

The importance of true diversity with FCB's global CCO, Susan Credle

 By Leigh Andrews

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FCB's leaders from across the globe are in Cape Town for their Global Leadership Conference, currently unfolding at the Belmond Mount Nelson. I sat down with FCB's global CCO, Susan Credle, for her insights into the importance of changing the statement from 'Where are the women' to 'Here are the women' and more.

On a warm afternoon in February, I sat drinking pink drinks (milkshake for me, glass of rosé for her) with FCB's global CCO Susan Credle on the verandah of the Mount Nelson Hotel as the sun slowly set, talking everything from different forms of diversity to personal industry inspiration. This may sound very 'la-di-dah', but it was a conversation a long time in the works, having chatted a few times since her appointment at FCB. Most recently Credle conducted video interviews on [women in advertising](#) for us at the 2016 Loeries, and also shared her personal views on [creativity](#).



Credle on the Belmond Mount Nelson verandah.

This time we were talking about FCB's focus on diversity and how that's not necessarily meant to imply 'girl power at all costs' but rather the importance of a truly diverse workforce across age, gender, race, experience and culture. What Credle does say about gender diversity, is that she actually had a dream on the plane over to SA that she was yelling at everyone for hiring really tough women that acted like guys – that's not true diversity. When you're in a group of people different than you are, you both contribute more and learn more. You should worry if your every discussion is with yes-men (or -women) – that's why Credle says: "Selfishly, throughout my entire career, I've always looked for people that were slightly different from me to work with."

If you look back at the 1950s or 1960s, even though *Madmen* portrays it a certain way, there were incredibly strong writers, some of whom were female. At FCB for example, [Shirley Polykoff](#) was behind the Clairol 'Does she or doesn't she' tagline, leading Credle to say "females at the top level is nothing new, we just got lost along the way." Credle herself grew up in the US's South in the 1970s, and didn't know women who had high-flying careers. Instead, they were all supportive roles, like teachers, nurses and bank tellers. When she started thinking about careers, she looked for where women were excelling, and the advertising industry was it. Mary Wells Lawrence who created the 'I heart NY' campaign had her name on the door, so did Diane Rothschild of the J&B 'ingle ells' campaign, and various others. It seemed to be the industry that loved employing and empowering women. Credle says the irony then, is that we seem to have come full circle on the issue.

The positive impact of positive self-talk

On having strong female figures like these as career mentors – even if you never actually meet in real life – Credle says there's a lot to knowing someone up there has achieved, which is the basis of the Cannes Lions 'See it to be it' initiative. This puts high-potential senior creative women in the spotlight, expanding their contacts, building their confidence and accelerating their careers as leaders.

"Seeing that it can be accomplished shows there is opportunity," says Credle, who was at BBDO for 24 years and took the Leo Burnett CCO role in Chicago because it seemed there were no US women at the time that were CCOs and she thought, "I'm at this point in my career where maybe I can do some meaningful things," remembering the importance of seeing strong female figures doing so in her own formative years. It's the same with the FCB global CCO role now, with Credle admitting she's amazed at how many of her female colleagues in the C-suite jobs never even considered them as an option when starting out their careers. Some didn't exist when we were younger, but for the bulk of us it never even occurs to us to aim that high. Even in 1985 when she started answering phones at BBDO, Credle says she used to tell herself, "I'm going to have a corner office someday." That's as 'big' as she could see, especially as she didn't see many female contemporaries at the time. Many simply weren't being considered for the C-Suite jobs, and while there's an ebb and flow of going for those top jobs, Credle feels motherhood also plays into this, as women question whether the job we do actually makes a difference and whether it's worthy and has a purpose, contributing to society over just filling out a timesheet.

It's all about creating meaningful work, for Credle and the FCB ethos alike. She admits that advertising can at times feel a little shallow, but has an incredible impact and can do some amazing things in the world. Look at some of the work from a generation ago – there was wit to it, there was humour, there was cleverness – even jingles and taglines, Credle says if you deconstruct them, the way that the words come together in a way that's memorable or become a company's North Star,

can be truly incredible. She says the US has spent at least a decade or more putting down taglines and saying they were cliché or old-fashioned. Instead, she feels they have never been more important, because if you get it right, it has just as much meaning as your last name – you should stick with it as that is the brand.

On the Global Leadership Conference itself, this is Credle's first since joining FCB last year and is an excellent opportunity to meet with the agency's leaders from around the world. While a few of the attendees wanted to hear from the likes of Credle and Murray, they felt it's just as important for attendees to hear from their peers. They've developed a set of tools, tested it for the first six months on themselves and now's the time to pray and see if the body accepts the organ. "It'll be really interesting to watch the offices and whether it's helping or inspiring them or rather getting in the way," she says, adding that they're encouraging everyone to be as candid as possible on what they've learned. **FCB wants to mindfully wake up every day and try to be good creative business partners to their clients** – and to do that you need to put some structure around it. They're recording the proceedings and the conference is being attended by leaders of every FCB office, so it's a fair group of people. After three intense days they'll go back to their own offices with a better understanding of the fact that you can say the same thing over and over and over again for three decades and still be fortunate if people remember it in the 31st year. So, just like with taglines, Credle is hoping the outcome of the conference is a commitment to some things that they keep saying over changing it up all the time.

