

Grace Mullings Shares How the 'Ubuntu' Mentoring Program Supports Black TFS Employees

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When Grace Mullings was a college student, she wanted to be a dentist. She was on that career path when she graduated with a Biology degree from Emmanuel College in Boston, MA.

However, her goal was shattered when she realized “I can’t stand the sight of blood!” says Mullings with a laugh. “Now how does that happen? How is that going to work?”

After realizing that blood made her squeamish, Mullings knew she needed to move on from her childhood dream. Not knowing what she wanted to do, she decided to pursue a Master of Business Administration degree while she tried to figure it out and along the way she discovered her true passion — finance.

Today, Mullings is far from the dentist chair and is currently the vice president and chief accounting officer for Toyota Financial Services (TFS) America Oceania Region. She started with TFS in 2005 as the director of accounting policy and left after a decade to work at a private equity firm. Mullings returned to TFS in 2020 and hasn’t looked back.

But in a sense, she has done exactly that. She’s continued to look back over her extensive career to ensure that other young professionals in finance, especially Black men and women who may want to follow in her footsteps at TFS, have the support and encouragement they need.



Creating a Circle of Fellowship

In 2020, Mullings started Ubuntu — a mentoring circle that takes its name from the African concept meaning “humanity towards others.”

“It means so many things,” says Mullings. “It means respect and helpfulness, sharing, community, trust, unselfishness, all the things that I was thinking about for a mentorship circle for our accounting, tax, and finance professionals. I think it just ties in so well with one of Toyota’s main pillars: Respect for People, so that just resonated with me and that’s what we called it.”

Twice a quarter, about a dozen Ubuntu participants come together virtually to connect, discuss relevant happenings at TFS and learn from each other. They also address the importance of networking and personal branding. This year, the group also plans to have their first in person meeting.

Mullings started the program to primarily support Black TFS accounting, tax, and finance professionals.

“The reason I initially started the program in this manner was the dearth of Black professionals I saw while navigating the finance and accounting world. And even now there’s just not a lot of Black professionals,” Mullings says. “The group was really created to promote fellowship and understanding and to retain and not just retain, but really help enhance the careers of Black accounting, tax, and finance professionals at TFS.”

She adds, “As I was growing up in the accounting and finance profession, there wasn’t a focus on development, there wasn’t that sense of community, and you didn’t have mentors to help you gain a better understanding of how the (financial) environment works and how to think through any (financial/accounting) issues that you came across. Because of this experience, I thought a mentoring circle was really a good way for me to give back.”

Now into its fourth year, Ubuntu has seen participants earn promotions and continue developing in their careers. One team member even moved from TFS to Toyota Motor North America for a new professional challenge within the Toyota family.

“This is really a good profession, and I want to show others how you can navigate and be successful in this profession,” Mullings says.

The Mother of Mentorships

While she’s seen several successes within Ubuntu, she credits one person for making a difference in her life both personally and professionally: her mother.

She says her mother’s bold, ambitious, and fearless personality left a lasting impression on her. Her mother’s encouragement during her early days as a certified public accountant (CPA) is what propelled her forward and gave Mullings the confidence she needed to forge ahead.

When Mullings first became a licensed CPA, she asked her parents if she could practice by preparing their taxes.

“My father said, ‘Oh, no.’ And my mother was like, ‘Okay, I’m going to file separately so you can practice.,’” Mullings recalls. “I mean, that sort of encouragement was just amazing.”

Although her mother was her primary guiding light, she was also mentored by several individuals throughout her career.

“I had many mentors,” Mullings says. “I was mentored, and I didn’t really understand I was being mentored.”

