok. So when you've had these different sort of opportunities to pursue a next thing or move as you're learning that this is an area you want to focus in, how do you determine when it's the right time to make a pivot or make a move or pursue sort of a next thing? What's that process for you in terms of when you know it's the right time? And similarly, have you ever had the chance to have an opportunity, then you turned it down because it was not the right one for you at that time?

Rona Matthew :

Yeah, I think it's, you have to just check in with yourself along the way. Right. So I will have a five year plan. Like I'll write it every couple of years and update it, but I always give myself permission to make. So in terms of pivoting, it's important to see how you're feeling. Are you growing in your current role? Is it giving you what you need? I ask myself those kind of questions. Am I challenged? Am I learning? Do I see upward mobility or do I see an opportunity to grow a particular area or business or myself? And if I feel as though I'm no longer getting that from my certain situation, job, client, et cetera, then I know it's time to make some changes. For me, I think going back to school was probably one of the biggest pivots I made having had my own company, I was running it for eight years and obviously you're giving up a lot by making such a drastic change.

Rona Matthew :

But I think at that time I realized it was what I needed to really get to the next level in my career, especially in a developed market. So I think again, just asking yourself those questions, like, where are you trying to go? Do you see the path to get you there? And if you can't see around the corner, then maybe you need to make a change. And I think consulting your [inaudible 00:11:24] too is important to do that. You shouldn't have to do it all on your own.

Laurie McGraw :

And when you're building your own business, I mean, that's like business school in real time on the fly. So to make a choice to go back to business school, that is a pivot and a thoughtful one at that. Rona as you again, along the way and I like this description, you just gave to yourself of intending to be a leading woman in marketing and entertainment. With that as perhaps a vision for yourself as what you are today and what you intend to be ongoing, who inspires you? Do you have a coach, a mentor? Who are the types of people or do you have somebody that's like, this is who I'm really aiming to be more like?

Rona Matthew :

Yeah, there are many. I first have to say, my parents inspire me. My parents are Antiguan. They are born and raised in Antigua and then migrated to the US. And they have definitely given me a lot of the tools as immigrants, as people of the world to just go and go to places, transplant yourself to a new space and just create. I think their ability to do that has really inspired me. When I look outward to like the industry, there are definitely people that I look to that happen to be women as a source of inspiration to me and one of those women is Bozoma Saint John, the CMO of Netflix. I think the way she's navigated her career, when being a truly authentic woman disrupting the industry has been a huge inspiration for me.

Rona Matthew :

The fact that she's a Ghanaian name woman, and she wears that with pride. She wears her heritage with pride. I think that has given me permission to wear my hair natural. I feel most confident with my hair natural or braids, or to do whatever I want. Little things like that, seeing yourself represented has been a real gift. I'd say, I don't have many mentors and coaches, but I do have some that I've kind of claimed as my own, whether they know it or not. Danielle Lee, whose now the head of the fan experiences at Warner is an incredible mentor to me. She actually gave me my first internship at Spotify when she kind of led the entire ad solutions business there. And yeah, she's just been an incredible partner in terms of just guiding me from here and there, giving me advice, but also, I would have to say, I've thought about it lately like maybe I should hire a coach because I've been having this need to fill certain gaps. And I think a coach could help get me there. So yeah, I'm on the lookout.

Laurie McGraw :

Well, there are definitely things to look at and by the way, like badass Boz who I follow too is incredible, amazing and incredibly inspiring. I think that she has a lot of wisdom to offer. So not a good person to sort of model your own career path after I'll say that. Rona, you've also, just in your background, some of the things that I've watched that you have done, you've talked about surrounding yourself with other people who inspire you. I know at Columbia, it was important for you to be part of the Black Business Student Association. Today at TikTok, you're one of the leaders of the black employee resource group. So can you talk about like why those groups are important, why you value them, why they're important for you to be a part of them?

Rona Matthew :

Of course. I think it's important to build community wherever you go. And I think that's especially true as a woman, as a woman of color where you tend to be in spaces where you're a part of a small community, where you're underrepresented. So that's definitely something that I find very important. I mean while at Columbia Business School, I definitely had a bit of a culture shock after spending eight years in South Africa. You'd imagine, I'm back in school, like what is going on? How do I navigate this very foreign, unusual space? And remember, I also went to Howard before for my college experience. I really wasn't familiar with like the dos and don'ts of navigating an Ivy league school. So I definitely needed my tribe. So I looked for those different groups and those groups were pretty intuitively like the Africa Business Club, the Black Business Student Association, as well as the Media Management Association.

Rona Matthew :

And I leaned into those groups to just kind of find community and also to just find people with similar interests, with people that could give me the unwritten rules and just kind of help uplift me when I was stressed out because it's a very stressful experience in business school. But even with TikTok, I got there and it's still a pretty young company. So there wasn't like a really fleshed out employee resource group or, and there was an affinity group when I first joined, but I thought it was really important to bring us all together, especially in a virtual world.

Rona Matthew :

So I haven't stepped foot in an office yet. Everything that I've done with the company has been virtual. So it was just really important to get there to create like happy hours for us on Zoom, to create ways for us to just like connect and share and not feel alone because it can be a bit isolating when you're working from home, especially, as a minority. So yeah, I think going to places and if you don't see what you're looking for, just give yourself permission to create it. And I think that's what I try to do wherever I go.

Laurie McGraw :

Well creating community for dealing with those types of things you're trying to navigate and stress is a big one. Right. As we're in this pandemic, as we're all getting used to virtual is the new normal, what does that look like? And there are definitely some positives. The losing of human contact in ways that are just, socially difficult sometimes to navigate important things that you're trying to do and work. That's just fantastic that you're putting the personal effort towards those extra things that are helpful. Probably not just for you but so many others who participate in those groups. Just wonderful. So I want to talk a little bit about being a black woman in tech, the numbers there, you know what they are. They're not fantastic. You're one of not enough.

