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Company Name: Straight Talk Foundation
Plot 4 Acacia Avenue
Industry: Health and Development Communication
Years in Business: 18 years

Introduction

My name is Suzan Ojok, I am the Executive Director for Straight Talk Foundation and I have served in this organization for the past eighteen years in different capacities and I have only served as Executive Director for six years. This is my sixth year.

I joined the Organization in 1998 when I was still a young person fresh from the university. It was my first place of work. I joined as a data clerk. Since joining, I have grown professionally and intellectually and I served in various capacities as a development worker, mobilizing communities to support our programs, I also served as an operations officer managing our relationships with partners. I served as a Grants manager mobilizing resources from donors and other partners. Then I also served as Director of Programs offering leadership and direction to our program until 2010 when the position for Executive Director became vacant and I applied and competed with other candidates and I took it on since October 2010.

Straight Talk currently offers the following services:

- *Communication products: Print (Young Talk, Straight Talk, Ugandan language Straight Talk in four languages). For visually impaired young people, we produce and distribute Braille versions of Young Talk and Straight Talk. Radio programs production: To date STF has worked with up to 17 Ugandan languages*
- *Youth friendly health services: We run youth centers in Karamoja and northern Uganda; that serve as safe spaces for young people to seek services in confidence (access, privacy and appropriate provider attitude)*
- *Capacity building: STF offers skills development for young people in various areas such as communication, peer counseling and general sexual and reproductive health communication. The organization provides training for teachers in handling sexual and reproductive health for learners in schools.*
- *Livelihoods and environment programs: Young people are empowered with knowledge and skills to be productive individuals. STF equips them with financial management, forestry and agricultural skills and knowledge.*

What would you describe as your biggest achievement?

My biggest personal achievement has been the growth I have attained to date as a female leader in Uganda serving as a Chief Executive of an organization devoted to offering quality programs to improve the health and wellbeing of young people in Uganda. My story is a source

of inspiration to many young females aspiring to take on positions of leadership. My leadership journey started about 18 years ago when I joined Straight Talk Foundation as a Data clerk. Having served in various capacities in the organization; I have grown personally and professionally by learning and sharing my efforts working on programs that have been very instrumental in enabling young people make informed life choices and realize their full potential. After completing school, it never occurred to me that I would one day serve in such capacity in an organization.

Since establishment; the organization has achieved consistent growth in its programming portfolio, by developing products that meet the ever changing needs of young people in Uganda. Although Straight Talk Foundation's specialty is adolescent sexual and reproductive health (ASRH), the model has proven successful in implementation of programs targeting various categories of young people. My work involves offering opportunities to so many young people throughout the country and empowering them to make better choices.

How is your product/service unique from others in the same industry?

Although there are many actors in the youth programming sector, the uniqueness about Straight Talk Foundation is its ability to develop products that concurrently address different themes with health for young people; examples of these include livelihoods, education, climate change; ICT, to mention but a few.

- We are a service delivery organization whose priority is to ensure that the audience needs are constantly met. We also take cognizance of the diversity that exists among young people (In school, out of school, rural/urban, illiterate/literate, married/unmarried, living with/without disability, living with HIV, to mention but a few) Our products are tailored to suit these unique needs of young people; and this is informed by continued research on such needs.
- Our products are given a youthful outlook. We are committed to placing media and ICT in the hands of children and youth (E.g. Journalist for a day and the Junior Journalist program). The young people we work with are capacitated to use ICT – they receive basic training in computer use, social media, journalism, photography including hosting programs for and by children/young people.
- Content for our products is informed by the thoughts and opinions of young people; thereby enhancing communication from young people to fellow young people. Using such innovations ensures that young people are not mere recipients of our services but also important actors in delivering such programs. This has created a great sense of young people's ownership of our products.
- In STF's opinion, we believe young people are the leaders of today. Our capacity building initiatives include leadership development for young people, no matter what level of education they have attained.
- There is unique use of ICT to champion the organizations objectives. The organization has piloted 3 knowledge learning centers that serve as a free ICT facility for young people to

acquire basic computer skills; adopt the use of ICT in accessing health information (Gulu, Kitgum, Nwoya districts).

What would you say are the major challenges experienced by your business and how have you managed to overcome them?

- The challenges faced by young people in Uganda continue to evolve and grow; many of which are driven by social and economic factors. Straight Talk Foundation re-invents itself through research to design new products and programs to meet these evolving needs. We consult young people for the most viable initiatives that meet their needs.
- Limited access to resources to support youth programs including livelihoods: Innovation and creativity are at the center of our programming. We strive to use cost effective means to deliver programs including establishing partnerships with other actors whose programs compliment ours.
- As a female leader; there have been challenges associated with how people perceive female leaders in a male dominated sector. It is often assumed that only males can excel at leadership ; but this has been proved wrong. This I have managed to overcome by always working towards excelling in all the work that I undertake.

