

OUR LEADING BUSINESSWOMEN

THE CEO MAGAZINE TALKS EXCLUSIVELY TO SIX EXCEPTIONAL LEADERS FROM AROUND THE WORLD ABOUT HOW THEY'RE BREAKING GROUND AND SHATTERING THE GLASS CEILING.

WORDS · EMMA WHEATON

Abbie Dillen

PRESIDENT, EARTHJUSTICE, US

Described as a leader with grit and determination, the new president of Earthjustice has been with the environmental-law organisation since 2000 and is grateful to now be its first female president. "I am thrilled to have the opportunity to keep growing Earthjustice's impact," Abbie Dillen tells *The CEO Magazine*. "The environmental threats we face are so daunting, and yet I see the possibility for solutions, from clean energy to restoring ecosystems. We can do better."

Fresh out of law school during George W Bush's presidency, Abbie recalls working with a small group of lawyers against the biggest industry law firms and the US Federal Government's Justice Department – the biggest law firm in the world – to successfully win a legal battle to keep protections in place for 56 million acres (around 23 million hectares) of wild forest. "That was one of the moments that hooked me on Earthjustice," she says. "It was amazing to me that we could affect the future of our natural world in a very profound way. That is the kind of power I have become addicted to, and luckily, it's the kind of power that I'm able to share with a group of like-minded people who also want to change the world."

Earthjustice has filed almost 100 lawsuits against the Trump administration, standing up for public health and the environment. In her role leading the charge for environmental protection and a cleaner and healthier future, Abbie has no intention of leaving the personal behind. This is something she believes many women, particularly those in leadership, have previously felt they needed to do. "There is a very important element of the personal to bring into this work, and sometimes it can feel vulnerable," she says. "But I think we have to start making the environmental threats we face personal so that we address them with the intense energy they require."



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Ronni Kahn

FOUNDER AND CEO, OZHARVEST, AUSTRALIA

After graduating from university, Ronni Kahn, founder of food rescue charity OzHarvest, lived on a kibbutz for 10 years. "On a kibbutz, you do a whole range of jobs – from working with kids and working with cows to running the accounts department," she says. This panoramic experience stood her in good stead for her future endeavours.

No stranger to breaking new ground, Ronni once again has many irons in the fire. Coming off the back of a tour of the documentary *Food Fighter*, directed by Dan Goldberg, about her one-woman crusade against food waste, Ronni has recently started a social enterprise dedicated to investigating tech solutions in the food and agricultural sector. What's more, in June, OzHarvest launched its Fight Food Waste campaign. Designed to help halve food waste in Australia by 2030, the campaign represents the first time that OzHarvest is directly targeting individual consumers. Ronni hopes it will incite "a major shift in our behaviour". And attention will soon turn to the 2019 OzHarvest CEO CookOff, an event held annually to raise money and combat the invisibility of vulnerable people by inviting leaders to break bread with them.

So, with all these pots on the boil and with everything she's learned, what sound advice would Ronni have for her younger self – or fledgling entrepreneurs? "Who you think you are now has no bearing on who you could be," she says. "With intention and the right attitude, the possibilities for change are limitless." »

Dr Segenet Kelemu

DIRECTOR GENERAL, INTERNATIONAL CENTRE OF INSECT PHYSIOLOGY AND ECOLOGY, KENYA

"I have always thought outside the box. I always find it boring to follow the status quo," says Dr Segenet Kelemu, a molecular plant pathologist and science leader who grew up in a remote village in Ethiopia. "I do not use the word impossible. Most things in life are possible if one puts in the effort and determination. Taking some calculated and well-thought-out risk can bring game-changing outcomes."

