



# Valentine Chitalu on Inclusive Leadership and Sharing the Limelight

Valentine Chitalu is a founding Partner and Chairman of Phatisa Group, a US\$300 million private equity fund manager focusing on the food and housing sectors in sub-Saharan Africa. Before becoming an entrepreneur, he worked for CDC Capital Partners in London and Lusaka, and continues this connection as a non-executive board member of CDC Group. He was formerly CEO at the Zambia Privatisation Agency where he was responsible for the privatisation of over 240 enterprises, and is Chairman of MTN (Zambia) and SABMiller (Zambia).

As part of a CEO Night with The Africa List community in Ethiopia in 2017, Valentine answered questions from the members about the leadership practices he has cultivated as a CEO and Chair. This was part of a series of 'CEO Nights' where a range of senior CEOs and Chairs from across Africa spend time with the community of 'next-in-line CEOs' that make up The Africa List community. They unpack what the jump from C-suite to CEO really looks like and how best to prepare for it. We only run 'CEO Nights' once a year so to make the interactions with the CEOs in attendance as structured and useful as possible, a small group of CEOs hosted breakout sessions, answering questions posed by the members on their 'CEO Life Hacks' that covered a range of topics including productivity, leadership and management strategies and their personal reflections.

Here are some of our favourite pieces of advice from Valentine:

## **How has your leadership style changed over time?**

Being a CEO is a journey. You start out thinking that you know a lot, but it soon becomes obvious that you have larger gaps in your knowledge than you ever thought possible. As you grow, you start to understand the over-confidence you had in the beginning of your career.

I'm also increasingly aware of the importance of inclusive management. People do not learn from you as a CEO, you learn from them. That is why it is of utmost importance to know and understand the gaps in your own knowledge and skill sets in order to surround yourself with a team that complements you. My goal as a leader is to create the environment in which a good team can succeed.

**What is one trait that you've seen derail the most leaders' careers?**

Once an organisation starts doing well, a lot of people start attributing that success to themselves, forgetting that in most cases it's usually the teamwork that is responsible for that success. One must always recognise the teamwork and the people in the team who are responsible for positive accomplishments; you need to build them up and celebrate their success. When an organisation is achieving great levels of success, the media tends to focus on the CEO, and sooner or later that CEO starts believing their own publicity, thinking that they are the only one responsible for the organisation's success. That is rarely the case.

**Which other CEOs do you look up to?**

Being Zambian, a lot of the CEOs that I have worked with and admire come from developing countries. They have a much more difficult set of circumstances than you'll find in the Western world. I think it's much harder to be a CEO in a developing country and I admire a couple of CEOs who have run businesses in Zambia, particularly in the beverage and telecoms sectors, that have achieved a lot of success under very difficult circumstances. Those are the ones that I look up to.

**Do you have any examples of the challenges that make being a CEO in a developing country more difficult? How have you navigated them?**

When I ran the Zambia Privatisation Agency, I didn't realise at the time how difficult it was for our female employees to be working in a country where it was not culturally acceptable for women to be expected to work late. I was totally indifferent to this. Before I knew it, I was dealing with husbands who were coming in to ask if their wives were in fact working late, or going on legitimate training or business trips for the company. I found that I had to reassure these husbands that their wives were doing credible jobs, working hard for their families and achieving great success. This is something that you typically are unlikely to meet as a CEO in the Western world, but one that I had to meet in an African context.

**Do you think from your heart or your wallet?**

I tend to be a very logical person, so this is where balance becomes important. I am aware that I may not have as much emotional intelligence as other people have, so it's always important to bring that layer to my thinking. Ultimately, everything we do involves people and people management. People management requires a much higher level of emotional empathy and emotional intelligence, which tends to come more naturally to women than men. Men can learn it or they can surround themselves with people who help them navigate that emotional intelligence.

**What is one thing you have committed to becoming world class at?**

I've personally committed to becoming world class in my approach to business; that I must be unique and I must be transparent. What you see is what you get, what I say is what I mean and what I mean is what I say; no hidden agenda. To be defined like this is very important to me

**How do you run meetings?**

I try not to speak first on a topic, because I am normally in charge and I find that as CEO if you speak first others start falling in. It's very important to first hear what everyone else has to say because this can change the view that I have, or allow me to better calibrate my approach after hearing what everyone else has said.

**What is most important for you at work?**

I am all about clarity, so I try and provide clarity for all. If somebody is not achieving their objectives, I make myself available by whatever means to ensure that I am there to help them achieve them. Many leaders tend to create an objective, but never really follow-up on how the person for whom they have set the objective is performing, and what difficulties and challenges that person is facing. If you are present and available you are more likely to help them achieve success, and have them respect that you are there to help rather than just being the boss.

**Who has had the biggest impact on your career path?**

My father was a primary school teacher, he was also always teaching himself and studying further including doing a Master's degree. I learnt from him that continuous self-improvement is one of the hallmarks of success. My father was also a stickler for time, and that has always stuck with me. Now in the companies that I run, being late is a career limiting move – one must be able to manage their time.

**What happens when someone in your team fails?**

It is very important that you first analyse whether you were clear enough in your instructions, and whether you have been well-defined enough in the time you have spent helping to train that person to do what they have been tasked to do. You must define these things first – people should be given a chance - if they still fail after that, then it is sometimes better to be cruel to be kind. Sometimes a particular environment simply doesn't fit that person and they go on to be a great success elsewhere. Ultimately though, it is very important that you were clear in the expectations of the team member and that you provided the correct training and information for them to carry out those expectations.

**If you could relive one of your big career decisions, what would it be?**

I certainly would have gone into private equity sooner. I sort-of went into it accidentally. I feel that I have achieved greater impact on others through this than I have in other areas of my career.

**How do you judge your success?**

Most people assume that it is money, but that's not really the case. Money success is simply a judgement on whether what I am doing is sustainable or not, but there are many objectives to the goals I set myself. One of those objectives for me is impact. That's why I sit on certain boards. I like to think that the work I am doing is making an impact within the community.

Learning is also very important. It's amazing how much I learn just spending time with people who come from different backgrounds and different age groups. Going back to the influence of my father – learning is continuous and if I am learning I am succeeding.

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