

Governance + Compliance

Issue 2 | March 2024



Repair and refine

Just one word **p20**

Reframing governance **p22**

The slow-burning ARGA saga **p42**

The magazine of the



Chartered
Governance
Institute
UK & Ireland



UK £8.99



“I’ve always believed in not just being an also-ran, but doing things well.”

Tesse Akpeki FCG is a joint winner of the CGIUKI 2023 Champion for Governance Award for her work promoting governance through combined people and technical skills.

INTERVIEW BY HOLLY BENSON

EDITOR OF GOVERNANCE AND COMPLIANCE

Having met Tesse a couple of times now, what I can say from our conversations is that her positivity is truly infectious. She has an open demeanour and has been candid with me about both her personal and professional experiences. This ability to share is something that has made her two podcasts, *TesseTalks* and *TesseLeads*, so successful, and the authenticity she brings to her interactions has, no doubt, also contributed to her success in business.

However, it’s not just charm that has been the source of Tesse’s achievements. She told me, ‘I have always believed in being excellent and doing excellent things. Throughout my life, I have worked incredibly hard; I’ve always believed in not just being an also-ran, but doing things well.’

This attitude was exemplified when Tesse took her CGIUKI qualifications – in the space of 18 months rather than the usual four years – and received awards for her performance in the company law and leadership and management exams, as well as receiving an overall award for her performance from the **WCCSA**.

It could be easy to be fooled by Tesse’s warm and sunny personality into thinking that that is her main strength, but she reflected, ‘I am a people person, however, it’s important not to lose sight of the fact that I am also a technical person in terms of the activities and the role. I come from a family of lawyers, and I qualified as a barrister-solicitor. I’m really keen on regulation, accountability, systems and policies, and staying on the right side of the law. Keep out of jail, but don’t let that be the standard. Do the right thing and find the right ways to do it.

‘Ever since law school, when I was doing my Master’s, I always had an interest in social jurisprudence. This has morphed into where I am today. I believe in compliance and I believe in accountability, but I also believe in compassion, care and empathy. To have a rounded ecosystem, we need to fuse the two sides. So, my architecture of compassionate accountability is about holding both of those elements.

‘I still do governance – what we know as company secretarial activities – but I’m also into the human-centred, person-centred stuff, putting people at the centre of what is happening in terms of running organisations. That means facilitating the environment, facilitating individuals, helping



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people to have conversations that matter and creating environments where people can do good work.'

Tesse does this by engaging a variety of different skill sets depending on the needs of the client. These include coaching, mediating, facilitating and educating. She describes these as 'different parts of the "people thing" – listen, teach, hold, support. I've trained myself to do it seamlessly, so I don't say, "Let's do this, then let's do that." I look at the need and design strategies – in collaboration with my clients – that include the different elements, applying the different lenses as required.

'My role is about helping my clients' organisations to mature. I like to get them to a stage where they don't need me anymore; that's how I see success.'

Wellbeing, leadership and resilience

Tesse is a voracious reader, something which she says was a huge contributor to her success in the CGIUKI exams. This commitment to learning has endured throughout her career. (As an aside, Tesse has dedicated the first part of 2024 to learning, and is currently enrolled on five different educational courses from January to March!) Inspirations Tesse mentioned during our interview included Jane Gunn, who works in the mediation space, Brene Brown, whose TEDxHouston talk entitled *The power of vulnerability* has been viewed over 60 million times, Dr. Amy Edmondson, who talks about psychological safety and Amy Cuddy who researches power and positioning.

It was against this background of research that Tesse launched the Online Wellbeing and Resilience Leadership Network in 2020 when, at the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, she found herself locked down in West Africa.

The network is the culmination of ideas that Tesse had been mulling over around the need for individuals and leaders to be mentally, physically and emotionally

well in order to create healthy organisations. Tesse was thinking about 'How to stop people from burning out and how people can be well enough in their mental state that they are able to recognise their bias and make better decisions. To do that, you need to be self-aware and socially intelligent.' With an enforced, extended stay in West Africa, finally Tesse had the time and space to act on these thoughts and set up the network.

Following a soft launch on LinkedIn – at which point Tesse was thinking she'd be lucky to achieve 100 responses – within no time at all there were more than 1,500 people signed up. Remembering that time, Tesse said that not only were people joining the network, but they were sending her messages and asking her questions. A lot of these focused on working relationships and how they could be managed and maintained in lockdown when everyone was working remotely.

Tesse recalls, 'My emails to the network usually started with "How are you?" Sometimes, I would get people responding even to that. This is when I learned that if you check in with people, you begin to have different kinds of relationships.

