Lunch with the DM

'I'm at my wits' end figuring out our indigenous cultural product'

Charles Mugabi tells **Philip Matogo** over generous portions of lunch at Isabella Bar and Restaurant in Ntinda, Kampala, how by a stroke of luck he managed to receive an education in the United States and returned home to manage the largest retail franchise for Orange Telecom in Kampala.

Charles Mugabi likes to eat. He says he doesn't, but he does. His plate of food arrived as a mountain, now it has plateaued. There seems to even be a crater where his plate once was.

I know, Isabella Bar and Restaurant in Ntinda, those ends of Kigoowa, has a mouthwatering buffet. I could have said delectable, but somehow the word doesn't fit. Mouthwatering describes exactly what was happening to me, delectable explains exactly what was with the food.

What was done was worthy of this word. And it also, with the meal's history over aesthetics, approximated the "M" word here, too. Now you see why this segment is called *Lunch with the DM*.

Furthermore, as Mugabi and I cut our meals down to size, I noticed the waitresses at this haunt are of the slightly slay queen variety, their appeal being roundly scaffolded by superior posteriors. I suspect their comeliness provokes a sort of "pretty privilege" in them. It gives them that casual, yet friendly air.

To those unaware, pretty privilege is the unearned social advantage people receive for being considered conventionally attractive, leading to more opportunities, better treatment, and perks in jobs, dating, and social settings.

It's often rooted in societal beauty standards that favour traits like symmetry, youth, and specific features, creating an easier life path but also potential objectification and pressure. This is especially so for women, with a concept that acknowledges attractiveness as a societal currency.

That currency had not lost its purchase that day. The charm offensive embedded in the waitressing staff made us pony up enough small bills to start an inflationary avalanche.

Business vision

Mugabi finds any mention of inflation as reflective of superior spending habits, at least by us lunching at Isabella Bar and Restaurant. He is a man who also pulls out the scissors when bureaucrats pull out the red tape.

Although he decries bureaucratisation, however, he concedes that it creates order, accountability, and efficiency through rules, hierarchy, and specialisation, which helps large organisations manage complexity and ensures consistency.

However, excessive bureaucracy, he argues rather convincingly, stifles agility, slows decision-making with layers of approval, reduces innovation, lowers morale, and can create a disconnect between staff and strategy, making companies less responsive to market changes.

Mugabi asks that Ugandan business owners and the business community at large cut through the clutter to cut costs and maximise returns. He also thinks that taxes are what businesses must render unto Caesar. Even though he appreciates that some businesses will not do anything short of what they can get away with doing.

Formative years

"My educational foundation was forged in Uganda, beginning at Cornerstone Leadership Academy, later at Makerere University. But the true launchpad for my global journey wasn't a classroom—it was an unexpected moment of integrity in 2010," Mugabi tells *Lunch with the DM*. "During a team visit by high-ranking US volunteers to Uganda, I exhibited an act of honest conduct. This seemingly small moment impressed the delegates so profoundly that it resulted in an immediate, generous gift: a full scholarship to pursue my Master's in Management at East Central University in Oklahoma. This act of character, rewarded by an educational lifeline, set the stage for everything that followed."

He would go through an apprenticeship of immersion—from class to corporate shadowing.

"In 2012, with my degree complete, I faced the classic immigrant dilemma: either resort to *kyeyo* as we call it—or pursue a challenging path home. An intervention by a friend, Mike Ebert in Phoenix, opened a radically different door," Mugabi discloses.

Expecting an entry-level job, Ebert would offer Mugabi "a unique form of support that allowed me to become a student of American business."

Mugabi says he didn't simply find a job; "I embarked on an unpaid, intensive apprenticeship, shadowing executives and teams across more than ten diverse companies throughout the US."

He added: "This wasn't a standard internship; it was a deep dive into the American corporate ecosystem. I immersed myself in sectors from real estate and telecom (Verizon Stores) to fine dining (Famous Dave's, Chipotle) and even aerospace. This hands-on, multi-industry immersion—from the front lines of retail to the corporate strategies of global franchises—became my true business school, shaping me into the versatile, multi-sector entrepreneur I will always be."

Invention. We should be crazy enough to envision a future plane landing at Entebbe with tyres made out of Ugandan banana peels. What does the world buy from us? Our refined wood vessels, the gourd, the smoking pipes, and animal skins could be the cultural products that truly make Uganda stand out. I see a struggle to create a digital alternative to the analog office. While the world builds digital marketplaces, we're building brick-and-mortar malls. While the world moves toward digital education, we build more schools with bigger signposts.
– Charles Mugabi, businessman

When he returned to his native country, Mugabi found himself having to master the market and the art of diversification.