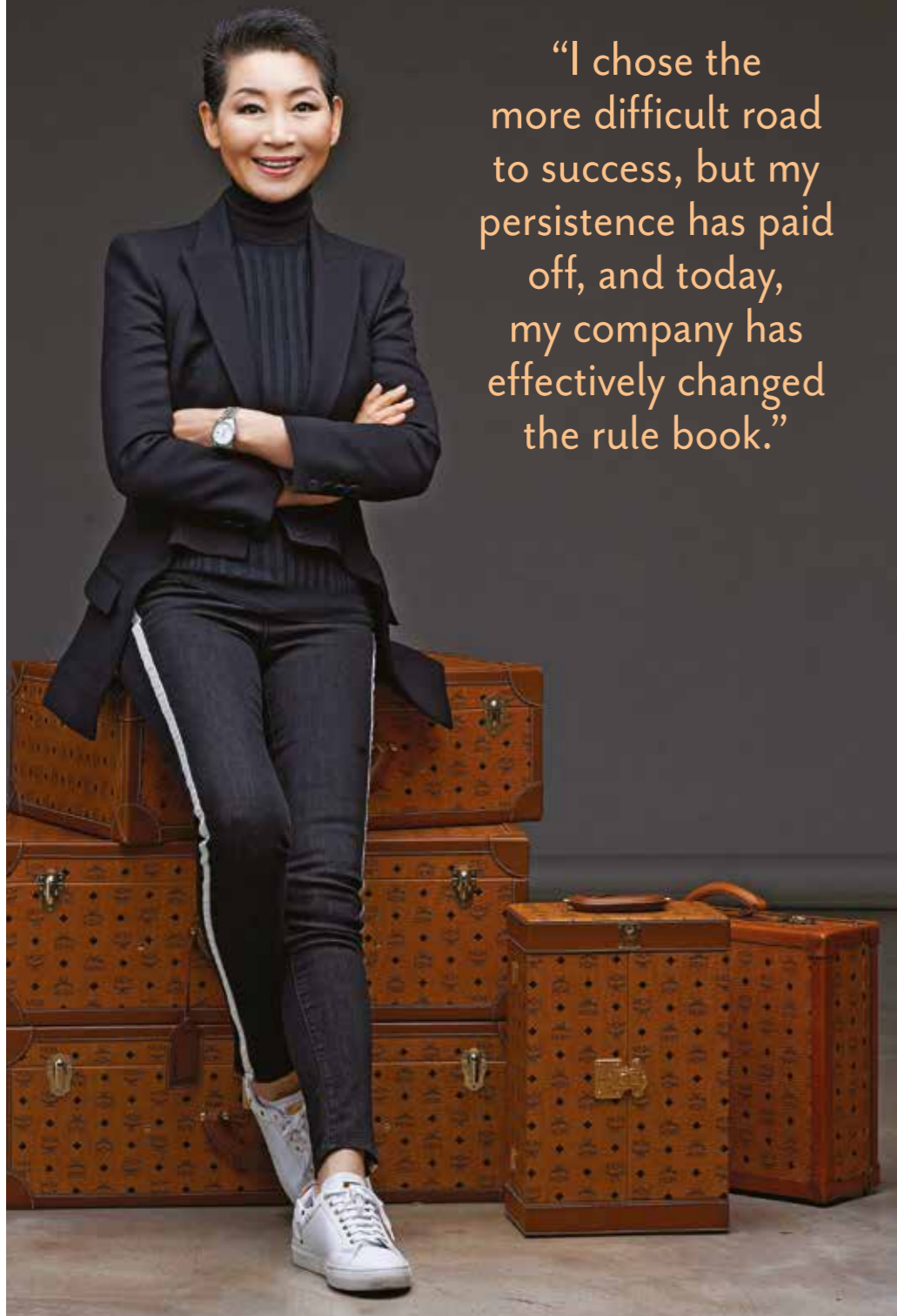
Known for both her strong research and her scientific leadership, Segenet has spent almost three decades – in the US, South America, and Africa – discovering how science can improve our food and agricultural systems. Returning to Africa in 2007, she spent five notable years overseeing projects concerning crop improvement, food safety, and climate mitigation as the Director of the Biosciences eastern and central Africa (BecA) hub in Kenya. She is now the first female leader of the International Centre of Insect Physiology and Ecology (icipe). "Africa's future is very bright," she says.

Under Segenet's governance, icipe is establishing itself as a leader in the emerging research of insects as food and feed – striving to discover the untapped potential this sector can have towards a more sustainable agricultural future. It's no wonder Bill Gates named her as one of his five heroes earlier this year.

Segenet grew up in a remote Ethiopian village, where, she says, women endured the hardships of rural life. Asked what advice she'd give her younger self, she insists that there's no room for any doubt or regret. "If I have any [self-doubt], I just have to remind myself of where I come from – all the mountains of barriers and challenges I have broken – and move forward," she says.

To the question, "How can we lead better?" she responds: "Honesty and integrity are key, as are passion and energy to do good things for the benefit of society. Leaders should always tell themselves that this is not about them. Do the best job with all the effort on the task at hand and to impact people's lives positively. If this is done, all things will come in place, and your career path will take its course."





“I chose the more difficult road to success, but my persistence has paid off, and today, my company has effectively changed the rule book.”