We have managed to minimize these challenges by;

- Through research, Straight Talk Foundation continuously innovates programs that respond to the evolving needs of young people in Uganda. Straight Talk Foundation has the capacity to adapt itself to changing situations regarding the lives of young people.
- Straight Talk Foundation has created a brand that is trusted and respected by youth and important stakeholders. We ensure that our programs fit in the priorities of young people and the country at large.
- Whereas some agencies choose to serve only a particular category, Straight Talk Foundation serves young people from all walks of life including working among those in hard to reach places like Karamoja including adults who influence young people's lives. This guided by the ecological model that defines the various levels of intervention for young people and important actors in their lives.
- In programming for young people; we use a holistic (emotional, physical, social and economic wellbeing) approach that requires addressing important aspects of a young person by working across important sectors relevant to the lives of young people in Uganda.

Where do you see your business in the next 3-5 years?

In the coming years, we want to see Straight Talk Foundation positioned as a self-sustaining organization generating sufficient resources to sustain its programs. We will develop and implement a strategy to attract resources to support the organization's existence. In the next five years the organization shall be a global center of excellence for social and behavior change communication; with various entities learning from the successes of Straight Talk Foundation.

Apart from providing the product/service offered by your business, how has your business contributed to your community?

Among many countries in the world; Uganda is one of those that has a youthful population for whom the programs of Straight Talk Foundation have been designed. Since establishment; we have served several generations of young people who are testimony to the good work of Straight Talk Foundation. We have made contributions in the following areas:

- Among several communities, youth champions of Straight Talk Foundation have been created among individuals who have been beneficiaries of Straight Talk Foundation programs; they continue to inspire other young people through their efforts. Several of such young people are held in high regard by their communities because they serve as role models.
- The print materials from Straight Talk Foundation have improved the reading culture among young people. The materials have often served as reference for parents, teachers and caregivers.
- Overall our programs have enhanced community access to health information and services especially among hard to reach and marginalized groups. The organization has thriving collaborations with several civil society organizations and actors in the youth programming sector.
- Straight Talk Foundation has proactively served marginalized groups such as young people with disability. In Straight Talk Foundation programming; there have been innovations such as home based care to enhance health service delivery to young people with mobility challenges. This is augmented by Braille and dialogue with their family members especially on addressing stigma and discrimination against people with disability.
- Facilitating community problem solving in Uganda using diverse channels suited to meet the communities' needs. In Karamoja for example, where enrolment and completion of at least primary school education is low; Straight Talk Foundation has engaged with communities to devise local solutions to local problems. The use of community theatre spearheaded by community members is one such successful initiative in Karamoja. Straight Talk Foundation has also created a strong community of youth who serve as "Junior Journalists" facilitating radio programs that provide a platform for people in Karamoja to discuss their community challenges (In Ngakarimjong, Pokot and Lebthur)
- Empowering youth with skills that make them productive individuals. Among communities, youth have been empowered to initiate business enterprises of their own contributing to household incomes. Examples of this include supporting youth with skills in agro forestry and establishing woodlots. Several out of school youth led *Straight Talk* clubs have evolved into community based organizations; creating a multiplier effect of Straight Talk Foundation efforts.
- Our programs in environment have empowered communities to mitigate the adverse effects of climate change. Communities have embraced tree planting to serve as wind breakers and make contributions to rain formation. Communities too, have established own woodlots serving as habitats for the fauna in their communities hence boosting the

- ecosystem services and promoting sustainable natural resource management. Trees are now viewed as sources of income.
- Straight Talk Foundation has built the capacity of communities and schools to engage in crop production enterprises .This has been achieved through the promotion of intercropping, and instilling basic business skills among schools and farming communities
 - Communities that have benefited from the Straight Talk Foundation livelihoods programs have been empowered to practice agriculture with business sense in mind. In our programs; beneficiaries have been empowered to promote the teaching and learning of agriculture in schools. Such initiatives have been critical in addressing food supply among schools that are often unable to provide meals to learners.
 - Straight Talk Foundation has trained Energy Service Providers (ESPs) who enroll community members and train them in the construction of energy cook stoves as a means to conserve energy. Many women are saved from the hassles of searching for firewood to prepare meals. This gives them time to rest and be in the company of their family members.

What have you done to develop/empower other women?

