

Influential Women Profiles Audrey Douglas-Cooke, Ph.D.: Healthcare Strategist, Educator, Author And Community Leader

NORFOLK, VA, UNITED STATES, September 2, 2026 /EINPresswire.com/ -- From Hospital Executive to University Professor and Community Advocate, Audrey Douglas-Cooke Continues to Champion Compassionate Leadership, Evidence-Based Results, and Opportunities for the Next Generation

Audrey Douglas-Cooke, Ph.D., is a healthcare strategist, educator, author, and former hospital executive whose more than 25-year career has been defined by service, compassion, integrity, and an unwavering belief in the power of people. Across healthcare, higher education, nonprofit leadership, and community service, she has consistently demonstrated that effective leadership is about more than titles or accomplishments. It is about creating meaningful outcomes, building trust, developing others, and using one's gifts to make a difference.



Based in Virginia Beach, Virginia, Audrey's professional journey began with a childhood dream of becoming a teacher. Encouraged by her sister, she pursued nursing at Georgetown University, a decision that initially represented an unexpected direction but soon revealed itself as a calling. What began as a practical educational choice developed into a profound passion for caring for others, educating future professionals, and empowering people to reach their potential.

Over the next 25 years, Audrey built an accomplished career with Sentara Healthcare, steadily advancing through leadership roles and ultimately serving as Vice President of Sentara Heart Hospital. As the region's only comprehensive cardiac and transplant hospital, the organization presented a uniquely complex environment requiring strategic leadership, operational discipline,

clinical understanding, and a strong commitment to patient-centered care.

In that role, Audrey became known for her strategic clarity and ability to guide high-performing teams through some of healthcare's most demanding challenges. Her leadership was grounded in the understanding that healthcare outcomes are ultimately about people. Whether focused on reducing readmissions, expanding access to outpatient care, increasing transplant volumes, or improving organizational performance, she believes meaningful leadership must be demonstrated through measurable results.

Although Audrey never imagined that she would one day help lead a nationally ranked hospital, the experience became one of the most significant chapters of her professional journey. It reinforced her belief in persistence, preparation, humility, teamwork, and the willingness to embrace setbacks as part of growth.

For Audrey, success has never been defined simply by reaching a particular position. Instead, she attributes her accomplishments to perseverance, purpose, faith, hard work, and an unwavering commitment to integrity. She believes in the importance of stick-to-itiveness—wanting a goal strongly enough to continue working toward it even when the path becomes difficult.

Not every opportunity comes with the first attempt, and not every door opens on the first knock. Audrey believes that remaining committed, continuing to develop one's skills, and consistently demonstrating value can eventually lead decision-makers to recognize an individual's capabilities and potential.

Letting the Work Speak

One of the principles that has guided Audrey throughout her leadership career is the belief that a person's work should speak louder than their words. While degrees, titles, awards, and professional accomplishments have their place, she believes that the quality and impact of one's work ultimately provide the strongest evidence of leadership ability.

For Audrey, this means being willing to demonstrate results rather than simply describe them. Improvements in patient outcomes, reductions in readmissions, expanded access to care, and increased transplant volumes are meaningful because they represent measurable changes that affect individuals and communities.

She particularly encourages women in leadership to embrace the power of evidence and outcomes. Rather than relying solely on credentials or having to repeatedly explain their qualifications, women can demonstrate their value through the results they achieve, the teams they develop, and the organizations they strengthen.

This evidence-based philosophy continues to influence Audrey's work in higher education, where she combines her extensive healthcare leadership experience with her commitment to preparing future professionals.

Returning to Her First Love: Teaching

In 2019, Audrey stepped away from hospital leadership to complete her Ph.D. and return to what she describes as her first love: teaching. In 2022, she joined Norfolk State University as an Assistant Professor, beginning a new chapter focused on educating and developing the next generation of healthcare leaders.

Her transition from executive healthcare leadership to academia allowed Audrey to bring decades of practical experience directly into the classroom. She understands the realities of healthcare organizations, the complexities of leadership, and the importance of making decisions based on evidence while remaining attentive to the human beings affected by those decisions.

Her colleagues have since elected her President of the Faculty Senate, a position that reflects the trust she has earned through transparency, authenticity, integrity, and collaborative leadership.

In higher education, Audrey recognizes that today's students are navigating an increasingly complicated world. Academic responsibilities are often accompanied by personal, financial, and mental health pressures, making holistic student well-being an increasingly important consideration for educational institutions.

She believes higher education has both the ability and the responsibility to evolve into a more inclusive, innovative, and student-centered ecosystem. Students should feel seen, heard, and genuinely supported. When institutions create those environments, Audrey believes they can strengthen not only academic outcomes but also students' resilience, confidence, sense of purpose, and ability to contribute to their communities after graduation.

She sees evidence-based leadership, meaningful mentorship, and authentic collaboration as essential to that future. Together, these elements can help institutions design programs and experiences that meet students where they are while preparing them for where they aspire to go.

Leadership Beyond the Classroom

Audrey's commitment to service extends well beyond her academic responsibilities. She currently serves as Chairman of the Board of Directors for a \$5.6 billion credit union, where she champions financial empowerment, responsible governance, and organizational stewardship.

Her community involvement also reflects her commitment to addressing challenges that extend beyond traditional healthcare and education. Her passion for addressing homelessness led to her appointment by the Virginia Beach City Council to the Board of the Virginia Beach Community Development Corporation. She continues to serve as Vice President of the Virginia Beach Community Development Corporation in a volunteer capacity, contributing her leadership experience to an organization focused on community development and housing-related needs.

