

# Thought Leader Spotlight

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As part of The Azara Group's monthly newsletter, we select a business leader to share insights about leadership, being an influencer, and career development. Our objective is to help support your ability to flourish as a leader and share what makes people thrive in business.

## Johnita Walker Mizelle

Director, North American Business Development  
Lyxor Asset Management, Inc.

- Education:** Harvard Business School (MBA)  
Spelman College (B.S. in Chemistry)
- Previously With:** Progress Investment Management  
Williams Capital Group  
Goldman Sachs  
Morgan Stanley
- Board Membership:** Council of Urban Professionals (CUP)
- Interesting Details:** Grew up in Virginia, competitive golfer, initially thought she would go to the Air Force Academy and become a fighter pilot.



### 1. What attracted you to your chosen field and profession?

Early in my college career, I discovered that I loved working with people and encountering new challenges. Originally, I wanted to go into science but found it wasn't for me after I was exposed to new fields. So I started to leverage my technical skills in business.

I received validation one day while interning at Spelman's Office of Development. At a meeting, I persuaded Jamie Dimon (current CEO of JPMorgan Chase who was a senior executive at Citigroup at the time) to make a \$2,000 contribution to our capital campaign. I saw that I had a natural ability to connect with people and began developing my power of influence and persuasion.

### 2. What person, opportunity, or game-changing moment had the biggest impact on your career?

During that same internship at Spelman, I was asked to host a group from Goldman Sachs. One of the Goldman Partners, Dexter Earle, was impressed by me and invited me to spend a week on Goldman's trading floor. I was fascinated by this new world and found that I loved finance.

This chance encounter changed my life's trajectory. I committed myself to Goldman's two-year analyst program, and I knew if I could survive and still remain excited about the industry upon the program's completion, then it was the profession for me.

### **3. What is the biggest challenge you faced professionally? How did you overcome it?**

Since I originally wanted to pursue a science-related profession, I didn't have the support, access, or experience to instantly excel like my peers. I hadn't taken accounting or economics courses. I was one of four blacks in my incoming analyst class of over 200 people, and it was lonely. It was hard adapting to this new culture and the hours were brutal.

I had to use common sense and street smarts to learn while on the job. I developed an instinct and ability to translate complex financial concepts into terms that people could easily understand. I learned resilience. My stubbornness and refusal to fail allowed me to overcome my challenges. And here I am, nearly 20 years later, doing well in an industry that has seen many people come and go.

### **4. What tools or tactics do you rely on in being a more effective leader and team member?**

I've learned the importance of asking for help. I leveraged relationships both inside and outside of Goldman in order to excel. I wasn't too proud to ask for help to overcome my knowledge gaps. This work wasn't rocket science...*but I was a rocket scientist*. I had to stay resilient and remind myself of that fact often.

My work ethic can't be surpassed by anyone. My days are long and I get to work early and leave late. I aim for the best outcomes in my role, with my responsibilities, and with my clients. I became a technician and learned the fundamentals of this business so that no one could do what I do better.

My leadership style is transparent and honest. I lead by example. Effective leadership is not just about getting results, but building trust along the way. I rely on my ability to learn what motivates people and I use this information to galvanize the entire team. We will either win or lose together.

### **5. Share a story about an interesting or difficult negotiation and how you were able to gain more influence and leverage as a result.**

My hardest negotiation was linked to a very senior role I really wanted that didn't work out. In short, it wasn't a good fit. I learned that you can sometimes have more leverage when you're willing to walk away. I felt empowered by both saying "no" and accepting it. However, it was one of the most difficult decisions of my professional career.

### **6. What do you see as your unique value proposition and how has your personal background prepared you to excel?**

There's power in being vulnerable – this is not about taking sucker punches but admitting that you're not perfect. Too often, leaders focus on their successes and don't share their struggles. When you share your mistakes and failures, you can alleviate the pressure everyone feels to be perfect and give people permission to try and fail and try again.

In addition, my parents instilled a strong work ethic in me and a very high standard for excellence. I was also a student athlete, which boosted my competitive nature. While most individuals compete against their peers – I see myself as my biggest competition. The expectations that I have for myself and my life far exceed what others may demand of me.

### **7. What is your proudest achievement?**

I am extremely proud of being a graduate of Harvard Business School and earning the Dean's Award for leadership that was given to only a few people. I earned that recognition for seeing the potential in others and building them up to be the next generation of female and minority financial services professionals. This passion to excel and help others is what drives me to do what I do.