Here are the women!

On the 'Here are the women' conference panel in particular, Credle says it's something she's been saying for 15 years now. Sharing the backstory, she says she attended a conference in the US called 'Where are the women'. While intentions at highlighting the diversity gap were there, she was so offended at the way it was addressed as she had been working hard and felt like saying, "I'm right here, and in asking that question you're saying I'm invisible, that I don't matter." So for her, the solution was to remove the W and rather say: "Here are all the women." If this had been done earlier, Credle says we may not have gotten so deep into the issue globally. Remember that she got into the industry because it seemed to love employing and empowering women. If they had told her at the time that it was actually a hard industry for women she doesn't think she would have chosen it. So, the more we say 'here', and the more we show up and celebrate people, the more likely we'll have the success we're looking for. Credle specifically mentions local female advertising stars like [Suhana Gordhan](#), who is running the panel and currently 'chair aunty' of the Loeries. Instead of highlighting how hard it is to be a woman in advertising, they'll share what they get excited about and why they love the business. Gordhan also asked the leaders to provide a tweet-like (140-characters or less) comment to this effect, and these will be screened throughout the panel. Credle says it's about putting a positive spin on what is positively happening within the FCB network.

“ Love the energy in this, and Maya! Sawit at [#FCBAfricaConference2017](#) Day 1 and it's left a serious impression!
<https://t.co/SniERzQvIj>— Taazima Kala (@taazimakala) [February 28, 2017](#) ”

Extending this beyond FCB and how the rest of the industry get to tap into a similar mindset, Credle says, "It starts with showing up. I try to show up as often as possible – not for my ego, but because I think it makes a difference. I get notes from women all the time saying it does mean something." That said, Credle points out it's not just about punting a specific sector of society but rather a diverse group.

The fastest way to achieve proper diversity is for people to realise it's a good thing over saying it's a legal requirement, you have to do it. The minute you do that, there's reluctance. The minute you respond to 'how did you come up with that great idea' with 'it's because we have a diverse group of people working here', you've put this into action and it's something people want.

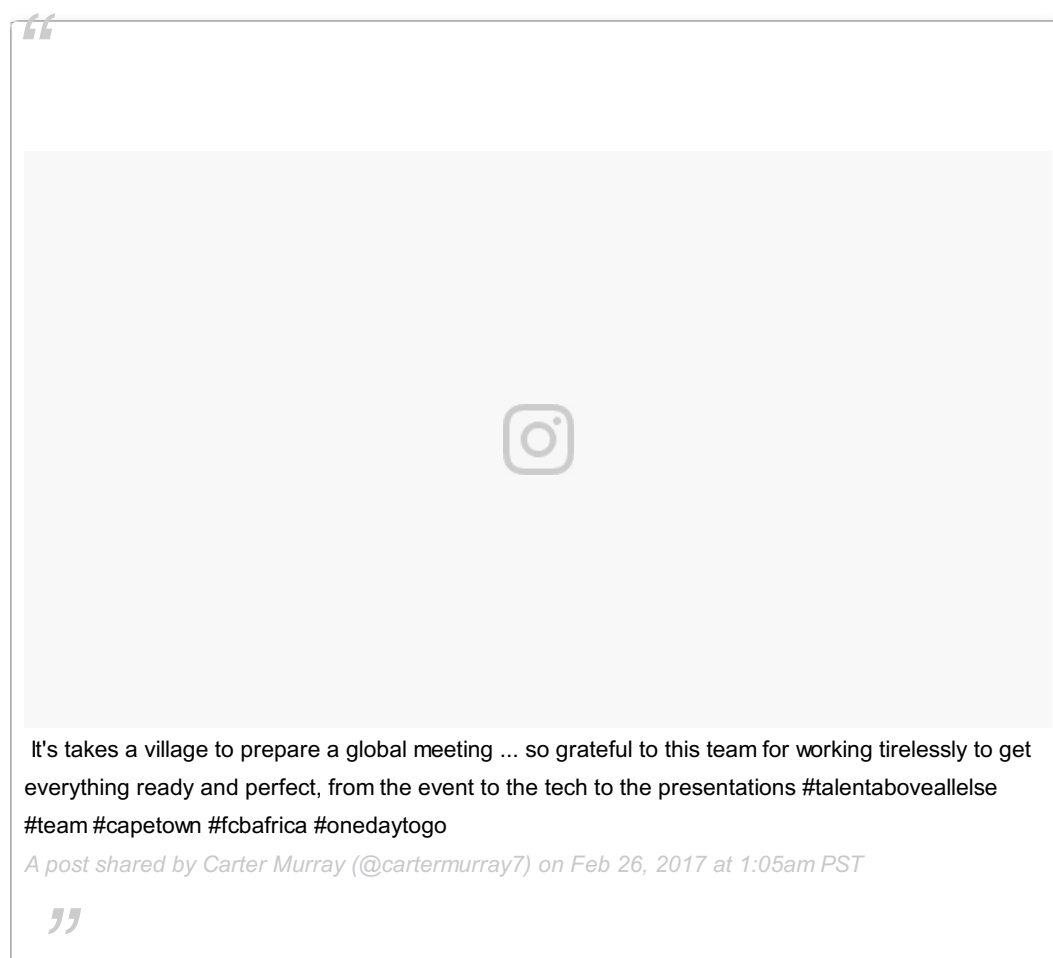
Award show juries: The creativity cheatsheet

