ISSUE 007

THE CEO FILES



SYLVIA MULINGE

THE WOMAN REWRITING THE RULES OF LEADERSHIP

Chief Executive Officer — MTN Uganda

Leadership. Reinvention. Courage. People. Purpose.

EDITOR'S NOTE

Some leaders are interesting because of the companies they run.
Others are interesting because of the journeys that brought them there.
Sylvia Mulinge belongs to the latter.

Her story is one of ambition, resilience, commercial intelligence and reinvention.
But more importantly, it is a story about what happens when a leader refuses to let conventional definitions determine the size of her future.

In this issue, The CEO Files looks beyond the title to explore the woman, the career, the setbacks, the philosophy and the vision behind one of East Africa's most consequential corporate leaders.

This is not simply the story of a CEO.
It is the story of becoming one.



Wycliffe Choreh
Media, PR & Communication Strategist.
Founder Jujaya Media

AT A GLANCE

Name: Sylvia Wairimu Mulinge, MBS

Position: Chief Executive Officer & Executive Director, MTN Uganda

Nationality: Kenyan

EDUCATION: Bachelor of Science in Food Science and Technology, University of Nairobi — First Class Honours

EXECUTIVE CREDENTIAL: Certified Executive Coach and Mentor

CAREER BEGINNINGS: Unilever

TELECOMMUNICATIONS CAREER: Safaricom PLC

MTN UGANDA APPOINTMENT: October 2022

LEADERSHIP MILESTONE: First female CEO of MTN Uganda

CURRENT STRATEGIC FOCUS: Connectivity, fintech, digital infrastructure, customer experience and digital transformation

THE GIRL WHO DIDN'T HAVE TELECOMMUNICATIONS IN HER JOB DESCRIPTION



There is something beautifully unconventional about Sylvia Mulinge's beginning.

She did not study telecommunications.
She did not begin her career in technology.
She studied Food Science and Technology.

On paper, it seems far removed from the CEO's office of a telecommunications company.

But perhaps that is the first clue to understanding her.

Her career has never been about being confined to the obvious.
After graduating from the University of Nairobi with First Class Honours, Mulinge began her professional journey at Unilever.

It was there that she entered the world of marketing and consumer understanding.

And marketing gave her one of the most important lessons of her career:

BUSINESS IS ULTIMATELY ABOUT PEOPLE.

Products matter.
Technology matters.
Distribution matters.

But understanding what people want — and why they behave the way they do — is where commercial power begins.

That lesson would become extraordinarily useful later.

Because telecommunications, despite all its technology, is fundamentally a business about people.

Who they are.
How they communicate.
How they spend.
How they work.
How they connect.

And increasingly, how they access opportunity.

THE SAFARICOM SCHOOL OF LEADERSHIP



In 2006, Mulinge joined Safaricom as a manager responsible for prepaid products.

It would become the beginning of one of the most remarkable corporate journeys in East African business.
She moved through roles in retail, sales, enterprise business and consumer business, eventually becoming Chief Customer Officer and Chief Consumer Business Officer.

Her progression was not simply a climb up the corporate ladder.
It was an education in how an African technology business actually works.
She saw the customer from the shop floor.
She saw enterprise customers.

She saw sales.
She saw distribution.
She saw brand.
She saw customer experience.
She saw digital transformation.
And eventually, she saw the business from the executive table.

That breadth matters.
Because some leaders understand finance.
Others understand technology.
Others understand marketing.
Mulinge developed something different:
COMMERCIAL RANGE.
She learned how the pieces connect.

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THE CEO WHO ALMOST WENT TO TANZANIA

Every great career has a chapter that could easily have ended differently.

For Sylvia Mulinge, that chapter came in 2018.
She was appointed CEO-designate of Vodacom Tanzania.

It was a significant career opportunity.
But she did not obtain the required Tanzanian work permit.

The appointment therefore did not proceed.
She returned to Safaricom and continued serving in senior leadership roles.
From the outside, it could have looked like a setback.

