

Q&A with Yota Baron, the first woman to be appointed CFO of Ford Motor Company Southern Africa

 By [Naresh Maharaj](#)

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Naresh Maharaj chats to Yota Baron, newly appointed chief financial officer at Ford Motor Company Southern Africa.



Yota Baron, CFO of FMCSA | image supplied

■ ***You're the first woman to be appointed CFO of Ford Motor Company Southern Africa (FMCSA). That must feel like a significant achievement.***

Baron: It is, and I'm humbled by the opportunity. But with that opportunity comes responsibility, particularly the development of young talent by inspiring them to take a leap of faith when opportunities arise, even if that might seem daunting.

I'm the first woman in my family to have graduated from university. My maternal grandmother was illiterate. So if that change can happen in one generation, then it can happen to other women in South Africa it too. It's our responsibility to make sure it does.

■ ***So mentorship is something you take seriously?***

Baron: Absolutely, mentorship and advocacy are crucial for career development. If you're a young person, it's important to feel confident enough to reach out to leaders inside and outside of an organisation you admire, to seek guidance, inspiration and feedback helps you to grow.

I encourage young South Africans to dream big and be prepared to put in the hard work so that when opportunities arise they're in the consideration pool.

■ ***There's an ongoing discussion about women in business, and the benefits and perspectives they bring to traditionally male-dominated sectors. We've all read books like Sheryl Sandberg's Lean In, but what's your view?***

Baron: My job is focused on hard data for the most part, but it's equally important to look at the 'soft data' too, particularly when dealing with young people who need a more empathetic approach. Today's leadership style needs to be inclusive by creating a sense of belonging. You can't lead by fear.

You must encourage diverse opinions and perspectives to develop the best creative solutions. Diversity covers many aspects such as race, gender, religious beliefs, age and experience versus inexperience, just to mention a few. The key is to listen without judgement so you can encourage an environment of inclusion.

■ ***That's certainly a very inclusive leadership style. You've been with Ford for 30 years: does that style fit the company culture?***

Baron: Yes, it does. Leadership is about walking the talk, leading by example, and valuing the input of everyone, whether it's the person on the shop floor or the top executives. Great leaders listen to others and are really interested in what they have to say.

■ ***Tell us some more about your tenure with Ford so far?***

Baron: My focus has primarily been on emerging markets in the Asia Pacific, Middle East and Africa regions. I've had a number of leadership positions, including internal control, treasury, customs and tax, marketing, as well as manufacturing finance.

I helped set up the finance team in the regional Ford Dubai office for Middle East and Africa. Before that, I was operations controller at Ford South Africa, overseeing financial management of the Silverton Assembly Plant in Pretoria and the Struandale Engine Plant in what is now Gqeberha, between August 2013 and September 2015.

■ ***Several members of the FMCSA executive team have, like you, spent quite a lot of time working overseas. What are the sorts of benefits that delivers?***

Baron: Working overseas brings a real depth in experience, which the team are able to bring home and apply. Being South African, we also better understand what the South African customers' needs are and provide them with the experience they want. But there's no compromise on Ford's global benchmarking of best practice. Working abroad also helped us to build up a broad network, which is useful in many ways.

■ ***You've returned to SA at an interesting time: we've just exited the third Covid-19 wave, we had a spate of rioting a few months ago, and Ford is undertaking a massive investment and expansion. How does that feel?***

Baron: It's tremendously exciting. South Africans are resourceful and we have a habit of overcoming setbacks. We have a lot of work to do to be seen as an attractive destination for investors, but I'm very confident.

■ ***And Ford's R15bn investment?***

Baron: It's a massive vote of confidence in the country, and it shows Ford's optimistic outlook for the domestic and export markets.

It will create about 10,000 jobs across the supply chain and include the establishment of new training centres to upskill the workforce, so it's not just about investing dollars, but also about investing in people. Ford doesn't make reckless investments, so the South African expansion is a solid commitment to its presence in SA in long term.

ABOUT NARESH MAHARAJ

Naresh Maharaj is a petrol head who loves cars and writing about them. He is also a Member of the SA Guild of Motoring Journalists. Naresh is also an international sports correspondent and an acclaimed corporate MC and voice-over artist. Naresh is a sports/news producer for community radio stations and also an award-winning sports journalist. Contact Naresh on nmaharaj321@gmail.com

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