

Career Connections Presents

**VOICES OF**  
Our Executive Coaches  
Informative Series

**Rita**  
**OKUTHE**



*Rita Okuthe is an executive coach and is the Chief Enterprise Business Officer at Safaricom.*

We asked Rita about her leadership journey and diploma experience, as a graduate from our Practitioner Diploma in Executive Coaching.

## TELL US A LITTLE BIT ABOUT YOUR LEADERSHIP JOURNEY

If you come home to my library, you will see a lot of books on leadership, from Machiavelli to Alexander the Great. I am really intrigued by some of these iconic leaders and the style that they had. My first step into leadership was to look back at the leaders that have gone before. Then, I looked at leaders around me, whether they were political leaders or business leaders.

Early on in my leadership journey, I had mentors, but I didn't have a coach. I think that when you only have a mentor, you're not able to see beyond the next corner. I fell into quite several pitfalls, which have helped me in my leadership journey. When I joined Safaricom, we went for a leadership course where we were asked, "Why should anyone be led by you?" It was about the purpose that drives you- in leadership and in life. How do you inspire people to take a vision, own it, believe in it with passion, and contribute towards the achievement of that vision for the greater good?

That has been the biggest challenge I see in leadership. Whether you look at political, business, or religious leadership. It's very easy to define the vision and to distil the mission. Evoking that passion and the same level of enthusiasm amongst your team has always been the drive in my leadership journey.

## WHAT IS YOUR LEADERSHIP PURPOSE?

My leadership purpose is to bring out the best in everyone who I'm privileged to meet by helping them achieve and do more than they ever thought possible, not just from a work standpoint.

I have found that giving people tasks that they feel initially daunted by without giving them too much information about how to figure it out, is quite a good way for them to realize their potential without having to dictate their every move.

When people realize that what they thought was insurmountable is doable, they gain a lot of confidence. They become more assured about themselves and more assured in you as the leader. That ripple effect enthuses the team and drives high-performance. In an organization like Safaricom, where the performance bar is always set very high, you have to have a leadership style that is constantly inspiring, pacesetting and affirming.

It's very important as a leader that you don't vilify somebody for a mistake, but you also need to make sure that they're learning from them and therefore growing in their journey. That's what I mean by affirming leadership.

## WHAT IS YOUR LEADERSHIP LEGACY?

I want to be the leader that makes a lasting difference in the lives of the people that I lead, be it in their career, through a difficult situation, or from an example that I showed them. I don't just want to be a leader who achieved great financial results. I want to leave a lasting impact and a personal, positive change in the lives of the people I work with.

## HOW DID TAKING THIS DIPLOMA FIT INTO YOU ACHIEVING YOUR LEADERSHIP PURPOSE?

I hadn't thought about who I really was, and if you've noticed, I don't speak much about myself. I remember post-module one, there's a session on reflection.

*For me, the coaching diploma was about those two words, "Let's reflect". If you want to be a transformative leader who leaves a positive impact in the lives of those that you lead, you must stop and reflect.*

Your leadership style, experiences and the sum total of who you are what enables you to make a difference or indeed hampers you from making a difference.

Interestingly, for a lot of my peers, the coaching diploma journey was about the way they lead people. For me, it was a lot of internal self-reflection. "Am I coaching with a mask?" In one of the modules, we talked about who you would really be if you take the mask off.

*The coaching diploma helped me peel away all the layers of this onion. As you know, when you first bite an onion, it really doesn't sting but as you begin to peel away the layers and it begins to sting, it has a very pungent smell, and it's a distinctly uncomfortable experience. I went through that whole purging down to the raw sense of who I am, dealing with some very painful experiences that I had been through in the past, that I had masked.*

In between two of the modules, I took a weekend away by myself to reflect and I got in touch with who I was and how I felt. Consequently, a lot of things around me changed because I realised you cannot leave a lasting transformation or lasting change in anybody's life if you're not authentic.

So that phrase, "Let's reflect" has really changed my leadership style to a more reflective, quieter, calmer one. I listen a lot more; I look for body language; I look for non-verbal signs and I try and figure out where someone is coming from. When you reflect, you hear what everybody's saying, and build on that to perhaps come up with an even bigger, better idea. That's how the coaching diploma has changed me as a person.

*The heightened self-awareness stays with me up to now. I'm more empathetic, sympathetic and I now listen more than I talk and I'm not quick to give advice.*

I give my team space, as well. They come to me with a problem and I say, "Well, what do you think we should do?" Whereas before, I'd say, "let's do A, and if that doesn't work, try B, and if that doesn't work, try C, and if all three don't work, then you have a problem".