But careers are rarely linear.
Sometimes the door that closes forces you to spend longer preparing for the door that eventually opens.
The experience did not erase her executive trajectory.

She continued leading.
Continued learning.
Continued building.
And four years later, another opportunity arrived.
This time, it was Uganda.

And this time, the title was not CEO-designate.
It was:
CHIEF EXECUTIVE OFFICER.

ENTER KAMPALA

In October 2022, Sylvia Mulinge officially assumed office as CEO of MTN Uganda.

She became the first woman to hold the position.
But the significance of the appointment went beyond gender.

She was entering a new country, a new organisation, a new market and a new leadership environment.

She was also succeeding a leader who had left behind a strong legacy.
That created a delicate leadership challenge.



How do you take over something that is already working?

You cannot simply destroy the past.
You have to respect it.

Then you have to make it relevant to the future.
Mulinge understood that challenge.

And rather than arriving in Uganda simply to reproduce what she had learned elsewhere, she had to learn a new market all over again.

SHE DIDN'T COME TO UGANDA TO REPEAT KENYA



Experience is valuable.
But experience can also become a trap.
A leader who enters a new country assuming that what worked in Nairobi will automatically work in Kampala is already behind the market.

Mulinge's leadership journey demonstrates a different approach.
Listen.
Learn.
Understand the customer.
Understand the market.
Then build.

Uganda is not simply another telecommunications market.
It is a young, entrepreneurial and increasingly digital economy.
The opportunity is enormous.
So is the responsibility.
And that is where leadership becomes less about bringing answers and more about asking better questions.

THE TRANSFORMATION: FROM TELCO TO "TECHO"

The most important phrase in MTN Uganda's current strategy may not be telecommunications.
It may be technology.

MTN Uganda is transforming from a traditional telecommunications company into what it describes as a technology enterprise powered by three growth engines:

CONNECTIVITY.
FINTECH.
DIGITAL INFRASTRUCTURE.

That is a profound shift.
The traditional telecommunications business was about calls and connectivity.

The emerging business is about ecosystems.
Data.

Financial services.
Digital platforms.
Infrastructure.
Home broadband.
Smartphones.
Payments.

Enterprise technology.
And the infrastructure that enables an increasingly digital economy.

Mulinge is therefore not simply managing a telecommunications company.
She is helping redefine what a telecommunications company can become.

THE NUMBERS BEHIND THE TRANSFORMATION

Leadership stories become more credible when the numbers begin to tell the same story.

MTN Uganda's 2025 performance illustrates the scale of the transformation.
The company reported 24.2 million total subscribers.

Active data subscribers reached 12 million.
Fintech subscribers reached 14.7 million.

Service revenue increased by 13.4%.
Data revenue rose 28.8% to UGX 1.1 trillion.

Fintech revenue increased 17.3% to UGX 1.1 trillion.
Perhaps more revealing is the changing composition of the business.

Voice is becoming a smaller proportion of the overall revenue mix, while data and fintech continue to grow.
That is not simply a financial story.
It is evidence of a company changing what it is.

THE DIGITAL INCLUSION QUESTION

For Mulinge, transformation is not only about building a bigger technology company.
It is also about determining who gets to participate in the digital economy.

Digital inclusion requires more than network coverage.
It requires affordability.
It requires devices.
It requires digital literacy.
It requires trust.

And it requires services that actually solve problems.
A smartphone without affordability is not inclusion.
A network without literacy is not empowerment.

A digital service without trust is not adoption.
The real challenge is therefore not merely connecting people.

It is making connection useful.



BUILDING THE BUSINESS BEYOND THE NETWORK

The transformation becomes even more interesting when fintech enters the picture.

Mobile money has grown from being a telecommunications add-on into a significant financial-services ecosystem.

That changes the strategic question.

It is no longer:
How many people use MTN?
It becomes:

HOW MUCH OF THEIR DIGITAL AND FINANCIAL LIVES CAN MTN ENABLE?