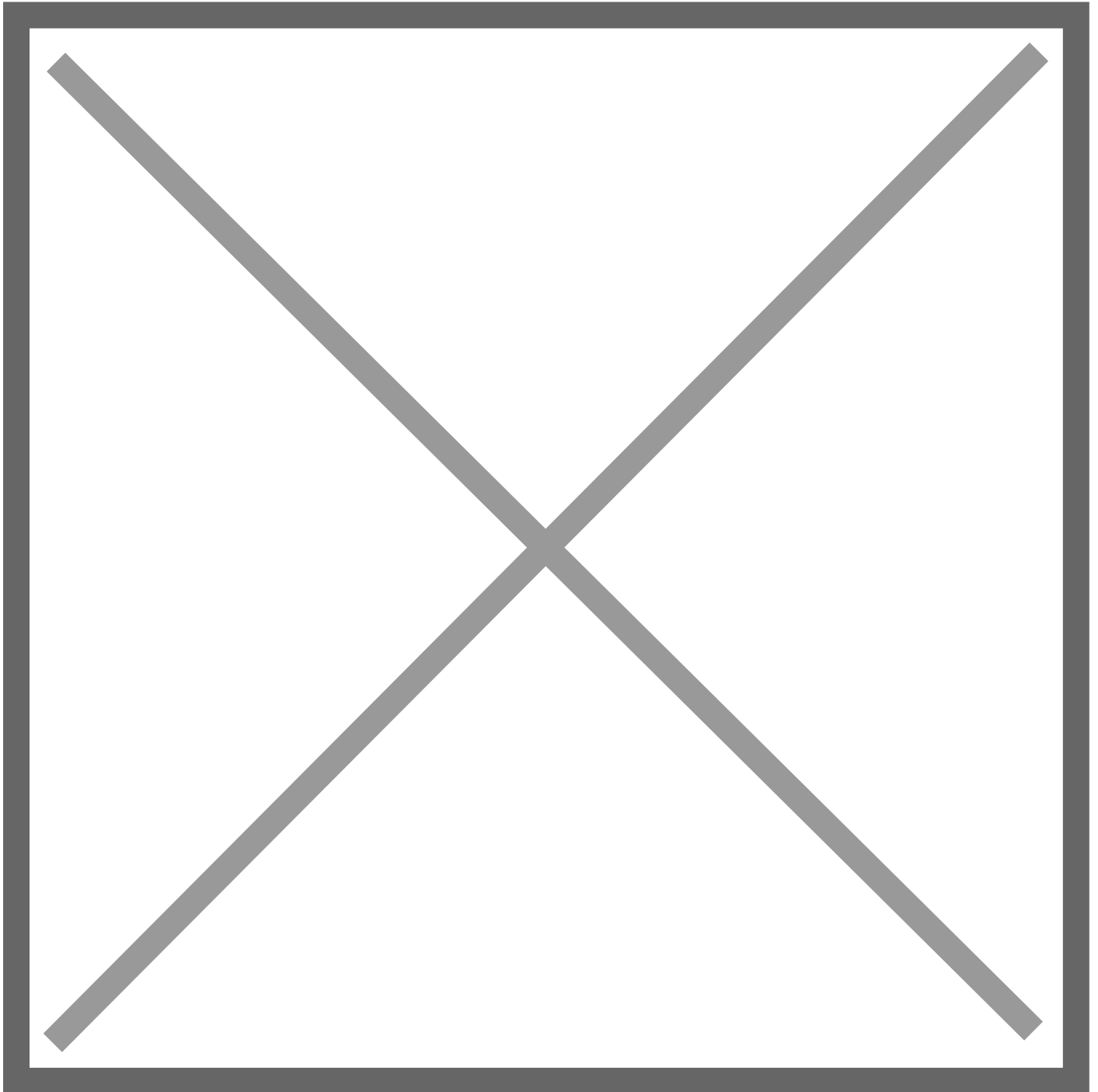
In fact, one of those supportive colleagues was largely responsible for her career at TFS. He mentored her at another company and pushed her outside of her comfort zone.

“And I’ve adopted that as a mantra, I see something in somebody and kind of go, ‘Hey, you need to do this,’” says Mullings. “Because that’s what my mentors and sponsors did with me and I realized that in reality this is what mentorship and sponsorship looks like.”

Diversity of Thought

Mullings believes diversity is important and is not only about race.

“What happens is there’s a set of circumstances associated with what you’ve experienced as a Black person, as a woman and combined. I’ve had these sets of experiences that I bring to the table that no one else has. Diversity of thought brings new ways of doing things, new ways of thinking about things and different perspectives, which I think just creates a better result,” says Mullings.



Making A Positive Difference

Encouragement and support are what Mullings hopes members get from the Ubuntu circle. In fact, she hopes that in the future there will no longer be a need for Ubuntu or other similar affinity groups.

“My hope is that something like this would not be necessary — that we make ourselves obsolete because there’s just going to be so many of us working in this space that we organically find and connect with each other,” she says.

Until then, the program is well on its way.

“It’s really becoming a circle, there is no head and no person is more important than the other. Everyone’s view counts,” Mullings says.