

MBA graduate tells of journey to executive position at Absa

Issued by [Milpark Education](#)

22 Nov 2022

Milpark graduate Portia Letlape remembers a time in her life after she'd finished matric, when she walked the streets of Rustenburg with a printed copy of her CV, looking for a job. Now, over 22 years later, she is in an executive position at Absa, as the head of Product at Absa Home Loans.



Portia Letlape, Milpark Business School alumni

When she looks back over her career spanning 20 years, Portia Letlape, 40, is struck by how often opportunity came her way – even if she didn't identify it at the time. And this is the top counsel she would offer to anyone starting out in their professional careers today: learn how to allow yourself to be uncomfortable during the growth process as it is how we realise our potential.

“Never think any task is too far below you and always do the best at any task you are given,” says Letlape. She remembers how she learnt this from leadership expert Robin Sharma's [book](#) *The Leader Who Had No Title*.

For the past two decades Letlape has worked in retail and financial services, progressing from a cashier to store manager in a range of different sectors. She moved up into Edcon Limited's head office, where she became business manager in the credit and financial services division. In 2016, she moved to

Absa to become Proposition Delivery manager and later Customer Value Propositions manager. This September, she was promoted to the head of product in the Home Loans division.

Her steady rise is a testament to Letlape's commitment to progress, but she remembers how daunting it was to be starting out in the business world without formal education. When she'd hear people talking about certain concepts in a meeting, she'd feel intimidated by her lack of knowledge.

“I thought I needed to get a degree and learn to speak this language I didn't understand,” says Letlape, who in 2012 registered for a short course in Business Administration through Milpark Education. Here she met Dr Shane Lavagna-Slater, who pulled her out of class one day and asked her why she wasn't in the MBA class.

At the time, Letlape felt like obtaining an MBA was far-fetched, but Dr Lavagna-Slater's encouragement was pivotal. “He planted a seed of hope and ignited the flame in me that I too can achieve this and so much more.” She took the leap and enrolled for her Postgraduate Diploma through Recognised Prior Learning and later progressed to obtaining her MBA in 2019.

“Milpark made me believe that anything was possible. I know that sounds clichéd, but if I never had that conversation with Dr Lavagna-Slater, I might still have only my certificate and not my MBA,” she says. Dr Lavagna-Slater became her mentor, and they are still in contact. She credits other lecturers and staff at Milpark too with helping her every step along her academic journey.

“There was so much support and encouragement and I really appreciate that about Milpark. Even when I suffered a loss in my family, they gave me extensions on my assessments, and I really valued that.” She points out that, it is through this approach from Milpark that many professionals who juggle work, family and academic commitments still manage to complete their studies.

As Letlape reflects on her career, there were so many moments when she was unclear about the next step. When she was hired temporarily as a stock-taking clerk, for instance, she didn't know that would lead to a permanent position. Much later, while working at Absa, she headed a team on a new kind of financial services project, which resulted Absa launching South Africa's first Green home loan: the Absa Eco Home Loan.

Letlape has learnt that being clear on one's goals, clearly writing them down and following an action plan does help to keep one focused on the right things. She is humbled at the opportunity to serve through this appointment and still hopes to obtain a PhD – another challenge set by Dr Lavagna-Slater.

"I haven't given up on that!" she says. "But I am excited to see what the next few years hold for me here." Without a doubt her attitude towards being open to learning and taking on opportunities as they present themselves has propelled her, but Letlape is clear about the value of each ordinary incremental step. "I never looked at a job and said it was too small. If someone asks you to pack shelves or mop a floor, never think that it is beneath you – you don't know where it will lead."

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