

# How Vodacom navigates the CMO-CEO relationship

 By [Karabo Ledwaba](#)

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In the dynamic world of corporate leadership, the relationship between a chief executive officer (CEO) and a chief marketing officer (CMO) often stands at the crossroads of innovation and strategy.



Andisa Ntsubane is Vodacom's CMO. Source: Supplied.

It's a partnership that can be both powerful and occasionally fraught with tension. The CEO is responsible for steering the company's overall vision and financial health, while the CMO plays a pivotal role in shaping the brand, customer engagement, and market positioning.

Vodacom CEO Sitho Mdlalose and CMO Andisa Ntsubane, had a chat with Heineken's marketing director Sharon Keith, on how successful collaboration between these two crucial roles can drive a company's success.

## Stop and start

CMOs on average last only three years at a company, while CEOs often stay for five years, and this can impact the business because of the stop and start nature that shapes the relationship.

Mdlalose commented: "Marketers come into a role and everything that was done by the person before is seen as average

and what you have is new and different. That stop-start nature of the relationship needs to adapt to bring out the best of the organisation and not the individuals involved.”

Ntsubane says the tension between the two roles often happens because CEOs overstep their understanding of marketing.

“The big thing is everyone thinks they are a marketer, we have to make sure we get alignment up front and early. I think in my first week at Vodacom, Sitho and I sat and started to talk about the expectations which is important.

“One of the first things to get over the line is the role that marketing will play in the organisation. We need to make sure there is alignment between brand strategy and business strategy. The ultimate responsibility for us as leaders is to make sure we leave brands and businesses with better equity than when we found them.”



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Ntsubane adds that in his role he has had to learn the language of the business and the habits of Mdlalose to get the most out of their relationship.

“It’s about building that trust and creating that relationship based on trust. Sometimes we don’t help ourselves as marketers because in the first instance we do not speak the language of the business.”

"We have to learn the language and find a way to consistently engage between the CEO and CMO and I personally have found a rhythm with him. I have interesting ways of finding out when I can reach him, when I can call him, is he in his car on his way home? Just making sure there is constant communication," says Ntsubane.

## Tension on action and sustainability

Mdlalose says what often drives tension between CMO’s and CEO’s is the battle between long-term plans and short-term plans.

He says a lot of times, the CMO and CEO agree on a long-term plan that is then disrupted by immediate emergencies like load shedding.

“I might agree we do what Andisa wants, but as the year goes on Eskom and load shedding get worse and I need to then decide if I need to transfer some of those funds into diesel generators to keep the network running,” says Mdlalose.

But he said when the two properly communicate they will decide and agree on what is best for the business.



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Adds Ntsubane: “We fully appreciate that focusing on one and neglecting the other has a significant negative impact. If you think of Vodacom as a brand, in 2023, people still remember with great fondness *Yebo Gogo* and the heart and emotion is still remembered today.

"Since then we have had a big focus on product, and driving sale and you can see the connection between where we are and where we were. It really is about finding the balance of finding the heart and emotion in the brand and bringing back

that sense of hope and inspiration."

He says there is not a lot of optimism in the country, and brands have a significant role to play in bringing that optimism and pride back.

## The budget

*“ As marketing leaders we are very good at complaining about budgets but we are not good at telling businesses what they are going to get for their investment. We really need to step-up and start thinking how we build those business cases for investment ”*

"We also need to look at both local and international best practice on marketing spend and bring that external data into some of these conversations because it's useful. C-suite executives don't necessarily know why it costs so much and that's important, but we also have to do a better job of reducing waste," says Ntsubane.

## Consistency and innovation

Mdlalose concludes that to keep consistent while driving innovation needs for leaders to drop unconscious bias and be open to new ideas.

"I have to drop the unconscious bias [from previous CMOs and strategies] and see if we can do better and be more special even if what we have is very good. The second is not saying no all the time, it's easy to say no all the time but what that does is bring a stop to innovative thinking."

## ABOUT KARABO LEDWABA

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