

JOURNEY TO LEADERSHIP WITH

Mr. Benson Ndung'u Chief Executive Officer & Senior Partner, KPMG East Africa



Q1. Let's start by delving into your background. Could you tell us about your early experiences and how they shaped your career path?

I was born and brought up in rural Kenya. My dad was a Pastor and he ensured that a deep foundation of faith was consistently nurtured in the family. My mother was a strict disciplinarian, a perfectionist. Together with my seven siblings, we often felt her wrath any moment we would go astray, and there were many!

In our early formative years, coming home in the evening after a grueling day in primary school, we would find all manner of household chores assigned to each one of us and they all had to be completed to perfection, well before dusk. There was a great sense of teamwork, selflessness and accountability among the siblings to ensure these targets were met. These are virtues that align perfectly with what I do today in my professional life.

Back in school, I was very strong with numbers and mathematics happened to be one of my favorite subjects. My dad never wasted any moment to remind me how good I was in the subject, and he would constantly encourage me to ensure that in future I pursued a career that involved numbers.

My dad identified the genius in me and affirmed it all the time, which drove me on and shaped the career path that I finally took. This is an experience that I strive to draw from in my everyday interactions.

I went on to pursue a Bachelor's degree in Business and Economics at Kenyatta University and later an MBA at the University of Nairobi. By the time I was completing my time at the university, it was clear to me that I needed to join one of the big accounting firms in the country. Within two weeks of leaving the university classroom, I joined KPMG and the rest is history.

Q2. Tell us about your diverse experiences and years in this industry and what motivated you to become the CEO of KPMG East Africa.

I started my career at KPMG as an Audit trainee in Kenya. Over the last 29 years, I have had the privilege of working with and providing services to some of the largest corporates in diverse industries in East Africa. My experience cuts across a wide range of clients both in private and public sectors. My foundation in the profession was built on a strong audit background which had a bias in financial services industry and large corporates.

I have been lucky to have had the opportunity in the firm to diversify my skills beyond audit. At managerial level and even as partner, I had the opportunity to work with colleagues in the advisory practice to provide consultancy services to a diverse portfolio of clients. I also ventured and worked with our tax colleagues in the firm to provide tax services to clients across East Africa.

As part of my growth in the firm, I was privileged to serve in the role of head of tax in East Africa for a period of two years before I assumed my current role of CEO, KPMG East Africa, five years ago.

I spent approximately twelve years in Uganda as the managing partner of our firm in the market before relocating back to Kenya in 2017.

This deep orientation with the KPMG service offerings and working across different countries that make up East Africa prepared me well for the role that I play today in the firm. To me, it has been a journey full of learning and fulfilment in every step.

Q3. Shifting focus to KPMG East Africa, could you provide some insights into core values driving its growth and sustainability?

At KPMG, our purpose is to inspire confidence and empower change. We work with and help clients both in private and public sector in doing projects that seek to transform society.

As a professional services firm, public trust is central to everything that we do. This is achieved through a set of core values that define our culture as a people with a code of conduct that shapes behavior. Integrity, Excellence, Courage, Together, For Better.

These Values represent who we are and what we believe in. They are the guiding principles for our day-to-day actions and help us choose between right and wrong. Each of our staff play a role in our success as a firm, and by acting in accordance with these values, we become trustworthy as individuals and shape how we are viewed by the world as an organization.

As a firm, trust and integrity are important in how our people, clients and diverse stakeholders experience and perceive us. Every day, our people are interacting and delivering for our clients. They are therefore our foremost priority. Their dedication drives our success, shapes our market perception, and fosters trust. We hold integrity and quality in all our business activities as non negotiable principles.

Our values play a big role in helping us attract top talent to KPMG and instill confidence in our clients. They help inculcate and sustain an ethical culture that also exemplifies diversity, equity and inclusivity. Our organizational culture is therefore a direct reflection of these core values and attributes, that continuously shape our reputation in the market.

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Q4. How has your vision for the company evolved in response to recent challenges?

This is a timely question. The business landscape has been evolving very fast and on multiple fronts. This year, which also happens to be the 10th anniversary since KPMG launched the KPMG CEO Outlook survey globally, we have highlighted the volatility, ranging from the economic and social shockwaves of the COVID-19 pandemic to the resurgence of inflation and geopolitical tensions that have defined the last decade. This can be found in our [KPMG Global 2024 CEO Outlook](#) and [KPMG 2024 East Africa CEO Outlook Report](#).

Our vision has focused on fostering greater resilience, adaptability, and innovation within KPMG and for our clients. This involves prioritizing digital transformation including artificial intelligence, enhancing data analytics capabilities and fostering a culture of continuous learning and development.

We have also placed a stronger emphasis on sustainability and social responsibility, recognizing that our role extends beyond just business success. By integrating these elements into our core strategies, we aim to create value not just for our people, clients and other stakeholders, but also for the communities in which we operate. This holistic approach ensures that we remain relevant, responsible, and forward-thinking in an ever-changing world.