'The way this has evolved is that now, when I'm working with leadership teams or boards, I encourage them to take time to ask each other how they are today. I feel very strongly that people shouldn't forget what they learned in 2020. The evidence is clear that productivity during COVID-19 went up, not down. And what was it that people were doing differently? It wasn't just working from home, it was the fact that people were checking in with each other and making the space to do that.'

Tesse is now recognised as an expert in the leadership and resilience space and has received numerous invitations to talk on these topics, including as a keynote panellist at an **ACEVO** event, as a virtual speaker for the Association for Fundraising Professionals speaking on resilience and wellness, and going to Portugal to speak to **APEO**, the association of midwives which focuses on the importance of midwives in leadership.

Do what you enjoy

Tesse spoke about how the space in which she operates has broadened and acknowledged that this is, in part, a result of the conversations that she's had with experts on her podcasts, *TesseTalks* and *TesseLeads*, produced alongside her childhood friend Paula Okonneh.

TesseTalks was another runaway success, with a soft launch on LinkedIn in December 2020. *TesseTalks* is described as a podcast to share 'top leadership and

management strategies that encourage leaders, board members and management to take action in today's world.' It sits alongside *TesseLeads* which provides 'a safe, sensitive and supporting place and space to share, hear and tell stories.'

Tesse hadn't initially planned to launch two podcasts. It was her brother Tony who said she needed to 'create a space where people could share their stories.' At the time, Tony was working in England as a key worker and, just days after this conversation, he died after being hit by a car when out collecting COVID-19 samples. For this reason, *TesseLeads* is a compassionate and insightful space for Tesse, something which I think comes through in the kinds of conversations and topics that the podcast addresses. There is an element of vulnerability that the guests and hosts bring which takes the podcast beyond the realm of 'work listening' to something more holistic.

Testament to the success of the podcasts is the calibre of guests that they are now attracting. Tesse was excited to tell me that 'I'm starting to get people on the show who are TEDx speakers for example. Rachael Schofield, a former BBC journalist has featured as a guest on *TesseTalks* and *TesseLeads*. Because the podcast is doing so well, I'm able to get these high-profile people to come and be my guests. One of the people who is going to come on the show later in the year is an anthropologist, he has 39.9 million subscribers on YouTube and 23,000 followers on LinkedIn. He's a world renowned explorer. Podcasting has changed my life; it's something I never knew would open up the world for me the way it has.'

Words of wisdom

If you haven't already realised, Tesse is a busy woman, running her own business as a self-described philanthropic entrepreneur, running an online network and hosting two podcasts, not to mention her book club, *TesseReads*, and her recently revamped Instagram



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account, *SmileyTesse*, which focuses on inspirational, motivational story telling. I wanted to know if she had any advice for others who are looking to branch out in terms of their activities. Citing inspiration from Rachel Schofield's book, *The Career Change Guide: Five Steps to Finding Your Dream Job*, Tesse advises people to 'Ask yourself what you really like, what you enjoy doing. From there, work out how you can be doing more of that. Once you have that as your anchor, other things will follow.

'I'm also such a great believer in mentors and coaches – so try to find one for yourself. If you do things as a team, everyone achieves more. Whatever happens, don't go it alone, ask for help if you need it and offer help if you can.'

We moved on from this advice to what Tesse would say to her younger self now, which was: 'Don't sweat the small stuff and live every day one moment at a time. Often we stand on the shoulders of giants. They have paved the way for us. I would share this poem by Iris Hesselden:

*"Time is such a precious gift,
Don't let it slip away,
Make the most of every moment,
Always seize the day."*

Incredibly studious when she was younger, she excelled and won prizes and scholarships along the way. Now Tesse realises that there were some moments that perhaps she missed because of her focus on achievement. That being said, she also recognises that 'some of those mistakes were lessons for the me now. I gave that younger Tesse such a hard time, but I wouldn't have been the person I am today if I hadn't had the life I've had.'

That theme of reflecting is going to be running through a lot of Tesse's work for this year; her word of the year is 'healing'. That will play out through her podcasts and other content. It has also inspired a particular thread that she is working on called 'Childhood to Champion' which will chart her experiences from being a child growing up in the social care system in Northern Ireland, through qualifying as a solicitor-barrister in West Africa, to coming to the UK where those qualifications weren't recognised and having to re-qualify, through to becoming an entrepreneur, wellbeing and leadership expert, podcaster and, most recently, CGIUKI's Champion for Governance 2023.

Tesse shares more about her career experience online at www.cgi.org.uk/tesse-akpeki. 2024 CGIUKI Award nominations open in March, Tesse tells her awards story in an upcoming blog on the CGIUKI website.