Laurie McGraw :

And there's also some, I've read some things, Forbes recently talking about the streaming platforms being quite helpful actually to giving voice to different communities, communities of color and the like. So you've been at TikTok for a little bit now and you've been involved in other sort of, big social platform, types of companies. So what are you seeing? What are you experiencing? What are you seeing? Are there reasons to be positive? Are you finding these efforts around DEI not enough? I'm just curious as to what your experience is.

Rona Matthew :

Yeah. I think like you said, streaming platforms is definitely been democratizing content and definitely diversifying content. And that's been something I've been really excited to see. I mean, the fact that the number one Netflix original show Squid Games just took off the way that it did and it's Korean film. It's not even in English and somehow it's captured the entire world. That's really exciting to me. The fact that the song of the summer Essence is by Wizkid, an Nigerian artist that I've been following for the past 10 years. So I do think that the access to streaming platforms has been incredible and definitely empowering different artists from all of the world to share their arts and their craft. Of course, there's more we can do as businesses to diversify our products, to diversify our workforce. So when you have the representation internally, you obviously see it also in the products and in the communities and in the audiences you're able to reach.

Rona Matthew :

So I think that's something that I'd like to continue to see be developed. I think at TikTok, it's definitely a priority. At least it's been communicated that DEI is something that we want to ground ourselves on and measure ourselves on as a business. I can say as an employee, one of the things I was kind of curious about was like, what are we doing to attract more black talent? So it's one thing if we're mobilizing, creating these activities, so we have community, but what are we doing to open the door and increase our pipeline? So one of the things I proposed to executive leadership was to have a historically black colleges and university's program, right, an HBCU pipelining program. And that's something that fortunately we're getting off the ground. I mean, we had our first HBCU open house and recruitment event about two weeks ago and it was a huge success.

Rona Matthew :

So we're clearly trying to increase our black population internally now. And it's something that has been getting a lot of support. And I'm seeing a lot of these initiatives within other tech companies. I mean, Google's Tech Exchange is an example, Amazon Entertainment, there are many kind of programs that are working on diversity hiring, which I think inevitably will help with diversifying content in the long run. So there's more we can do, but I think there are definitely trailblazers trying to make this happen at a grassroots level.

Laurie McGraw :

Well, it also sounds like you're one of those trailblazers, which is again, just excellent Rona. There's also literally no way that you haven't faced your own obstacles in terms of career pursuits or within the workplace. So just briefly, how do you deal with those? When you do face obstacles, whether they're just obstacles because they're obstacles or they're obstacles more specifically because you're either a woman or a woman of color, how do you handle those and how do you think you're doing with that?

Rona Matthew :

Yeah, that's a great question. It goes back to the community. Like my best friends are by rocks. So my best friends are actually in South Africa. So every other week or so we'll have our quote unquote four women's group chat where we'll check in with each other and find out how we're doing in our personal lives, our professional lives. So I definitely suggest that people find their tribe, they find their community and really invest in those relationships that make them better. Because I honestly don't know how I would've gone through the pandemic had I not had those check ins with my girlfriends and my yoga sessions from time to time. So I definitely think that's a critical way of kind of getting perspective on the challenges you face, is sometimes getting other points of view, whether it's through your family, through networks, through your work networks, et cetera, just leverage your community.

Rona Matthew :

When I'm stressed, I honestly take a break. My work is very stressful. It's very demanding. I'm at a startup in hypergrowth mode. Naturally you're always on, naturally you're working crazy hours, but if I need to just slow down and give myself a break to balance out, that's what I do. Sometimes I don't work on weekends and I'm totally okay with that. So yeah. I just try to give

myself the balance when I need it. I really just try to investigate what's bothering me. Do I need to read something? Is there a meditation that's due? Do I need to take a dance class? Like I ask myself questions all the time and try to check in. And I think that's the only way to figure out what's wrong is by listening to your body and your needs and trying to find solutions.

Laurie McGraw :

Well, that is great advice, Rona. And I think, one that speaks to what a lot of women like you, who are on amazing career paths do. As we close out on Inspiring Women, this has been just such a great conversation, any last sort of advice that you might give other perhaps younger, aspiring women who are looking to follow a similar career path like yourself?

Rona Matthew :

I would say it's really simple. Be yourself and believe in yourself. I think it's time and time again, there are messages or you're maybe in different environments where you feel like you're not enough, where you feel like you're not valued, where you feel like you need to adapt and do all this code switching and fit in. I firmly disagree with that idea. I think one of the things that has gotten me from A to B to C is just having the confidence that anything I set my mind to, I can achieve, can achieve. It may not come out perfectly, but Hey, there's a lesson in every failure, right? So I try to look my glass as half full and never half empty. So that's just one thing I would say is believe in yourself, because if you don't believe in yourself, no one else will. Right. So you have to start with you.

Laurie McGraw :

That is fantastic. All right. We have been on this episode of Inspiring Women. We have been speaking with Rona Matthew. Rona Matthew is a leading woman in marketing and entertainment. Rona, thank you so much.

Rona Matthew :

Thank you. Thank you, Laurie.

Laurie McGraw :

This has been an episode of Inspiring Women with Laurie McGraw. Please subscribe, rate, and review. We are produced by Kate Kruse at Executive Podcast Solutions. More episodes can be found on inspiringwomen.show. I am Laurie McGraw and thank you for listening.