Credle adds that FCB was early to support [Free the bid](#) to get more female film makers to bid on jobs. In the US, clients often required triple bidding. Pereira & O'Dell co-founder PJ Pereira is friends with film maker Alma Har'el, and while talking about why there aren't more women directors, they came up with the idea of getting agencies to always bid one woman on those three-bid projects. Har'el then got in touch with Credle, who "got it" – by the time you're triple bidding, that

last bid is not the one you want anyway, so why not make it go to a good cause? Credle says she has been doing this long enough that she knows almost every CCO in the US, so she sent out a list asking for sign-up to it, and says as many as 80% of respondents were absolutely in. She started in October and they already have some heavy-hitter directors interested in their projects. “Our brains are so full of the guys' names that it's not even a pity vote, we literally forget the females.”

As a leader in the industry, Credle says to be mindful of those things, to use your connections to make things happen very quickly. She's already had producers calling and saying they need more women on their roster because of this initiative.

Credle says that kind of thing is really exciting, as is the fact that big award show juries are now being pressured for 50/50 gender representation. That's the fastest way to change things, as she never realised the juries are the way you network and learn, they're like masterclasses in creativity. The fact that for so many years of her life she wasn't on them and all the guys were leads Credle to say: “It's something you just don't get if you weren't on the list.” So, once she started going to them her networking capabilities were buoyed up immediately and she got better, listening to the top people in the industry talking about creative work. She started to understand it more. All these people who had been doing so a decade before her were really creative, sure, but they were also getting the cheat sheet. “It's like in [Glengarry Glen Ross](#), where you need those sales slips to get better at your job – you need to be on those juries to get better. So those to Credle are huge, as are any panels putting women up there and paying attention. If Credle is designing a panel or jury she starts with 50/50 male/female but also aims for diversity across the board – age, strength of creativity, people of colour.



That's a huge issue both in SA and the US alike. If you look at the creative work that's attracting the mass population, it's a very integrated group of talented people. Look at *Moonlight*, which won at the Oscars after last year's debacle where there was a call to boycott it because of the lack of diversity. It's amazing how fast that happened and shows Credle that if we're not changing as fast as the general society, it's not good. It's strange that business is a step behind, and particularly in the US where creative recruitment takes place out of the creative finishing schools. At the start of Credle's career, there were only a few of those, which were mainly for the art directors who had to learn the technicalities and physical craft of doing the job. She feels these schools do a great job of preparing those students to hit the ground running as they've had a form of apprenticeship, but the creative directors Credle learned from were taxi cab drivers and bartenders from interesting

walks of life, and she herself would not have entered the industry if she'd had to study further to do so as she simply didn't have the money. So when we look at diversity, we need to look at that, too – bringing back internships or junior trainee programmes for true socio-economic diversity and change.

Touching on another aspect of diversity, Credle joked: "Age is going to be a good one as I'm getting old now, I'm in my fifties". She spoke of her pride when FCB group's John Claxton was awarded at Cannes for craft writing last year as he's what she calls 'a mature individual' and his craft 'a lost art'. Touching on what Credle does differently today to when she first started, she says when she first started she just wanted to be creative, today she looks at creativity from the 'business of business' angle, to service a business problem or brand that she would not have known how to do a few decades ago. That said, Credle loves that there's room for both – "the best is when you have that experienced person working with that crazy, wonderful nutjob that has no rules yet. The combination is unbelievable and she'd like to see more of it."

On her months at FCB, she says the sense of collaboration is what stands out most. As it's a smaller or challenger network brand, they have to work together and help each other to win, which is a really refreshing thing to see. This was evident even on the grounds of the Belmond Mount Nelson the day before the FCB Global Leadership Conference kicked off – we watched as groups from the various FCB markets shared ideas as our own talk came to an end.

She's glad to be on the FCB team, and so are we.

Follow the [FCB conference](#) and [Credle](#) on Twitter, and remind yourself of my [creative conversation](#) with her just before last year's Loeries.

ABOUT LEIGH ANDREWS

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