

Wesgro CEO, Wrenelle Stander

 By [Robin Fredericks](#)

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As an executive with over 28 years of work experience, Wrenelle Stander, CEO of Wesgro, has amassed a unique set of generalist leadership skills.



Wrenelle Stander, Wesgro CEO

Beginning her career in aviation at South Africa's National Department of Transport, Stander rose to become chief director of aviation and maritime regulation and also served as deputy CEO of the SA Civil Aviation Authority. Underpinning her readiness for the role, Stander has sat on a range of boards and has an MBA from the Oxford School of Business.

Prior to joining Wesgro, Stander held key positions including CEO of Comair Limited, managing director of South Africa's Air Traffic Navigation Service (ATNS) and managing director of Sasol Gas, a subsidiary of Sasol Limited.

We chat with Stander as she shares more about her background, why the industry could benefit from more female leadership and shares her message for Women's Month.

Tell us about yourself - your background?

As the second child of a family of four children, my journey started some 56 years ago. Born in Cape Town, I was spurred on by the daily financial struggles and hardships that my parents faced living on the Cape Flats. I wanted something different and better for myself. I wanted to break out of the cycle of poverty and not feel trapped by circumstances. With this single-mindedness pushing me forward, I began to swim upstream.

Education was my ticket to a life of opportunity. This was helped by the growing confidence in doing well at school and holding leadership positions. Upon reflection, I continually built my confidence by becoming a big fish in a small pond and then jumping into a bigger pond. I was determined to swim and not sink.

■ ***What do you love most about your work?***

I love the age and stage that I am in my life. In particular, working with young leaders in a line relationship, as well as, through mentorship circles gets me very excited. It invigorates me to support them, as they grapple with the challenges and opportunities of growth in the corporate world. I feel I can add real value to their journeys and the reward for me is high.

■ ***What are your tips for climbing the career ladder in your field, particularly as a woman?***

Personal integrity is the holy grail. Constantly seeking out opportunities to grow and take the opportunities with both hands when they come knocking. Recognising that it's okay to fall and that it is more important to "get up". Staying focused. Doing each job to the best of your ability. Treating others with respect, you never know who you will meet in a new capacity down the line.

■ ***In your view, where does the value lie in a diverse, inclusive work environment?***

Diversity in the workplace enables better outcomes overall. When women are present in the boardroom, you typically find that conventional wisdom gets questioned more readily and different perspectives and ideas are brought to the fore. I am proud that wherever I have worked, I have been able to demonstrate that diversity is truly possible and that people from different social backgrounds and genders can work together in an environment of mutual respect and harmony – often sparking new levels of creativity.

I am driven by the fact that I am one of a group of women pioneers in the corporate world. I see my role as paving the way for other women, as well as redefining the rules to develop corporate cultures that embrace women as leaders and create new ways of managing and leading together.

■ ***Do you think your industry could benefit from more female leadership?***

All industries would benefit from more female leadership. Women need role models and women peers to look up to in the workplace. Importantly we need sponsors to advocate on our behalf. I don't feel we are there yet as a country.

Sponsors are advocates who actively work to advance the career of their proteges, touting their accomplishments and potential, connecting them to others in their network, recommending them for bigger roles, and encouraging their proteges to take on challenging assignments. Sponsors are typically senior leaders - who, in most organisations, are still primarily male.

I have had many sponsors and today is an opportunity to recognise them: Professor Anton Eberhard, Pat Davies, Dr Rod Crompton and Ketso Gordhan are all leaders who have made a deep impression and who participated in shaping the woman leader I am today.

■ ***How do you maintain a work-life balance?***

My earlier days at work were often characterised by pangs of guilt as I struggled with "work-life" balance, and societal and family pressures. My heart would break every time I heard someone sigh "Poor Emma" when there was a school function, event, or social activity I couldn't get to. I believe I only found equilibrium in my home and work life when I spoke to Emma, my daughter, about my struggles and guilt, to which she responded: "Mom, you would drive me mad if you were a stay-at-home mom!" And so, with time I came to accept this battle as part of juggling a career and motherhood.

▣ ***What have been some of your career highlights?***

My working life has been incredibly interesting and privileged. I was exposed to running a R7bn turnover business, implemented massive capital investment projects, participated in major investment decisions, worked in an international context, survived in a complex global matrix, and participated on boards of joint venture companies and then some.

Becoming the first woman CEO at the Air Traffic and Navigation Services Company was an occasion where I broke the glass ceiling! I was one of only three women in the world ever to head up an air navigation organisation.

Similarly, I become the first woman to be elected by my global air navigation peer CEOs to serve on the Executive Committee of the Commercial Air Navigation Service Organization (CANSO). Other highlights include being appointed as the first woman Group CEO of Comair Limited as well as the Managing Director of Sasol Gas, a subsidiary of Sasol Limited.

▣ ***What advice would you give your younger self?***

You are good enough. You're ok. Persevere. Dream! Make the choices and many sacrifices. Persevere despite the many challenges! Challenges are often the greatest accelerators to learning and understanding.

▣ ***What is your message to women this Women's Month?***

As women, we need to be aware of our own internal conversations and self-confidence - "those barriers within" - that prevent us from getting to "the top" in the professional world. If you are learning, growing and helping to make the world a slightly better place, I feel you're already at "the top". Battle your inner demons constructively – I for one came to accept that "guilt" was part of juggling a career and motherhood. It's this self-awareness that will open unlimited potential for you.

ABOUT ROBIN FREDERICKS

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