You don’t need to have everything figured out

By Hellen Mathuka

The past few weeks have been a blur of tight schedules and high stakes... the kind of 'crazy' I thought I was used to after 20 years in this industry. But this time, the pressure pushed me into a different kind of space: a space of reflection. It forced me to stop and look back at where this journey actually began.

There was a time early in my career when walking into certain rooms made me pause for a second before taking a seat.

Not because I didn’t know my work.

But because I would look around and notice something immediately.

Sometimes, I was the only woman there.

And in those moments, a quiet voice in my mind would ask a question many women know too well:

Am I really supposed to be here?

It’s a strange feeling. You’ve worked hard. You’ve prepared. You’ve earned your place. And yet there is still that small hesitation, the instinct to listen a little longer, speak a little less, wait until you are absolutely sure your voice deserves the space.

What changed everything for me wasn’t a promotion or a title.

It was people.

Early in my journey at Kenya Airways, there were leaders and mentors who saw something in me before I fully saw it in myself. They trusted me with responsibility. They encouraged me to step forward. Sometimes they simply said something powerful and simple:

“You can do this.”

It’s incredible how much those words can shift a person’s confidence.

Because sometimes empowerment is not about a big opportunity.

Sometimes it’s about someone opening a door and believing you belong on the other side of it.

As my career grew across finance, revenue management, and later strategy and innovation, I began to see the same pattern again and again.

Talent was everywhere.

Brilliant women. Sharp thinkers. Capable leaders.

But not everyone had the same encouragement. Not everyone had someone advocating for them in rooms where decisions were being made.

That realization stayed with me.

And it quietly shaped the kind of leader I wanted to become.

Today, when people talk about empowering women, they often imagine large initiatives or big programs.

But I have learned that real empowerment often happens in smaller moments.

It happens when a young woman sitting quietly at the table is invited to share her perspective.

It happens when someone is trusted with a challenging project even if they are not 100% confident yet.

It happens when a leader says, “Let’s hear her idea,” and actually means it.

And perhaps most importantly, it happens when leaders move beyond mentorship and become sponsors.

Mentorship is important. It guides you.

But sponsorship changes your trajectory.

A sponsor is someone who speaks your name when opportunities arise. Someone who recommends you for the project that will stretch you. Someone who makes sure you are present in the rooms where important decisions are made.

Those moments can change a career.

Some of the proudest moments in my leadership journey are not the ones people might expect.

They are not necessarily tied to titles or positions.

They are the moments when I see someone else grow.

When a woman who once hesitated to speak now confidently shares her perspective in a leadership meeting.

When someone steps into a role she once doubted she was ready for.

When women across our organization take ownership of initiatives, lead boldly, and create impact without waiting for permission.

Those moments remind me that leadership is not just about personal success.

It’s about the ripple effect you create for others.

But the truth is, there are still barriers many women face.

Some are structural, access to opportunities, visibility, or leadership spaces.

Some are cultural, the expectations that shape how women are perceived when they lead.

And some are internal.

I’ve seen incredibly talented women hesitate to apply for opportunities unless they feel completely ready.

Meanwhile, others may step forward even when they meet only part of the criteria.

Confidence is a powerful thing.

And sometimes all it takes to unlock it is encouragement from someone who believes in your potential.

Every now and then, I imagine sitting down for coffee with my 22-year-old self on her first day in the industry.

She would probably be excited.

A little nervous.

Very determined.

And maybe a little unsure of what lies ahead.

If I could speak to her now, I would tell her something I wish more young women knew earlier in their careers.

You don’t need to have everything figured out.

You don’t need to wait until you feel completely ready.

Growth often begins the moment you step into spaces that feel just slightly beyond your comfort zone.

I would tell her to listen carefully, learn constantly, and observe the people around her.

But I would also tell her something equally important:

Speak.

Share your ideas.

Trust that your perspective matters.

And above all, stay true to your values.

Titles will come and go.

Roles will evolve.

But integrity, humility, and authenticity will always be your strongest foundation.

Because in the end, success is not only about how far you go.

It is about how many others rise along the way.

And if my journey has taught me anything, it’s this:

When one woman is given the opportunity to grow, the impact rarely stops with her.

It opens the door for many more to follow.