Our overall vision is to ensure that KPMG continues to play a central role in making the world a better place both from within our organization and through the work that we do.

Q5. Considering the organisational culture, what specific type of culture do you envision for the company, and what benefits do you believe it should yield?

As I mentioned earlier, our values are the foundation of our culture. They underpin every decision we make and every action we take. As a firm built on the strength of our people, we recognize that our achievements are a direct reflection of their dedication and expertise.

KPMG's culture is characterized by inclusivity – fostering a sense of belonging, innovation, and integrity. We value diversity of thoughts and ideas – ensuring that every voice is heard. We believe that encouraging diverse perspectives can lead to innovative solutions for KPMG and our clients. Our employee value proposition reflects the inclusive environment that KPMG is.

We have a culture that drives a high degree of self and collective accountability which helps in measuring outcomes and in driving business decision making.

'Challenges and Opportunities'

Q6. Reflecting on your journey to the CEO position, what are some of the most significant challenges you encountered as you progressed to this role?

I became CEO of KPMG East Africa in mid-2019. I knew in this role I was going to experience some challenges but not at the scale that in no time was to manifest.

Towards the end of 2019, *Covid-19* was reported in some parts of Asia and by March 2020, it was a full-scale global crisis. This was an unprecedented global health crisis which brought about widespread disruptions, from lockdowns and travel restrictions to economic slowdown.

Navigating through this period required immediate and intuitive action to ensure the safety and well-being of our employees while maintaining operational continuity. We swiftly transitioned to a remote working environment, leveraging digital technologies to sustain productivity and collaboration. Our clients were also experiencing unprecedented times, and we needed to walk with them on this journey as their service provider. I immediately appreciated the scale and benefit of being a member of a global organization. Whereas nobody had answers or previous experience with what was facing us, attending virtual global forums that were quickly put together was a pivotal moment as iterative ideas came through that I would progressively draw from in dealing with our local circumstances. I recall, in April 2020, still early in the pandemic, we were able to share with our clients a framework for maintaining operational resilience to help in building financial, operational, and commercial resilience. It helped many of them.

Geopolitics is another issue that may sound as if it is remote to most of us in East Africa. No, it is not. It impacts our ability to service global clients in some instances. Case in point is cloud computing where suddenly due to political tensions across the globe, as a firm we were not able to serve clients in certain jurisdictions and we had to explain to those clients why there were difficulties. It was also similar with the advent of Russia-Ukraine war and the emergent blacklisting of corporates. These are situations that draw more from people skills and less on technical skills to navigate.

I realized very early on that my role was clearly more to do with people relations both inside and outside of the firm than it was to do with direct service delivery. This is the only way to build trust and get people to perform at their best and also give beyond what they are contracted to do. So, getting this *balance of time* right was a challenge at the beginning. This gets more complicated while dealing with differing expectations from various stakeholders and ensuring that everyone remains motivated in the pursuit of excellence and doing the right thing, always.

I am privileged to be leading a team of outstanding professionals who have an unwavering commitment to their professional duty.

I am very proud of the team that I have across the entire firm in East Africa. The innovative mindset, adaptability and agility in solutioning some of the most challenging situations has been exceptional and a source of inspiration for me.

This pool of talent that reside in the firm has made it easy for me, as I am able to draw from its capacity in flipping the day-to-day challenges of my office into opportunities that make a difference in delivering impact and transforming society. I have an advisory council of young professionals in the firm that I use as a sounding board on a continuous basis.

Q7. Given the recent increased demand for integrating Artificial Intelligence (AI) into organizational activities, what is your perception of it, and how do you foresee its impact on businesses in the next five years?

Artificial Intelligence (AI) is becoming the way of life. In our [KPMG Global 2024 CEO Outlook](#) and [KPMG 2024 East Africa CEO Outlook](#) reports released recently, CEOs across the globe are prioritizing investments in Artificial Intelligence. They see implementation of AI as a means to harness innovation, increasing profitability, enhancing the diversity of skills and capabilities, and boosting efficiency and productivity through the automation of routine operations, among other benefits. AI also enables faster data analysis - empowering organizations to make data-driven decisions, such as personalized customer service.

AI is however not without a challenge. Despite its numerous benefits, the cost of implementation is a concern for businesses. Ethical implementation of AI is a major challenge due to concerns about data and intellectual property protection. AI is also seen as a double-edged sword, helping in cyber-attack response but also opening avenues for new attacks. Some of these challenges can be addressed through regulation which is currently lacking – requiring organizations to in-house develop these, even as they proactively work with regulators to formulate the regulations.

In our [2023 KPMG Generative AI Survey](#), the findings indicated that GenAI technology attracted more than US\$1.37 billion in venture capital in 2022 – more than was invested in the previous five years combined.