### HOW WOULD YOU DESCRIBE YOUR EXPERIENCE ON THE DIPLOMA?

Uncomfortable at first, to be honest because I had to confront a lot of things that I was dealing with internally, but also the discomfort of having to do it with a group of people not within my inner circle. I found the first two modules very intrusive. One of things that I knew about myself was that I tend to take criticism very personally. Some of the uncomfortable moments were the three on one coaching and the feedback sessions in groups because the criticism wasn't always positive. After the period when I went away for self-reflection, I began to open up a little bit more.

In the end, I formed lasting friendships. It was tough at first, but then I settled eventually.

The heightened self-awareness helps you to understand the type of people you should surround yourself with. I made a lot of changes, especially in my home environment, my close friendships and the type of people I surround myself with because I'm now aware of who I am.

### HOW HAVE YOU USED THE LEARNING FROM THE DIPLOMA?

Before I went for the diploma, I would wake up in the morning and reach for my phone to see if there's anything I needed to respond to. I could never sit like this and have a conversation. I would have my devices and I'd be looking at them and multitasking.

After the diploma, I have learnt the value of reflection and being in the moment. One of the things we're told as coaches is that you must be in the moment with your client. So now when I wake up, I say my prayers, and then I reflect, and I say, okay, so what do I need to do today? What is important, what is urgent? what is strategic?

### WHAT WAS THE SHIFT YOU MADE, CONSIDERING YOUR JOURNEY FROM THE BEGINNING?

It was my self-perception, how I related to others, and the issues that I had to deal with that changed. When I walked in, the masked Rita was confronting the unmasked Rita, and that was the cause of the conflict and the tension. When I had that break in between the two modules, I came back and said, "So this is who I am. This is what I've been through," and I became more self-aware.

Actually, the change was heightened self-awareness. Even when I didn't pass my demo, I wasn't devastated. The old me would have been devastated. I would have blamed everybody and said that I didn't want to do it in the first place. Instead I realized that maybe I didn't do a good job in demonstrating that I knew my stuff and I went back and did it.

The thing about looking at your phone in the morning, is sometimes somebody else's priorities become your priority because it's an intrusion into your day. About three times a day, I create a buffer for reflection. That reflection in the morning helps me to prioritize my day. In the middle of the day, I go for Mass from 1:15 to 1:45, again, an opportunity to reflect. I disconnect a little bit; in church, you can't use your phone. It's a quiet place. So, I come out and I reshape my day. Also, in the evening before I go to bed, I wind down and I switch off the TV.

Before I went for coaching, I was constantly wired to my phone, laptop and TV. I would spend some quality time with my daughter but as soon as she was in bed, I was back online.

Now, I'm able to just switch off, look at the day and reflect, and consider tomorrow. I'm more in control of my life, and because of that, I don't have the sort of yo-yo up and down high stress. I work in a high stress environment, but I'm not stressed because I've managed to create those breaks. Of course, it doesn't work like magic every day, but the more you put it into practice, the more it works.

In fact, at the time I went for the coaching, I was unwell because of too much stress. But I've now managed to control it. I can't really emphasize how powerful this tool was, "Let's reflect". Very few people pick up on it during the course, but those two words have really changed my life.

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### WHAT IS THE BIGGEST CHALLENGE FACING LEADERS TODAY?

First, a lot of leaders are not in touch with who they really are, their purpose, and how that purpose lends itself to what they're doing. Especially in the business world, people get promoted based on performance numbers. So you find that you are growing in the organization, but not as a person; there's a dissonance within you. Sometimes, you don't even believe in the vision and the mission of the organization you are working for. But you got the job and you want to keep it. This is what leads to a disconnect with the teams you lead, because you can't translate a vision that you don't believe in.

I also think leaders have too many conflicting priorities. Sometimes, because we don't take time to reflect and think, we're not able to prioritize these things and figure out what's the most important priority.

You find a lot of leaders with a long to-do list and they're ticking them off. But, that's not really the value of leadership. Leadership is about inspiration, vision and showing direction more than just 'doing'.

We also have a real issue with ethical leadership because we are not in touch with who we are or what we really stand for. If you don't know what you stand for, then you'll fall for anything. I think those are three challenges that we face and...

*...that's why sometimes young people are disillusioned by their leaders, because they don't see that overwhelming sense of vision and purpose.*

When you look at leaders like Alexander the Great and Julius Caesar; men died for these guys, in droves. Thousands of people lined up and went to battle, left their families because of the charisma of the man, the compelling vision that he had, the ability to really articulate that vision in an inspiring way. As leaders, we really need to be more inspiring. I ask myself, if these people were not being paid by Safaricom, would they still work for me? That is the true test of your charisma as a leader. We need to stimulate inspiration.

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### ANY PARTING WORDS?

Let's reflect.

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