



People who Lead Change

In the everyday rhythm of a university, change rarely happens through policy alone. It happens in conversations, in how people are treated when things are uncertain, and in the small decisions that either build trust or break it. For Bulelwa Moikwatlhai, Assistant Director in the Directorate for International Partnerships and Relations, those moments of care are what make leadership and innovation possible.

As part of a series raising awareness about the revised University of the Free State Strategic Plan 2023–2028, this feature reflects the theme People who lead change and the core message that a culture of care enables people to thrive and lead change.

Bulelwa has seen first-hand how care makes a difference in leadership. “I’ve seen HODs adjust workloads when a team member faced a family crisis without making them feel guilty about it. I’ve seen senior academics open their doors for informal mentoring to early-career staff who weren’t in their department. And I’ve seen support staff go beyond their job description to help a first-generation student navigate admin processes because they knew the student was close to giving up. Those moments don’t make it into reports, but they’re why people stay and why they give more than the minimum when it matters.”

It also connects to the university’s North Star of contributing meaningfully to Responsible Societal Futures. This commitment calls on the institution to serve society in thoughtful ways, and Bulelwa believes that care is often the hidden driver behind innovation. “Care is the foundation. People don’t innovate when they’re running on fear or burnout. When leaders and colleagues notice if someone is struggling, check in, and make space for that, it frees up mental energy for creativity. Care removes the noise. It tells people: ‘Your wellbeing matters as much as the outcome.’ That’s when you get people willing to experiment, challenge old processes, and propose changes that stick, because they know they won’t be left alone if it gets messy.”

She also speaks about the environment that helps people reach their potential; an environment where openness replaces fear. “An environment where it’s safe to try, fail, and try again. At the UFS, I do my best work when there’s psychological safety in the team – when I can bring an idea to the table without fear of it being dismissed, and when colleagues are willing to give honest feedback to make it better.”

Her leadership style comes across as practical and people-centred. She believes in listening first, making space for quieter voices before decisions are made. She makes a point of giving credit publicly so recognition is shared where it matters. When colleagues face obstacles – whether a process, resource, or conflict – she prefers to remove those blockers privately, allowing them to focus fully on their work. According to her, people feel valued not through big gestures, but by knowing their contribution is noticed and their time respected.

Bulelwa believes that graduates carry this culture of care into society. “UFS graduates leave with a strong sense of community – it’s part of the university’s identity. In the workplace, clinics, schools, and

businesses they join, this translates into how they treat colleagues and clients. I've seen alumni start mentorship programmes for junior staff, advocate for student mental health in their organisations, and lead teams by asking 'how are you doing?' before 'what's the deadline?'. That culture spreads because people remember how it felt to be supported, and they replicate it."

She also reflects on resilience during times of transition. According to her, the technical parts of restructurings and shifting priorities are manageable. "The hard part is uncertainty. What kept me grounded was the care from colleagues who made time to talk things through, and leaders who were transparent about what they knew and didn't know. Knowing I wasn't carrying the transition alone made it possible to stay focused and adapt. Care doesn't remove the challenge, but it makes it survivable and sometimes even meaningful."

Through her words and actions, Bulelwa shows how care is a way of leading change. Her perspective reminds us that when people feel supported, they are more willing to contribute, innovate, and carry that culture into the wider world. This is how the university meaningfully contributes to responsible societal futures – by developing change through care.

