

Malawi attorney built his firm on five key principles

By Brian Cox



Success is rooted in character.

That conviction is at the core of attorney Ralph Sauti, Jr.'s legal practice in Blantyre, Malawi.

When Sauti started his law firm eight years ago, he established five values upon which the firm would be built and to which it would adhere: character, capacity, competence, teamwork, and efficiency.

Sauti's decision to make character the firm's top value derives from hard experience.

Before launching his own firm, Sauti worked for a well-established law firm headed up by an attorney widely recognized for his legal skills. The attorney was appointed to a high government position in 2012 and later became embroiled in a multi-million-dollar money laundering scheme.

The financial scandal and the attorney's legal troubles had an adverse effect on the firm as clients stopped paying bills and sought other representation. Senior attorneys left for other opportunities, and though Sauti had only been with the firm a year, he was left to manage and run a firm that had been thrust into turmoil.

It was a difficult and trying time for the young lawyer. At one point, he went four months without receiving a paycheck.

But the challenging experience also led him to conclude he could start his own firm. He realized that if he could go without pay for four months at the current firm, then he could go without pay at his own firm, if necessary, and still survive and provide for his family. He drew strength and motivation from having endured the ordeal.

"I always knew that one day I would set up a firm, but didn't plan on it this soon," he says. "I think most people, instead of telling me it was a huge risk, they told me that it was a good step. It was so risky, but others said, no, that's boldness."

As he began giving serious thought to what kind of firm he wanted to establish, he considered lessons he had learned from the two firms he had worked for since earning his law degree from the University of Malawi.

"I thought about things that they did that I never wanted to do; things that they did that I wanted to do better; and other things that I wanted to retain," says Sauti. "I began asking myself,

'If I wake up in the morning, why would I go to work?' And 'If I am able to grow the firm, why would people working with me wake up and say they want to go to work?'"

He developed a vision for the firm and outlined the values by which he was going to abide. He drew heavily on the lesson he learned from the senior partner at his previous firm, who Sauti describes as one of the most brilliant attorneys in Malawi.

"I concluded that it's not about competency that will make your rise or fall," he says. "It's about character. When I was setting up the firm, I wanted character to come first."

The firm has now grown to a team of nine lawyers experienced in commercial and corporate law, conveyancing, employment and industrial relations, and arbitration and dispute resolution. Its institutional and corporate client base continues to expand. Sauti is diligent about refining his vision for the firm as it grows.

"We have changed members of the team since the firm started," he says. "There are people who have come and people who have gone, but the values have remained."

Sauti, the youngest of six children, first found interest in becoming a lawyer around the age of 11 when his father died. The lawyer who was responsible for Sauti's father's will never had it read or executed and the family received nothing from his father's estate.

"That's what motivated me to become a lawyer. I wanted to become a lawyer so that if I was in the same position he was I would do things differently," he says. "We were victims of corruption. I think growing up and going through moments of pain and anxiety made me think 'nobody deserves this.'"

Sauti's father was a researcher at the Ministry of Agriculture. When he died in 1994, a close friend and colleague assumed responsibility for the family. Dr. Natalie Hahn, who later became a deputy director at UNICEF, established a trust fund for the children and supported the family for the next two decades, including covering the cost of their education.

A remarkable woman, Hahn spent five years as the UNICEF representative to Malawi where she helped implement a massive water and sanitation program that brought clean water resources to more than 300,000 residents in the city of Ndirande. She was

Malawi attorney built his firm on five key principles



Ralph Sauti with Dr. Natalie Hahn, a close friend of his father's, who established a trust fund for the children after he died in 1994 and supported the family for the next two decades, including covering the cost of their education.

also instrumental in developing a national orphans' policy and became known as "Chifundo" or "the one who brings mercy."

Sauti considers Hahn his adopted mother. He says her influence and encouragement exposed him to a range of possibilities to which he could aspire.

Though he knew wanted to pursue a career in law, when he completed high school, he was initially unable to get into a university that offered a law degree program. So, he found a different route to his dream.

He first earned a degree in education from Mzuzu University in 2005 and taught high school for two years while "fighting for a way into law school."

While not the career he wanted, his education degree came in handy years later when he was a candidate to lecture at Malawi University of Business and Applied Sciences.

"Apparently, it was my education degree that distinguished me at the university," says Sauti with a laugh. "I was different from my lawyer colleagues who only knew the law but didn't know how to teach it."

In 2007, Sauti attained a seat at the University of Malawi where he began fulfilling his ambition of becoming a lawyer.

His first job out of law school was with a firm that concentrated in commercial law. After three years, Sauti was ready for a new challenge.

"I needed to grow, but I could not grow in that organization," he says. "It was then I made a decision to do an advanced degree in commercial law."

Sauti made the move to Ralph & Arnold Associates, where he was also able to return to school for his LL.M. in Commercial Law from the University of Malawi. A mere 20 months later, he ventured out on his own.

It is a time of tremendous opportunity in Malawi, according to Sauti. The country is poised to become a seat of arbitration, which will make its procedural laws applicable to many practical aspects of arbitration. In 2022, the Malawi Commercial Arbitration Centre was established.

"Many organizations are now strategically positioning themselves – even within the legal sector – to tap into the market and the volume of work that will come as a result of Malawi becoming a seat of arbitration," says Sauti. "And we are one of the firms that are doing that as well."

Sauti and his wife, Miriam, have three children. His daughters, Lea Ruth and Faith Monique, are 14 and 11, while his son, Chiyambi Joy, is 6. Miriam is a curriculum development consultant. She also manages the family poultry farm, which the couple started as an alternative revenue source when Sauti was first establishing his firm. They raise black australorps and local chickens.

"My wife is very busy," says Sauti. "She does everything. She is everything. She's a truck driver. She's a manager, a consultant, a mother, a wife. She is a lot in one package."

Sauti decided to join Primerus as a way to expand his firm's reach and to service clients who need work done in Malawi. But more importantly, Sauti wanted to be part of a global community that offers legal services within a specified set of values.

His vision for Sauti & Company continues to broaden.

"Within the set of values that we have and within our vision, I would like to extend our reach and handle state work so that we become one of the firms representing government," he says.

His vision even extends beyond Malawi's borders. Sauti aspires to participate on the global market.

"I am dreaming bigger," he says.



Ralph Sauti and his wife, Miriam, have three children (l-r) Faith Monique, 11, Lea Ruth, 14, and Chiyambi, 6. The family enjoys taking road trips together.