Sung-Joo Kim

FOUNDER, CEO, AND CHIEF VISIONARY OFFICER, *SUNGJOO GROUP*, SOUTH KOREA

Sung-Joo Kim is a fashion entrepreneur who has gone against the grain to defy gendered expectations by entering business and not becoming a housewife. Sidestepping an arranged marriage, Sung-Joo was estranged from her family for a time before proving her business smarts and

determination and founding Sungjoo Group, a South Korean distributor for brands such as Marks & Spencer, Yves Saint Laurent, and Gucci. In 2005, she also acquired German luxury leather goods brand MCM, salvaging the then-struggling label.

“As a female entrepreneur in South Korea, the corporate landscape in which I started my business was unimaginably difficult, since the prevailing rules were dominated by patriarchal traditions in which networking was based on school ties, hometown links, and other common pursuits,” Sung-Joo says. “These male-dominated networks created tightly knit systems that not only became challenges for female entrepreneurs like me, but also created a glass ceiling for other women.”

A champion of women in business, Sung-Joo also speaks out on corruption and describes the struggles she faced in her own business. “With product marketing, for example, the prevailing practices required illicit rebates and bribes – a route that I refused to take even if my business suffered as a result,” she says. “By doing so, I chose the more difficult road to success, but my persistence has paid off, and today, my company

has effectively changed the rule book.”

Sung-Joo notes that being unconventional is always challenging but can also be rewarding. Her personal philosophy is ‘succeed to serve’ (rather than serve to succeed), and to this end, she donates 10 per cent of the company’s profits to the greater community. Others have recognised her for this mission-driven approach to business: in 2015, she received an OBE, and in 2017, an honorary doctorate from the University of the Arts London for her pioneering achievements as a businesswoman and humanitarian.



Melanie Perkins

CO-FOUNDER AND CEO, *CANVA*, AUSTRALIA AND THE US

Frustrated with the time it took to complete a simple graphic-design task, 19-year-old communications student Melanie Perkins decided to fill the market gap with her own easy-to-use online platform. Founded in Sydney in 2014 with the intention of “democratising design”, Canva offers web-based design tools for non-professional graphic designers as an alternative to PowerPoint or Adobe’s design suite. “Canva reimagines design for the digital age,” Melanie says. “It’s a tool for everyone – regardless of income, design experience, your language, or device.”

After closing a US\$40 million capital funding round in January this year, Canva shot up the ranks to become Australia’s next tech unicorn – worth US\$1 billion. Now, at just 30 years old, Melanie continues to challenge the archetype of success in Silicon Valley (an elite, educated young male) and is one of tech’s youngest female CEOs. “I learned the power of determination quite early in life,” she explains. “And it’s not just the extroverts who get ahead; as an introvert myself, the best piece of advice I can give is to just start and learn as much as you can along the way.”

Looking ahead, Melanie plans to use this latest funding to continue expanding Canva’s 10-million-strong user base and double its 250-person workforce. But ultimately, something greater than money motivates Melanie. “Every day, I get to work with smart and kind people to tackle huge challenges that help millions of people across the globe,” she says. “I spend my time improving the things I can change – not worrying about the things I can’t. More than 20,000 not-for-profits around the world use Canva to raise awareness for their causes – that’s what makes all the work worth it.”

Amanda Nevill

CEO, *BRITISH FILM INSTITUTE*, UK

The first female CEO of the British Film Institute (BFI), Amanda Nevill has made a tangible social impact on the film industry. Six years ago, she established the BFI Film Academy, which runs industry-led courses at local locations throughout the UK as a pathway for 16–19-year-olds from all backgrounds to enter the film industry.

“It’s vital that everyone, regardless of background, can easily find their way into this storytelling industry,” Amanda says. “As an organisation, and obviously for me personally, one of my great passions is creating opportunities that otherwise wouldn’t be there.”

As an industry body that provides funding for film projects, the BFI has challenged the industry itself by introducing its pioneering Diversity Standards. “We basically said, if you want to be funded by us, you have to demonstrate to us how you are going to deliver diversity in front of, and behind, the camera,” she says. “And we set out very clear guidelines on what we would expect.”

She notes that since the beginning of British film, women have directed only seven per cent of films. “If we talk about how we can lead better ... we as women need to challenge the way we do business. Everything from the length of day to how we do business has been designed on the environment where women stay at home and look after children and men go to work. We need to start looking at how we can lead the change where business models fit a 21st-century life, where both men and women can

partake in bringing up families as well as pursuing a career.”

Amanda believes film is wonderful for the way it provides an inclusive platform for all kinds of people and communities, and she works to ensure the BFI reflects and supports this. In celebration of her efforts, Amanda received the Veuve Clicquot Social Purpose Award earlier this year. ■