"Returning to Uganda, I hit the ground running, initially managing the largest retail franchise for Orange [Telecom] with five service locations across Kampala. It was a rapid success, but I quickly learned a vital, market-driven lesson: Never put all your eggs in one basket," says a boisterous Mugabi.

"When the market inevitably shifted, I had the resilience to pivot, driven by the knowledge gained during my American corporate immersion. This conviction fuelled a rapid, multi-faceted diversification. I founded a dynamic portfolio of startups, spanning everything from thriving restaurants and a media company offering comprehensive branding and web services, to an events business and, most recently, car rental services and guided tours."

He nevertheless remained critical of his so-called success story.

"My success in the Ugandan market has provided a clear, often frustrating, vantage point: The pervasive, encouraging advice to entrepreneurs is to study successful leaders, emulate their habits, and expect the same outcome. Frankly, this is often a recipe for disappointment," Mr Mugabi advises.

The food is going down well, just like his story.

"Countless aspiring individuals spend years trying to replicate a polished "success story," only to wake up feeling like bigger failures. Why? Because we never see the whole picture," he says.

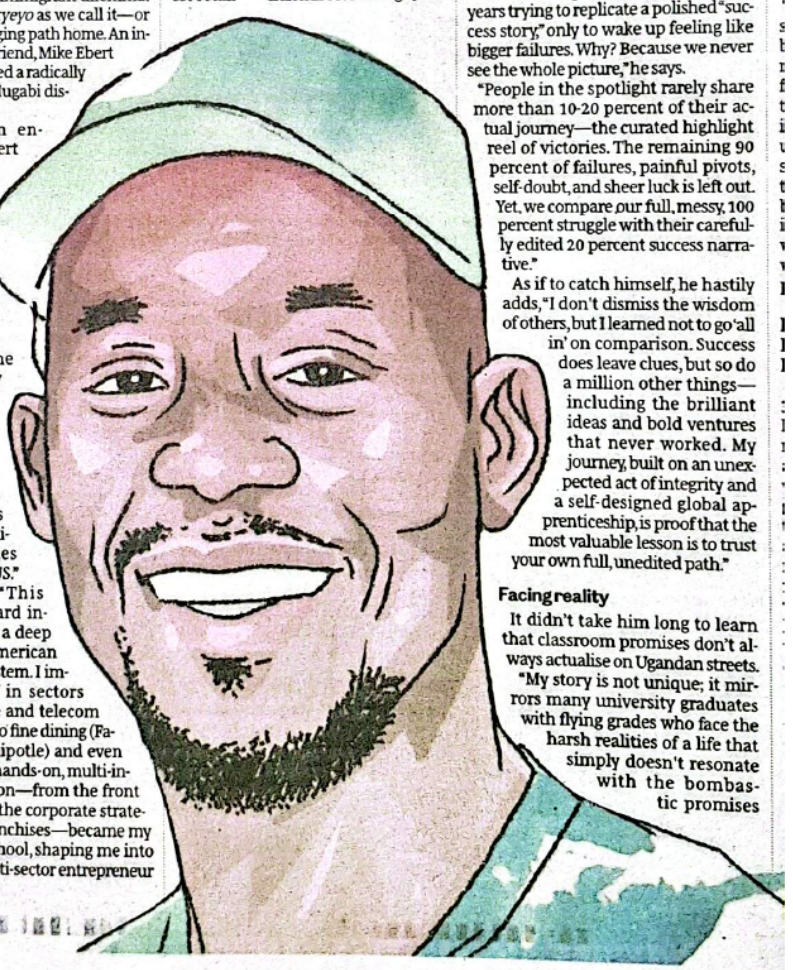
"People in the spotlight rarely share more than 10-20 percent of their actual journey—the curated highlight reel of victories. The remaining 90 percent of failures, painful pivots, self-doubt, and sheer luck is left out. Yet, we compare our full, messy, 100 percent struggle with their carefully edited 20 percent success narrative."

As if to catch himself, he hastily adds, "I don't dismiss the wisdom of others, but I learned not to go 'all in' on comparison. Success does leave clues, but so do a million other things—including the brilliant ideas and bold ventures that never worked. My journey, built on an unexpected act of integrity and a self-designed global apprenticeship, is proof that the most valuable lesson is to trust your own full, unedited path."

Facing reality

It didn't take him long to learn that classroom promises don't always actualise on Ugandan streets.

"My story is not unique; it mirrors many university graduates with flying grades who face the harsh realities of a life that simply doesn't resonate with the bombastic promises



The return