- Gender sensitivity is one of Straight Talk Foundation core values. We strive to ensure that women and young girls are meaningfully involved in our programs. We proactively devise initiatives that respond to the unique needs of girls.
- Empowering young girls to enroll and keep in school: Straight Talk Foundation has been a major actor in championing girls' education in Uganda. Often Straight Talk Foundation is approached by partners such as UNFPA, Unicef, Save the Children; etc to join hands with them in addressing vices such as teenage pregnancy and early marriage that hinder girls empowerment and attainment of education.
- Supporting women and young mothers with livelihoods skills and connecting them to innovations: We have had programs targeting young girls engaged in commercial sex work; STF equipped them with knowledge and skills to initiate alternative sources of income; thereby discouraging them from engaging in risky sexual behavior that can pre dispose them to HIV.
- Working with women and young mothers to improve their wellbeing. The organization proactively develops and implements programs that involve young women and girls. In Northern Uganda Straight Talk Foundation has facilitated the formation of young mothers' groups. An important activity was supporting them technically to operate their saving schemes; from which they can borrow to initiate livelihoods projects.
- Addressing menstrual hygiene. Many girls drop out of school as a result of menstruation related challenges. STF in its programs has developed and implemented initiatives such as community sensitization; equipping girls with skills to manage menstruation by using innovations such as homemade sanitary towels.

Advice to women

My advice to women is, they are usually two things that I like telling people: Never underestimate yourself, and we are all created differently. Never underestimate your potential to excel in life. We are not all designed to be Chief Executives, we are not all designed to be doctors but we can unleash that hidden potential within us. Secondly, never be afraid to take risks. Sometimes I think the biggest barrier that hinders us as women from growth is that we are so much in comfort zones that we fear to try and fail. We learn from our mistakes. Never be afraid to take risks and also never be afraid to ask for assistance, guidance, advice. I myself call up on some people and ask for assistance. So women should not feel afraid to ask.

How has MTN Uganda contributed to your achievement?

Our main communication service provider has been MTN. This enables us communicate with staff and partners working in several parts of the country. Personally, I have been a consistent customer of MTN since 1998. It is the contact known by all our partners and donors. Working with MTN, our ability to connect with young people on various platforms requiring the use of ICT has been greatly enhanced. Examples of this include our enhanced social media presence, our toll free SMS line (6300) that have become popular among young people in Uganda today. For some projects we have used a hotline that victims of gender based violence would call if in need of assistance

Her Story and use of ICT in Business:

I have served Straight Talk Foundation for 18 years. I started at the lowest rank in the organization. Going through Makerere University; my degree was often referred to as "Social Circus" (Social Sciences) because Arts degrees then were considered to have no value in matching the job market. Having sat at home for a year without a job after university. I concluded that indeed that nobody would hire a social scientist to work for them.

I began to search for any opportunity that came along. I walked to a small secondary school in my community and asked for any job opportunity available. Even if I was not trained as a teacher, I was asked to teach senior 2 and 3 English language and being paid 3,000 UGX per day. In 1998 while teaching at this school, the Straight Talk Foundation that had interviewed me for a *Development Worker* position (that was not successful) contacted me to interest me in work as a data clerk offering better pay and work conditions. I took up the opportunity. Upon joining Straight Talk Foundation; I found that there were opportunities for personal growth. Hired as staff number 5; I worked closely with the Founding Directors who believed in me and provided opportunity for me to work on many other programs whenever there were opportunities. As a result; I grew technically and served in various capacities prior to my appointment as the Executive Director.

I believe that since taking on the reins of leadership from the Founders; I have made my own mark in the organization; offering guidance in the development of new products and programs.

The organization had a workforce of 135 staff by the end of 2015 with steady growth in its incomes in the past five years. Likewise the organization's programming portfolio continues to grow each year. As an individual; I always use my life story to inspire many young women into aspiring to take on leadership roles through self-belief. I also encourage many young people to appreciate values such as hard work and investing in professional and personal growth.

Although for many entities; the primary interest is in financial growth (including profits), Straight Talk Foundation's interest is in empowering young people in Uganda using various means. I derive satisfaction from the young people whose lives we touch with our programs even without asking for any fees for our services.

I believe every person has a story to tell of their life journey and the Straight Talk Foundation is a great institution that has supported several people like myself in telling their stories by availing to them platforms in all kinds enhanced by the use of ICT. All people the world over go through a phase of adolescence (growth) in their lives. Often, no body prepares young people for this phase that is marked with challenges of adolescence and the reality of life out of school. This is the place where social workers and social scientists have been most relevant. I would at any one time encourage anyone pursuing a career in social sciences not to feel discouraged; they shall be relevant individuals either serving in organizations like Straight Talk Foundation or establishing their own organizations to address social problems in this country. There is always a place to start.

Several prominent individuals testify to having had life changing experiences after being exposed to Straight Talk Foundation programs (Government officials, parliamentarians, current CEOs; to mention but a few). Having interfaced with millions of young people across the generations; one important lesson I have learned is that at all times; programs such as those of Straight Talk Foundation should continue to exist. We also feel very proud about my efforts towards ensuring that the organization continuously reinvents itself to be able to respond to several health and development issues relevant to the wellbeing of young people in the country (health, education, gender, livelihoods, climate change, nutrition, immunization, etc)

I deserve to win this award because I work in a sector (children and youth) offering a service for which you cannot expect to make profits from your beneficiary. Rather with minimum resources using various means; we strive to serve all categories of children and young people recognizing that their needs and access to ICT is varied.