Audrey also serves on the Board of Directors for the Virginia Center for Inclusive Communities, where she supports efforts to advance dialogue, understanding, and equity throughout the Commonwealth.

These roles reflect a broader philosophy that has shaped her career: leadership should be used to strengthen communities. For Audrey, professional success creates an obligation to share knowledge, open doors for others, and contribute to the well-being of the people and communities around her.

Bringing Courageous Conversations to a National Audience

Audrey's commitment to understanding people and communities also extends into her work as an author. Her book, *Racial Justice: Seeking First to Understand the Stories that Shape Us*, explores race, empathy, human connection, and the ways personal experiences and unconscious biases influence how people see the world.

The book encourages readers to engage in reflection and courageous conversation rather than approaching complex issues solely from preconceived assumptions. Its central emphasis on seeking first to understand aligns closely with Audrey's broader leadership philosophy: people cannot effectively work together, lead together, or build stronger communities without making a genuine effort to understand one another.

The book quickly reached #2 on an Amazon bestseller list, helping amplify Audrey's message and extend her influence beyond healthcare and higher education.

Her work as an author complements her roles as an educator and community leader. Across each platform, she encourages people to examine their assumptions, recognize their blind spots, listen with greater empathy, and take responsibility for the ways they contribute to the environments around them.

The Influence of Her Mother

Among the most important influences on Audrey's professional philosophy has been her mother, who taught her that your attitude determines your altitude. That simple principle has remained with Audrey throughout every stage of her career.

She believes that individuals can unintentionally limit themselves by deciding in advance that they are incapable of achieving something. Whether the goal involves managing a hospital, leading a major initiative, pursuing executive leadership, entering academia, or shaping public policy, Audrey encourages people to challenge the internal messages that tell them certain opportunities are not meant for them.

The question she carries with her is simple: What do I have to lose by trying?

For Audrey, failure to achieve a goal on the first attempt is not a reason to stop. It is an opportunity to reassess, realign, identify areas for growth, and try again. She views recalibration not as failure but as part of the process of becoming better prepared for the next opportunity.

This philosophy is particularly meaningful to Audrey when considering the experiences of women, especially women of color, who may continue to encounter institutional and cultural barriers in professional environments. She believes that persistence matters precisely because progress is not always immediate.

Encouraging Young Women to Believe in Their Potential

Audrey's message to young women entering healthcare, business, academia, and leadership is centered on belief. She encourages them to genuinely believe that they can accomplish whatever they set their minds to and to recognize that mind over matter is more than a familiar phrase—it is a discipline.

When individuals train themselves to approach challenges with the mindset that they can succeed, they become more willing to pursue opportunities that initially appear beyond their reach.

Audrey encourages young women to embrace positions of leadership even when those roles may historically have been inaccessible or not designed with them in mind. She believes that women should not allow uncertainty or institutional expectations to determine the limits of their ambitions.

At the same time, she emphasizes that confidence must be paired with preparation. Persistence alone is not enough. Individuals must continue refining their craft, developing their expertise, seeking mentorship, learning from setbacks, and demonstrating their capabilities through meaningful results.

Her message is ultimately one of persistence, preparation, and self-belief. By continuing to show up and improve, she believes individuals can eventually reach the people with the authority to recognize their talent and open new doors.

Integrity as the Foundation

Honesty and integrity remain the values that anchor Audrey's professional and personal life. To her, honesty begins with being truthful about who you are, understanding your strengths and limitations, and recognizing the areas where you still need to grow.

She believes it is perfectly acceptable to say, "I don't know" or "I don't understand," provided that the next step is to take responsibility for learning. In her view, acknowledging what one does not know is not a sign of weakness. It demonstrates self-awareness and creates an opportunity for growth.

Integrity means doing the right things for the right reasons, consistently, even when no one is watching. Audrey believes leaders must model the values they expect others to embrace, and that integrity is strengthened by compassion, authenticity, empathy, and bravery.

She also believes that individuals should reflect honestly on their own biases, blind spots, and opportunities for growth before making judgments or decisions about others. Self-awareness and humility create the foundation for trust, and trust allows individuals and organizations to thrive.

A Legacy Defined by Service

Across every chapter of her career, Audrey has remained grounded in the belief that leadership is ultimately about service. Whether leading a complex hospital, educating future healthcare professionals, serving in governance roles, supporting community development, advocating for inclusion, or writing about racial justice, she consistently seeks opportunities to uplift others.

Her journey demonstrates that leadership can evolve without losing its purpose. Nursing led to healthcare administration. Healthcare leadership led her back to teaching. Teaching expanded into faculty governance, while her commitment to service opened doors to community leadership, authorship, and advocacy.

Through each transition, Audrey has carried the same principles with her: faith, hard work, humility, courage, accountability, compassion, and integrity.

She understands that measurable outcomes matter, but she also recognizes that authentic relationships matter just as much. The strongest leaders, in her view, are those who can deliver results while making the people around them feel seen, valued, respected, and capable of achieving more than they initially imagined.

Audrey Douglas-Cooke continues to lead with both heart and purpose, guided by the belief that every gift is meant to be shared. Her career is a testament to the power of persistence and the importance of using one's knowledge and experience to create opportunities for others. From healthcare leadership and higher education to community service and courageous conversations about race and inclusion, she remains committed to a simple but powerful principle: when individuals uplift others, they have the ability to elevate entire communities.

Learn More about Audrey Douglas-Cooke:

Through her Influential Women profile, <https://influentialwomen.com/connect/audrey-douglas-cooke>

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