



**Values in Uganda we want to preserve while doing business**

## Relational business works on chains of trusted relationships not contracts

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In Uganda, business operates more informally and less contractually which is easy when there is a direct exchange of goods, services and money. However, when you order goods and services, trust becomes the currency. You make a payment via mobile money without a formal contract, and delivery follows later.

Deliveries are often handled by a Boda Boda (motorcycle driver), a third-party trusted to transport goods from one place to another without any formal agreement. This system is sustained through a network of trusted relationships. You are introduced to a seller by someone you trust, who essentially vouches for the seller's reliability. Likewise, the seller has their trusted Boda Boda guy to handle these transactions. These chains of trusted relationships hold the entire system together.

If someone breaks the trust, they risk being excluded from a network of friends, clients or business partners which can be damaging also for the business.

Coming from Germany, this way of doing business initially felt thrilling – especially the time I sent a few thousand USD for a gorilla trip. All I had as confirmation was an itinerary sent via WhatsApp and a message acknowledging receipt of funds. It was such a relief and joy when the operator actually arrived to pick us up, and from there, the trip was built on a foundation of trust. This relational way of doing business added something special to the experience. The absence of a detailed contract gave me the freedom to embrace the trip as it unfolded, instead of fixating on rigid expectations.

This way of conducting business nourishes human connections. Once a strong bond of trust is formed, everything moves at an accelerated pace. The web of social connections relieves the pressure of having to handle everything yourself, making the process not just efficient, but enjoyable and supportive.

## Relational business enhances collaboration

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In a relational business environment, the quality of services is higher, and collaboration between businesses is more natural. Products and services are less standardized – there are tailored to meet your specific needs. Sellers often go the extra mile to find exactly what you want, even if it means they won't make a sale this time as they connect you with another seller. Ultimately, they trust that you'll return, and even recommend them to others. Likewise, the seller you ended up purchasing from will likely recommend the first seller for further business.

This approach makes the overall experience more rewarding for everyone involved. The seller doesn't have to push something the buyer doesn't need, while the buyer receives a product that truly fits their needs, making them feel seen and valued – something every human desires. It's a pleasure to call that seller again.

However, I also had a transactional experience, when I bought a car. That experience served as a reminder of how special a relational approach is. After the car purchase, I felt stressed for two days before I could finally enjoy the car. Needless to say, I won't be recommending that seller to anyone.

With relational business, you're not just making sales – you're building a connection with the buyer and at the same time a marketing web where satisfied customers naturally recommend you to others. On top of that, these positive, pleasant connections contribute to everyone's well-being, strengthening relationships and even improving health by reducing stress and fostering a sense of trust and connection.

## Less control but aligning with the flow of life asks us to trust into life

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Life in East Africa flows with less control but more alignment to the natural rhythms of life. My first experience of this was back in 2011, when I started a solar business in Tanzania. I quickly realized that my daily to-do list became irrelevant after the first day. Power outages were just one of the many unexpected disruptions. Yet, amidst these challenges, life offered unexpected gifts – chance connections and encounters that brought me closer to my goals, often more easily or with better outcomes than I had anticipated. Of course, there were setbacks too, as life tends to be unpredictable.

Since then, infrastructure in the region has improved, but life here remains far less predictable than in other parts of the world. You might start the day with one plan, but five different things could happen instead. Maybe you'll accomplish your task, but only if the timing is right. I've learned that the clearer I am about my overall direction, the better the outcome – provided I don't try to control every step of the way. For me, this means developing deeper trust in life's unfolding.

Surrendering to this natural flow requires trusting in life in all its forms: success and failure, birth and death, joy and sorrow. I've learned that embracing all these aspects, without trying to force myself into a constant state of happiness, brings a sense of peace and joy. While Germans often complain about small things, I've encountered so many smiling and laughing Ugandans, even in the face of real hardship.

The key is to allow life to unfold and stop trying to control it away from its natural course. If we're truly honest with ourselves, control and manipulation never work in the long run. In fact, they bring constant stress. This way of living may seem less efficient, at least if efficiency is measured in monetary terms. But in the grander scheme, it ensures the health of living systems. Isn't that the ultimate goal – to improve life?

## It takes a village to raise a child

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Uganda used to embody the saying, “It takes a village to raise a child.” In the villages, people genuinely cared for one another, making decisions with others’ well-being in mind. Helping the less fortunate was seen as a communal responsibility, while individuals also generated wealth for themselves. The idea was that “the best way to store your food is in your neighbor’s stomach,” emphasizing shared abundance.

There was a strong support network made up of guardians, siblings, grandparents, aunts, uncles, and clan members. They ensured that no wrongdoings went unchecked. This interconnected web provided enough support for individuals to not only care for themselves but also extend generosity to others, creating an unbroken chain of gratitude and charity within the community.

I had the privilege of meeting a SACCO\* group in a village while working with a solar company that donated solar torches and a mobile phone charging station. The people welcomed us so innocently with wide smiles and genuine curiosity. Despite their modest means, they gifted us two chickens, millet and cassava. It’s remarkable how, despite having so little, they gave so much. Their mindset is one of abundance, and reciprocity is deeply valued. Watching children roam freely and safely in the village, I saw a sense of security and trust we have lost in the industrialized world.

Unfortunately, this social cohesion is fading, especially as you move closer to cities. Cultural events are increasingly confined to immediate family, and acts of compassion and charity are becoming less common. Yet, some still remember this way of life, and a few entrepreneurs I work with are determined to preserve it. One woman shared that her goal in making profit is to also be able to pay school fees for many more children and support families in need.

How would the world change if we shared our resources and took care of each other? Wouldn’t it make us richer in a more holistic sense?

# Definitions of trusted relationships

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## 1. Definition of Trust

**Trust is our willingness to be vulnerable** to actions of others because we believe they have good intentions and will behave well towards us. We let others have power over us because we think they won't hurt us but will help us. Trust is a double-edged sword; we can also be betrayed.

**The formula of trust** is compassion, sincerity, reliability, competence and good communication.

## 2. Relational versus transactional connections

**Relational connections** are rooted, reciprocal and naturally rewarding. There is a natural give and take. They feel safe. It is about how things get done. It's about winning hearts and minds of people. Relational engagement methods operate with a long-term view, aimed at building relationships and acknowledging the need for a stable foundation for future engagements (longer-term mutual benefits).

**Transactional connections** are temporary, self-serving and taxing on the mind, body and spirit and are all about short-term. Get what you want and win the sale without much thought to the customer's need or the longer-term (short-term benefit for self).