

Florence Makada's decade at the wheel of Motorcare

From network administrator to managing director, Makada's rise proves that with knowledge, resilience, and the right support women can lead in any sector.

BY ROLAND D. NASASIRA

In the male-dominated automotive sector in Uganda, Florence Sempelbwa Makada occupies a singular position as the only woman heading an automotive dealership. As she marks a decade as Managing Director (MD) of Motorcare Uganda in March, her journey reflects a strategic blend of financial discipline, people-centric leadership, and a commitment to reshaping the industry's gender landscape.

From her office overlooking the Motorcare showroom, Makada keeps her door wide open, a symbolic gesture that mirrors her leadership philosophy of accessibility and transparency. Her decade-long tenure, she says, has been both interesting and fruitful, with her having achieved more than 90 percent of the goals she set 10 years ago.

From finance to the front office

Makada's path to the top was paved by a deep, ground-level understanding of the company's operations. Her previous role as finance and business planning manager gave her a clear view of the company's weaknesses and inefficiencies, providing a firm foundation for strategic growth.

"Typically, finance people police companies, but they are also auditors who understand many things in detail," she explains. This insider's perspective allowed her to step into the MD role with a clear roadmap for change.

Building a self-driven team

One of Makada's first and most significant operational changes was a philosophical shift in workforce management. She moved away from a model of close supervision to cultivating a team that operates with autonomy and ownership.

"When I became managing director, I had to grow a strong workforce that works independently to achieve desired organisational goals. This makes my life easier; having a self-driven team that understands what to do with minimum supervision. Among the other operational changes I made to be more effective and efficient, this is my greatest success," Makada says.

Revvig up government business

A major strategic goal was to expand Motorcare's business with the government, the country's largest buyer of vehicles. When she took over, government business accounted for between 20 and 30 percent of total revenue. Moreover, this segment was fragmented, with a separate entity, Kampala Nissan, handling government accounts.

Makada consolidated this



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relationship, bringing all government business under Motorcare. To grow the segment, she took a hands-on approach, personally visiting ministries and parastatals to meet permanent secretaries and executive directors.

"I listened to their issues and challenges about our brand and discussed how to improve. One particular issue was the cost of maintenance," she recalls. In response, she implemented significant pricing changes, including sacrificing company margins and enhancing volume discounts to remain competitive. "When we did our last parts pricing survey in this market, it was competitive," she notes.

The result was dramatic; government revenue surged to over 70 percent of total business. She notes that recent government policy changes have reduced direct purchasing, but the robust relationship she built during her tenure remains a cornerstone of the

company's success.

Encouraging women into leadership

Beyond balance sheets and market share, Makada's most visible impact has been on the company's demographics and culture. She has actively worked to correct gender imbalance, not just through hiring quotas, but through a deliberate philosophy of mentorship and empowerment.

"When I became MD, women made up approximately 15 percent of the workforce, compared to the current average of 45 percent," she says. "It was not just about growing numbers, but encouraging women into boardrooms. The only way they can get there is through grooming, training, and giving them confidence that it is possible."

Makada is clear-eyed about the advantages she sees. "I hold no bias against men, but I find women more results-oriented, structured, and go-getters."

Mastering the operational engine

Makada emphasises that a successful automotive dealership relies on more than just sales. It demands robust operational and stock management. Even with high sales, she warns, poor data management, stock control, and inefficient debt collection can undermine success, a situation she describes as falling into "minimise days' sales outstanding."

Her focus on these fundamentals is evident in the company's logistics. Despite keeping stock levels for 2023, 2024, and 2025 minimal compared to total inventory, Motorcare has maintained a fill rate, the availability of parts when a customer needs them, of more than 97 percent.

Standing tall in a male-dominated sector

While acknowledging the industry's historical gender gap, Makada believes the tide is turning as more women gain confidence in their ability to lead. She argues that this shift begins in childhood.

"They are biologically different, but in terms of ability, a girl can and should do what a boy can do. At university, no courses are meant for boys or girls, just as it should be in the workplace. Women have learnt to balance work and life, to be mothers and CEOs at the same time," she asserts.

Her advice to women navigating such sectors is grounded in competence and relationship-building. "Everyone thinks the automotive industry is for men, but at the end of the day, it is about management, understanding your business and people, and knowing how to get results from the people you lead. Because I do that well, they believe in and respect me. We work as a team to achieve desired results."

A foundation of values and hard work

Makada's leadership is guided by a personal set of values. Known for being tough, she says it stems from a desire to see her staff succeed. "I do not like seeing staff fail. Sometimes people say I am tough, but I am because I want people to become better in life. I offer a supportive hand to my staff because I believe that when they achieve their targets, I also achieve mine."

This philosophy of hard work and possibility is paired with a remarkable capacity for multitasking. She often runs multiple projects simultaneously and has been known to volunteer support to field staff unprompted. This trait explains how she held two positions simultaneously at Motorcare from the time she joined in 1996 until her promotion to MD in 2016, serving in roles ranging from network administrator to sales manager and finance manager.

Background

After a brief stint at the Tanzania Electricity Supply Company, Makada returned to Uganda.

Following a short period at a bank, she joined Motorcare (then Kampala Nissan) as a network administrator in 1996. Her commitment to continuous learning saw her become a chartered accountant in the UK in 2005, earn a Bachelor of Science in Applied Accounting from Oxford Brookes University in 2006, and complete a senior management course at Stellenbosch University in South Africa.

Her rise from network administrator to managing director is a testament to the very message she champions; that with knowledge, resilience, and the right support, women can not only enter but also lead in any sector.



Gender.

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Florence Sempelbwa Makada

FAMILY

Born in Mukono District, the middle child of two girls and two boys, Makada's foundation was laid at Matala Boarding School (now Nkoyoyo Boarding Primary School) and Gayaza High School. In 1991, she attended the University of Dar-es-Salaam under an East African exchange program, earning a Bachelor of Science in Computer Science with Statistics.