

## Bridging Worlds and Cultures

Amel Karboul: A Career Journey from “Success to Significance”

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In assessing her career to date, Dr. Amel Karboul, somewhat unexpectedly, turns to soccer’s “it’s a game of two halves” truism.

If the first phase of her working life was used to learn, grow, build a career, and foster a strong self-identity, then the second, she explains, finds her asking how she can now help others succeed.

“I feel I moved from the first period, where it was more about *success*, to this second period, which I hope will be more about *significance*,” said Amel [Düsseldorf, 2001–2002].

This from a woman whose CV is already bursting at the seams: engineer, company founder and CEO, management consultant, executive coach, professor, and national cabinet minister.

Today, Amel describes herself as being involved with “a portfolio of activities” that includes author and speaker, but most of her time is spent in her roles as secretary general of the Maghreb Economic Forum and commissioner to the International Commission on Financing Global Education Opportunity.

We’ll look at each in turn.

The Maghreb Economic Forum (MEF) is made up of member states Algeria, Libya, Mauritania, Morocco, and Tunisia. The organization nurtures a new generation of public leaders and provides a blueprint to foster economic and social growth in the region by addressing common challenges such as unemployment, political instability, energy security, and education reform.

“Given our individual and collective strengths, we believe that we can and must work to rebuild our region,” said Amel. “Our young people deserve a better future. I dream of a time when people across this region will enjoy a decent education, plentiful jobs, health, and a good quality of life, and when Tunisia in particular will be a leading light for other Arab nations.”

The International Commission on Financing Global Education Opportunity—part of the United Nations Education Commission—is a global initiative to engage world leaders, policy makers, and researchers to realize equal educational opportunities for children and young people. The commission has three clear objectives: gather evidence from around the globe on what works to expand and improve learning; agree on an investment case and agenda for action; and inspire and persuade leaders—across all levels and sectors—to act.

“Until now, education has been very much seen as a national topic—without ever really making it onto the global agenda,” Amel explained. “We’re looking at how to get 124 million children and youth to school for the first time, and to improve upon what and how we teach the 250 million others who are already in school but who are not learning enough. If we fail to act today, we’ll lose many future generations.”

Amel argues that education—even across some of the developed world—continues to be delivered much as it had been a century ago, with little innovation in the way children are taught. She is passionate, she says, about exploring the role of technology in improving education on a global scale.

“We must harness the potential of technology. We must use the digital revolution to create an education revolution. Take, for instance, the countless refugee children around the world—we cannot get them to school, so we must use technology to bring school to them.”

To understand better where Amel is coming from today, it’s worth looking at one of her earlier career highlights.

In 2014, Amel was offered the role of cabinet minister as part of a Tunisian interim government tasked with guiding the country through a phase of political transition. She helped organize transparent elections and lay the foundation for robust economic and social governance and policymaking.

“A lot of people told me not to take the job, as it was very risky. Libya was in turmoil, Syria had fallen into civil war, and it looked like the odds were against us. The likelihood of being able to organize and conduct proper elections was slim.”

Undeterred, Amel accepted and was given the role of minister of tourism, with a mission to revamp a sector that represents 8% of the country’s GDP and provides jobs for more than 20% of its population.

Hardly a one-person job.

“I built a sizeable team, made up equally of men and women. I wanted it to be diverse, too, in terms of age and experience.” It was critically important, she adds, that she gives this team broad authority and decision-making power.

As an executive coach, this gave her time for self-analysis.

“Having done a great deal of leadership and transformation coaching, I now had to practice what I’d been preaching for many years. I had to reconcile my strengths with my weaknesses and face up to my own leadership limitations.”

In Amel’s estimation, her strategic abilities are stronger than her operational capabilities. She is a strategic leader, someone who gives direct, honest, and tough feedback out of a belief that people need to be challenged as much as supported to learn and develop.

“But were these the best strengths to help this team grow? More than once I found myself reevaluating my leadership skills. It was both educational and humbling.”

Looking back, Amel says, these were tough times of self-assessment for everybody on the transition government. She remembers lying awake some nights, asking herself why she was doing this, and if she doing the right thing.

In the bright light of day, however, the answer was clear. “We were building the first democracy in the Arab world, giving hope, not just to 11 million Tunisians, but to Arabs around the world. It was a huge personal learning experience to realize that I could be vulnerable and resilient at the same time.”

In March 2015, power was handed over to the newly-elected government.

“While in many parts of the world this might be a customary ceremonial occasion, in our region it was a unique moment in history. Many of us were moved to tears to witness a peaceful, constructive handover.”

Asked what part her inner consultant has played across the many and varied aspects of her career, she responds, “A lot!”

“I was first drawn to consulting—and BCG in particular—because of the diversity of tasks and opportunity to learn. I felt consulting would help make my professional canvas broader by giving me experience across industry sectors and exposing me to diverse skills and approaches. It was a chance to hone my analytical strategic thinking and an opportunity to learn more about what makes organizations successful.

“From politics to executive coaching, I’ve learned to challenge myself to ask the right questions; to solve complex problems by breaking them down to manageable tasks; to communicate complex ideas by making them more digestible; and to ensure recommendations get properly implemented—all skills that tap in to my consultant identity.”

Amel maintains concrete ties with BCG. As part of a project to educate Syrian refugee children living in Lebanon and Jordan, she reached out for advice to the firm’s CEO, Rich Lesser. There is now a BCG case team working on a social impact project to develop a monitoring and evaluation framework for education technology solutions to ensure these children get the best access to education.

Now contentedly into the “second half” of her career, Amel says she’s ready to give the idealist within her a bit more playing time. “Too many people are cynical about our ability to make the world a better place, but I believe. And I’m at a stage in my life when I can afford to invest time in this belief.”

Her experience across so many working worlds and cultures, she adds, has helped both shape her and give her direction.

“I see myself as conduit between a number of different worlds—men and women; engineering and business; the Arab world and the Western world. I feel that because I am able to navigate and move comfortably in so many of these environments, I am able to understand and translate—in terms of thinking and purpose—as a way to bridge these different worlds.”