That is a much bigger question.

And it opens a completely different horizon for the company.

THE LEADER WHO SAYS: HIRE PEOPLE SMARTER THAN YOU

Perhaps the most revealing window into Mulinge's leadership style comes not from a strategy document, but from how she talks about people.
Her philosophy is unusually direct.
She hires people who are smarter than her.

Not people who simply agree with her.
Not people who make her look good.
People who bring expertise she does not possess.

Her leadership approach recognises that a CEO cannot know everything.
The chief executive's role is not to be the expert in every room.

It is to bring the right experts into the room and create the conditions for them to succeed.

That is a powerful distinction.
A CEO does not have to be the smartest person in the room.

The CEO has to make sure the room is smart enough to solve the problem.

VALUES BEFORE EGO



There is another element of Mulinge's leadership philosophy that deserves attention.
She places significant emphasis on values.
Because intelligence without alignment can become destructive.

People may be brilliant.
But if their values are incompatible with the organisation's purpose, brilliance can become a liability.
Her approach therefore combines competence with character.

And in an era where companies are increasingly judged not only by what they achieve, but by how they achieve it, that distinction matters.

THE BOARDROOM LESSON FROM BOB COLLYMORE

There is a particularly human story in Mulinge's leadership journey.
She has spoken about entering the Safaricom boardroom at the age of 34 and receiving advice from the late Bob Collymore.
She was trying to adapt herself to the masculine energy of the room.
Collymore challenged her.
The lesson was simple:

YOU DO NOT HAVE TO BECOME SOMEONE ELSE TO LEAD.

He encouraged her to embrace the qualities that made her different rather than trying to imitate the men around her.
That lesson appears to have stayed.

And perhaps it explains something about Mulinge's leadership today.
She does not present leadership as a performance of toughness.
She speaks about empathy.

Listening.
Nurturing.
Affirmation.
People.
And courage.

Not as opposites to strength.
But as different expressions of it.

SEE YOURSELF AS A LEADER FIRST"

Mulinge has a particularly powerful message for women entering leadership.

See yourself as a leader first.
Her message reaches beyond corporate boardrooms.
It starts much earlier.
At home.
At school.
At the dinner table.

In the way girls are encouraged to speak.
In whether their opinions are valued.

In whether they are taught to believe they belong in the room.
Because leadership pipelines do not begin when someone receives a CEO appointment.
They begin decades earlier.

THE WOMAN BEHIND THE CEO



Corporate profiles often stop at the office. But people are more interesting than their titles.

Mulinge is a certified executive coach and mentor with a strong interest in leadership, women empowerment and community impact.
She has also held leadership roles beyond MTN, including involvement with the Maasai Mara Wildlife Conservancies Association and President's Award–Kenya.

She is also a mother of two teenagers and has spoken about the importance of maintaining balance, healthy living and personal wellbeing.
That dimension matters.

Because leadership is not lived only in boardrooms.
It is lived in the decisions people make when nobody is watching.

In how they manage pressure.
In how they treat people.
In what they choose to give back.
And in what they continue to learn.

PURPOSE BEYOND THE CORPORATE SCORECARD

Under Mulinge, MTN Uganda's story has also included a strong emphasis on ESG, inclusion and social impact.



The company has invested in initiatives supporting economic empowerment, education, health, water, environment and agriculture.

It has also focused on improving opportunities for women and accessibility for people with disabilities.
This reflects a broader change in African corporate leadership.

The modern CEO cannot simply ask:

DID WE MAKE MONEY?

The better question is:

WHAT DID THE BUSINESS MAKE POSSIBLE?

Jobs.
Access.
Opportunity.
Digital participation.
Financial inclusion.
Skills.
Enterprise.

Community resilience.
That is where commercial value and social value increasingly meet.