I anticipate a significant increase in the adoption of AI in business activities most importantly as a means of driving sustainable value creation and defining competitive advantage. It will definitely require a significant investment in reskilling and skilling of staff as a way of future proofing them. Business processes, models and products will certainly also require redefining. Those organizations that embed AI and optimally harness its potential in their entire business ecosystem while effectively managing the downside, will leap big in years to come.

Q8. What is your take on ESG and the key role it plays in organizations to address climate change?

In recent years, Environmental, Social, and Governance (ESG) principles have become central to businesses, governments, and communities alike. The COVID-19 pandemic, in particular, highlighted existence of significant failings in addressing climate change and societal challenges such as inclusion, diversity, and equity, especially in accessing economic opportunities.

In our *KPMG Global 2021 CEO Outlook* and *2021 KPMG East Africa CEO Outlook*, majority of CEOs noted that as confidence and trust in governments declined, the public was looking to businesses to fill the void on societal challenges, such as gender inequality or climate change. Consequently, CEOs recognized that large corporations have the resources – both financial and people – to help governments find solutions to pressing global challenges.

Globally, including our market, organizations now regard ESG as a vital tool for creating value. They are recognizing its influence in enhancing employee engagement, fostering customer relationships, and promoting positive brand association. With a well-informed public, ESG is increasingly affecting the ability to attract top talent and secure investments.

Organizations have a pivotal role in addressing climate change. Most large corporations are signatories of the UN Global Compact and have pledged to achieve net zero emissions by 2030. However, insights from our CEO Outlook surveys over the past three years have revealed concerns regarding their capacity to meet this ambitious goal.

Despite these challenges, there are encouraging developments. Companies are increasingly adopting rigorous standards for climate disclosures, which will enable them to hold themselves accountable and exhibit transparency in their environmental impact. They are also actively engaging with the local communities where they operate to address climate change and other societal challenges.

Q9. As you reflect on your journey, what advice would you offer to growing leaders seeking to advance their careers?

Firstly, you must have a clear purpose at individual level that you aspire to achieve in life. This should be aligned to your organization's purpose otherwise you will not succeed. To be meaningful, your purpose should have the potential to impact others beyond your personal self.

Secondly, understand that learning has no end, and it should be continuous. Learn from people around you and those you interact with. Always challenge yourself to be better and never get complacent. I have learnt on my journey that there is something new to learn every day. You need to be prepared to learn from outside your comfort zone or area of expertise. Every setback you encounter along the way should be an opportunity to better yourself.

Patience is an irreplaceable virtue. Understand that there are some skills that you shall only gain through experience and never from a book.

Most importantly, it is important to understand that leadership is a selfless service to others. This attribute should be evident long before you get into a high office.

You should have a genuine interest in the team you lead and their welfare. Start practicing this virtue early in your career with the team that you lead today.



Mr. Benson Ndung'u, CEO & Senior Partner, KPMG East Africa, delivering opening remarks at the 2023 BCCK - KPMG CEO Outlook Breakfast at Capital Club in Nairobi.

Q10. What three things would you advise aspiring business leaders looking to transition into leadership roles?

As a leader you generate results through other people and it doesn't matter how strong you are technically but rather how best you can deliver success by getting the team to perform at their optimal best.

Firstly, your ability to collaborate effectively with individuals and harness their strengths is crucial. Only with your team's support can your vision as a leader come to fruition. Emotional Intelligence (EI) is therefore very important. For aspiring leaders, developing EI can significantly enhance your ability to connect with your team, foster a collaborative environment, and navigate the complexities of human dynamics in the workplace. You must also learn to actively listen. It is important as a leader to keep your word as a way of building trust with the team as well.

Secondly, the business landscape is evolving rapidly, driven by technological advancements, market dynamics, and global trends. Aspiring leaders must commit to lifelong learning, be agile and adaptable to change. This mindset allows you to stay relevant, embrace innovation, and drive sustainable value creation for your organization.

Lastly, be humble and be ready to learn from your team. Seek to hire people who can positively challenge you. Be prepared to develop your team. Create an environment that will help each of your team member gain a sense of belonging that allows them to perform at their optimal best.

“Leadership is a selfless service to others”

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Q11. Throughout your career, what three resources have significantly influenced your journey?

At the outset of my career, I heavily relied on reading books about business and leadership skills, which primarily involved purchasing physical copies. Although I continue to read books today, advancements in the delivery of reading materials have provided me with the option of reading online.

Additionally, I stay informed and enhance my knowledge by attending conferences, business forums and active engagement in my social networks. I do also participate in leadership courses and masterclasses conducted by esteemed institutions.

I also enjoy listening to podcasts by thought leaders in fields such as leadership, well-being, and spirituality.

Parting Line

“To be an effective leader, prioritizing your well-being is essential. Take time for personal wellbeing which encompasses not only self-care but also spending quality time with your loved ones. It gives you the foundation to serve others and provide a platform for success in your leadership role.”