

## Interview.

Women making a difference in Operational Excellence, 2023.  
Industry: Mining.

# Naseem Banu Lahri

Managing Director of Lucara Diamond

As the Managing Director of Lucara Diamond and the first Motswana woman and youngest female managing director in the world to run a diamond mine, **Naseem Banu Lahri** is a role model for tenacity and hard work. She talks to dss+ about inclusion, creating a ripple effect and never giving up on your dreams.



 Find **Naseem Banu Lahri** on LinkedIn



### **What inspired you to work in the mining sector and what were your early influences?**

My journey didn't start in mining. While studying to become an accountant at the University of Botswana, one of my core course requirements was to take on vacation work to ensure that I was ready for work life once I graduated. So one Saturday morning I got up and walked into an accountancy firm to look for a placement. Upon arrival it dawned on me that the office was closed on weekends, and I would have to come back during the week. Fortunately for me, on my way out I met the Chief Executive Officer (CEO) of the firm who was working that weekend. My determination must have impressed him because he asked that I draft a CV and drop it off on Monday morning. I got a call back for the job that transitioned into a full-time auditing role immediately after my graduation. It was in between getting married and taking my final accountancy exams shortly after the birth of our son that I realised I needed a role that was less repetitive and more dynamic. A few years later, an opportunity at a coal mining company arose that coincided with a family trip to the same location. I didn't expect to get a call back from the interviewer the same day, so my family and I headed back to Gaborone and while in transit I got the call to say my interview had been successful. So that family trip quickly turned into a permanent move and I've never looked back. I fell in love with mining's dynamic environment, where the daily challenges are different. I think it is my willingness to take a leap of faith when opportunity knocks on the door and a need to be challenged that has spurred on my career choices.

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### **Mining is integral to Botswana's economy and, as the MD of a mining company, you hold a lot of power in that sector. How important is leadership in setting the tone for company culture and how has your own progression made an impact?**

After two years in coal mining, I started a role with a diamond mining company. I was blown away by the level of impact that just one small office had on the economy of the entire country. Learning more about the wider importance of the diamond industry helped clarify how leadership can make a difference. This kickstarted my radical dream of becoming the first female managing director of a mining company. From financial reporting and sales, I transitioned to different areas of the business to problem-solving projects, including working on transformative initiatives such as the first shared services concept in Botswana. This strategic involvement with projects was exciting, but the company culture at the time was not very progressive and I struggled to advance and get closer to my dream. However, the more I was told I couldn't advance any further, the stronger my determination became. Eventually, I stepped out of my comfort zone and took on the Chief Financial Officer (CFO) role at a small start-up diamond mining company. At the time, I was the only woman in the boardroom in a male-dominated industry. Yet the dynamics were very refreshing. They listened to my ambitions for the company and were willing to do their best to make things happen. The company and I grew together and five years later I was appointed Managing Director at Lucara Diamond. It taught me that a progressive culture and energetic leadership are integral to personal, company, community and national success.

Q.

**Did you doubt your ability to take on such an important role, and how have your experiences impacted your leadership style?**

The CEO who appointed me was also a woman who had not been in her role for long. I remember saying to her that I didn't think I was ready. Her reply was that no one's ready for these jobs. Her response gave me the courage to take on the role and the platform to make daily decisions that impact not only the success of the company but also the mining sector, communities and Botswana itself. At a company level, I'm a big believer in inclusion for everyone. It's good to ask different people to the party, but are they given the opportunity to dance? True diversity and inclusion open pathways and provide challenges that offer opportunities to develop and fulfil potential. Once you reach the top, it's also important not to forget your own journey and past struggles. After all, we are all human. Even advocating simple policy changes such as extending maternity leave to six months and introducing paternity leave can make a big difference to people's work-life balance. The benefits are often far greater than the policy implementation process by improving morale and creating a team spirit. You know you are on the right track when you have a workforce that is happy to come to work and go the extra mile for you. I'd advocate employee happiness as a key performance indicator (KPI) for any leader.



Q.

**As technology and innovation transform the mining sector, what impact is it having at a company level?**

As a small organisation, we are known for our agility and innovation. We were the first company to implement a diamond recovery process initially developed to sort fruit and vegetables and recycle products, but never used in the diamond industry before. We have also used technology to become more resilient in project strategy and gain a competitive advantage. For example, during COVID, when industries and countries were going into lockdown, we pivoted our use of technology to complete an insourcing project as well as the implementation of SAP which was completed in July 2020. Of course, we were expected to continue production as a sector integral to the economy. So, I leaned heavily on my problem-solving capabilities, where I looked for ways to keep the workforce safe while at the same time focusing on technology to continue moving forward rather than stagnate. In March 2020, we interviewed and engaged 120 people, onboarded and completed the induction process entirely online. So, while other companies were retrenching, we were employing and using technology was key.

At the same time, we used a digital platform called Clara Diamond Solutions to help revolutionise and disrupt the way we do sales. Clara is a secure, digital sales platform that uses propriety analytics together with cloud and blockchain technologies to modernise the existing diamond supply chain, driving efficiencies, unlocking value and ensuring provenance from mine to finger.



**You've touched on the company's broader reach in the community. How does that work from a sustainable perspective?**

We are a very community-led organisation and I'm proud that we spend our time and energy creating sustainable projects. We make sure that whatever project we bring to a community has the potential to go beyond the life of the mine to create generational wealth. So, we put in place those value chains that will support the community in the future by developing different expertise and skills. As part of this, we opened a locally based community office to understand local needs and assess project ideas to help support 18 villages in the area where we operate.

One village was identified as having a high malnutrition problem, so we funded a farm that would not only feed the community but allow them to derive an income. Production started in 2019 and since then malnutrition is no longer a problem. Plus, it supplies an income stream for the community. This project employs seven people, four of whom are women, to run the farm and support the 832 members who are part of the trust. It involves training people to manage their own farms, so the whole project eventually becomes independently run. Success has meant we are now extending this blueprint from a local to a national level. A further way we are nurturing communities at a national level is to tap into Botswana's athletic talent. One project we are developing is to build a world-class sports facility, including tennis and volleyball courts, an Olympic swimming pool and FIFA-accredited football pitch. Over the years we have noted that sometimes it's about looking outside of the box on how companies can impact communities long-term. Not only by providing an income, but also by playing a role in diversifying skills that showcase national talent on a global stage.

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**What are your key drivers for getting to where you want to be in your chosen profession?**

If you are determined and tenacious by nature, you are halfway there. Obviously, hard work plays a significant role and you have to be up for a challenge. You have to take on those challenges and see them as opportunities to make things happen rather than barriers to success. Accept it's not going to be easy and learn from failures. I failed many times along the way, but I put disappointment aside each time and moved forward. It often requires a leap of faith, but you will eventually find the wings you need to fly. Also, you must be happy in your role, so focus on what motivates you. For me, it was about making an impact. Now, when a Botswana diamond is sold, I know that my efforts have helped to empower an individual, a family, a community and a nation. So think about your role as having a ripple effect in the best possible way. Importantly, never give up on your dreams, no matter how many knock-backs you get along the way. If you dream it, you can achieve it.

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