THE YEAR SHE BECAME MTN'S CEO OF THE YEAR

In 2025, Mulinge was recognised as MTN CEO of the Year across the group's African operations. The recognition came after MTN Uganda delivered a strong performance and received multiple group-level awards.

But the significance is not merely that one executive won an award.

It is that a Ugandan operation under a Kenyan woman had become a benchmark within one of Africa's largest corporate groups.

That is a powerful East African story.
Leadership crossing borders.
Talent moving across markets.

African executives building African businesses.
And corporate success being measured increasingly through the ability to adapt locally while thinking regionally.



BEYOND 2025

The next chapter may be even more ambitious.
MTN Uganda's strategy is built around three platforms:
CONNECTIVITY

Expanding broadband, fibre and network capability while improving customer acquisition and retention.
FINTECH

Deepening digital financial services and expanding the value of the mobile-money ecosystem.
DIGITAL INFRASTRUCTURE

Building the infrastructure required to support a more connected African economy.

That means Mulinge's next challenge is not simply maintaining momentum.
It is scaling transformation.

WHAT SYLVIA MULINGE'S STORY REALLY TEACHES US

Perhaps the most important thing about her journey is not that she became CEO.

It is how many times she had to become something different before she did.

Scientist.
Marketer.
Brand manager.
Telecommunications executive.
Retail leader.
Enterprise executive.
Consumer business leader.
Chief Customer Officer.
CEO-designate.

Special projects executive.
And eventually:
CHIEF EXECUTIVE OFFICER.

The title changed.
The responsibility increased.
But the underlying capability was being built all along.
That is why career progression should not always be judged by how quickly someone gets to the top.

Sometimes the most valuable preparation is happening in the roles that appear unrelated to the final destination.

LEADERSHIP LESSONS FROM SYLVIA MULINGE

1 YOU DON'T HAVE TO START IN THE INDUSTRY TO LEAD THE INDUSTRY
Mulinge studied Food Science and Technology.
She became a telecommunications leader.
Her story demonstrates that leadership capability can travel across industries.
THE LESSON:
Build transferable capabilities — strategy, customer understanding, commercial execution, people leadership and adaptability.

2 YOUR CAREER CAN SURVIVE A CLOSED DOOR
The Vodacom Tanzania chapter did not unfold as planned.
But the career continued.
And another, perhaps more significant, door eventually opened.
THE LESSON:
A setback can alter the route without cancelling the destination.

3 LEADERS DON'T NEED TO BE THE SMARTEST PERSON IN THE ROOM
Mulinge deliberately hires people who are stronger than her in their areas of expertise.
THE LESSON:
Your leadership is measured by the quality of the people you enable — not by how often you prove that you are the smartest person present.

4 VALUES ARE A BUSINESS ISSUE
Competence without cultural alignment can become dangerous.
THE LESSON:
Hire for capability, but never ignore character.

5 DON'T BECOME A COPY OF THE PEOPLE AROUND YOU
The lesson from Bob Collymore remains powerful:
Leadership does not require abandoning who you are.
THE LESSON:
Authenticity is not weakness.
It is strategic confidence.

6 CUSTOMER EXPERIENCE IS A GROWTH STRATEGY
Mulinge's career at Safaricom placed customer experience at the centre of her leadership journey.
At MTN Uganda, that philosophy continues through the company's focus on customer-centricity, digital experience and service quality.
THE LESSON:
Customers do not experience your organisational chart.
They experience your decisions.

7 TRANSFORMATION MUST HAVE A PURPOSE
Moving from telecom to technology is not transformation for its own sake.
It is about creating new value.
THE LESSON:
Transform because the customer and market are changing — not because transformation sounds impressive.

8 WOMEN SHOULD NOT WAIT TO BE INVITED INTO LEADERSHIP
Mulinge's message to women is particularly direct:
See yourself as a leader first.
THE LESSON:
Sometimes the first person who must believe you belong in the room is you.

