

Suhana Gordhan's advertising journey (Part 1)

 By [Jessica Tennant](#)

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Raizcorp hosted entrepreneurs and ad people on Friday morning, 8 June, for the second talk in the Loeries Creativity Series at its offices in Sandton. This time, Loeries chair aunty and creative director at FCB Africa, Suhana Gordhan shared her thoughts on the power of creative thinking, what creativity means to her and lessons in leadership she's learnt along her journey in advertising from the boys' locker room to the beaches of Nicaragua, everything from: feelings of fear, doubt and inferiority, consciously turning these into hunger, trust and vulnerability; dealing with dictators; running in high heels; and what it's like to be a woman of colour in the South African context.



Suhana Gordhan presenting at the Loeries Creativity Series, hosted by Raizcorp.

In part one, I cover the first half: how she defines creativity and turns her feelings of fear, doubt and inferiority into hunger, trust and vulnerability, why this is essential for those working in the creative industry, and some lessons in leadership she learnt while learning to surf as a participant in the US-based LeaderSurf programme...

Can anyone be creative?

Gordhan calls herself a 'creative' because she's in the business of creativity, but it's more than a job she says. It's about the way she sees the world. "It's a feeling I have, and an energy and a spirit inside of me." And there are different types of creativity, she goes on. "The ones that we all overtly know, being a painter, a musician, a writer or a dancer, but there's also an unconventional creativity that isn't overt and is more about how we interpret and see things."

To illustrate this, she shared a story about her 'Nani' (Indian for granny), who became a widow and needed to find a way to provide for her family of five daughters, which in Indian culture means five marriages, as the woman's side of the family pays for the wedding. So, she did something she knew how to do, and that was using a 'ganti' or antique wooden grinder to crush spices. To some, that might sound like survival, but to Gordhan, it's a form of creativity because it's about taking something that you have, from your culture, from what you know, and bringing value and purpose to the things you do. "It's an attitude and it's a way of being and your ability to do exactly that, use the things you have and find value in it."



Gordhan is often asked: 'Can we all be creative?'; and her answer is yes. "I believe that we are born as human beings with creative instincts and that it kind of lies dormant in us until we harness that power and use it in our lives to bring value and purpose. I've got to be careful because not everybody can make a profession out of it, not everybody chooses to do that, but certainly, you can bring creativity into your life."

Gordhan believes that creatives need these three things: hunger, trust and vulnerability.

“ When I talk about creativity, I often say it's like wearing your skin inside out because that allows you to absorb and take in everything, and for me, creativity is not about knowing everything. ”

When you don't know something, you have to get to a place of seeking and curiosity, she explains. But there are enemies of creativity, she says, such as fear, doubt and inferiority. "These plague everybody I suppose, but specifically creative people, and maybe it's because they have that vulnerability, that inside-out skin wearing thing.

Gordhan admits that she spent much of her career in these three states, but that in time, she's started to look at them in a positive light and has realised that fear can be turned into hunger, doubt into trust and inferiority into vulnerability. "It's a bit of pendulum in life because you can switch between the two so easily, so it's very important to consciously think about it."

From falling to staying put

At the beginning of 2017, Gordhan took part in LeaderSurf, a leadership development programme in Nicaragua, United States founded by Brian Formato who believes in action and experiential learning and that there are correlations between leading and surfing. "People learn best when they are in a safe, yet foreign, environment. Classroom-based leadership development programmes that are run within an organisation have very little impact on driving new leadership behaviours. Public programmes that are experiential and learner centred, versus lecture-based, have the biggest impact on sustainable behaviour change," he says on the [website](#).

The participants, except for Gordhan, were all from the US, but different industries. Gordhan and one other were the only ones in advertising. And every day, they'd meet under a tiki hut to share a business problem. "Everyone would input on your business problem and you would input on theirs, which was really refreshing because these are people from different industries, so it's kind of a different perspective altogether, but at the same time there were actually a lot of similarities."



LeaderSurf.com

Gorhan says she learnt a few personal lessons about leadership during their daily surfing trips. The first was how similar carrying a surfboard is to tackle a problem. "You carry it like clamshells: two people, one in the front, one at the back, and it's easier to carry it that way. This made me think of the way we tackle problems because you always want to go to the middle, the thick end of the problem when actually it might be easier to start at the easiest bits and to work together as a team."

The second had to do with first observing to make sure you know what you're getting into. "Before we could even get into the water every day, we had to sit on the shore, observe the tide, the current, the waves and the wind, and all sorts of things, and kind of just take note before we got in, and for me, that about knowing what you get into before you actually plunge into it."



Paddle. Catch a wave. Stand. Surf. (Part 1)

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Next, that it's not just about you, it's also about the people you're leading. "There's this etiquette around waiting for your wave. Not every wave is yours," and after catching a wave, you need to get out of the way quickly. "That for me was about getting out of the way of your teams, like letting them be liberated and allowing them to be empowered."

The pay-off line for the course became 'paddle, paddle, paddle' because it's what they told the participants every single day. "In order to get momentum, you have to paddle really hard and fast to be able to catch the wave, and for me that's about when there are opportunities coming up behind you, there are tons of them, and if you have the energy to engage in that moment, the right one will come along, and that will be yours, that will be your wave. And if all else fails, you just keep paddling."



LeaderSurf.com

Her most important lesson, however, was about standing up and staying put. "I kept falling off my surfboard and I kept telling the instructors, I'm falling, I'm falling off my surfboard, and they said, 'No, you're not falling, you're leaping off,' and that is because of fear.

"I didn't realise it at the time, but now that I think about it, that's how I approach a lot of scary things in life – I want to leap off immediately. So, the lesson for me was it's time to stand up and stay put.

"And the entire surf experience I guess was a lesson in trust... In that you have what it takes and you'll find what it takes because it's already in you. So, when something is mightier than you, trust yourself."



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To be continued... Part two coming soon. For more on the Creativity Series, visit Loeries.com. Follow Gordhan on Twitter [@SuhanaGordhan](https://twitter.com/SuhanaGordhan), and find out more about LeaderSurf [here](#).

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