9 AFRICAN LEADERSHIP SHOULD THINK BEYOND BORDERS
A Kenyan executive leading a major Ugandan company is a reminder that African talent does not have to remain trapped within national boundaries.
THE LESSON:
The next generation of African companies will increasingly be led by executives who understand markets across the continent.

10 LEADERSHIP IS ABOUT BUILDING WHAT COMES NEXT
The strongest leaders are not simply guardians of today's success.
They prepare the organisation for tomorrow.
THE LESSON:
Your greatest responsibility as CEO may be to make the organisation ready for a future you cannot completely predict.


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THE MOST POWERFUL LEADERS DON'T ENTER ROOMS TRYING TO PROVE THEY BELONG.
THEY ENTER READY TO CHANGE WHAT THE ROOM CAN BECOME.



Sylvia Mulinge's story is particularly compelling from a Jujaya perspective because it challenges the traditional African corporate leadership narrative.
We often tell leadership stories as stories of arrival.
She became CEO.

He became Managing Director.
They took over the company.
But the more interesting story is what happened before the title.

The years of preparation.
The unexpected turns.
The closed doors.
The uncomfortable rooms.
The people who believed in you.
The people who challenged you.

The moments when you had to decide whether to imitate the room — or change it.
That is the real story of leadership.
Mulinge's career demonstrates that African leadership does not have to fit one mould.
A woman does not have to become more masculine to lead.

A Kenyan does not have to abandon her identity to lead in Uganda.
A scientist does not have to remain a scientist.
A setback does not have to become a definition.
And a telecommunications company does not have to remain a telecommunications company.
Everything can evolve.

The person.
The organisation.
The market.
The ambition.
That may be the most powerful lesson in her story.

FROM SAFARICOM TO MTN: THE AFRICAN EXECUTIVE IS EMERGING

There is also something bigger happening here.

For years, Africa's corporate leadership stories were often told through the lens of multinational executives arriving on the continent.

But increasingly, African executives are building careers across African markets.
They understand the complexity of the continent because they have lived it.

They understand customers.
They understand regulation.
They understand culture.
They understand informal economies.

They understand ambition.
And they understand that Africa is not one market.

It is many markets connected by increasingly similar aspirations.
Sylvia Mulinge's journey from Nairobi to Kampala is therefore more than a career move.

It is a small illustration of what an increasingly integrated African corporate ecosystem can look like.

THE BIGGER QUESTION

MTN Uganda has already demonstrated that connectivity can become a platform.
The next question is whether that platform can become an engine of economic opportunity.

Can fintech deepen financial inclusion?
Can digital infrastructure accelerate enterprise?
Can affordable smartphones bring more people online?
Can data become a tool for productivity rather than simply consumption?

Can technology make small businesses more competitive?
Can digital services reach communities traditionally left behind?

And can a telecommunications company become one of the institutions helping to build the digital economy itself?

Those are the questions waiting for Mulinge's next chapter.



THE CEO'S REAL LEGACY

Every CEO eventually leaves.
The question is what remains.
Revenue can be remembered.
Buildings can be remembered.
Products can be remembered.
But the most enduring legacy is often less visible.

The people who became better leaders because of you.
The businesses that grew because you created an ecosystem around them.
The customers who gained access.
The young people who saw someone who looked like them in the boardroom and thought:

PERHAPS I CAN DO THAT TOO.
The women who raised their hands.
The teams that learned to think bigger.
The communities that gained opportunity.
That is a different definition of success.
And perhaps it is the one that matters most.



THE FINAL WORD

Sylvia Mulinge's journey did not begin with a CEO title.

It began with a degree that had nothing obvious to do with telecommunications.
It moved through marketing.

Through brands.
Through customers.
Through retail.
Through enterprise.
Through transformation.

Through an international opportunity that did not materialise.
Through another opportunity that did.
And eventually into the CEO's office at MTN Uganda.

Her story reminds us that leadership is rarely a straight road.
It is a series of rooms.
Some you enter unexpectedly.
Some you leave disappointed.
Some change you.
Some challenge you.

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