

MENTORING AND THE CHALLENGE OF LEADERSHIP IN AFRICA

**BEING THE TEXT OF THE FIRST COMMENCEMENT ADDRESS DELIVERED
BY
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Introduction

1. Let me begin by thanking the Pro-Chancellor and Council, Vice Chancellor and Senate, as well as the Congregation, staff and students of the Federal University of Agriculture, Abeokuta for the honour of inviting me to deliver the First Commencement Address in the history of this institution. I stand before you today as someone who by the special dispensation of Providence has had the opportunity to serve our country in some capacity. My address will naturally draw on that experience. But let me assure you that I intend to speak from the heart as a concerned Nigerian on an issue that remains germane to the fortunes of our country.
2. The writer Chinua Achebe once declared that the problem with Nigeria is the problem of leadership. I agree with him. However, I am of the view that having identified the problem, the search for solutions should now engage our earnest attention and energy. I wish to submit that lack of adequate preparation for leadership, especially in public life, is a critical missing link in our search for solutions. As I would argue, mentoring recommends itself as one of the viable approaches to addressing our leadership challenge.
3. A few days ago, our country marked the 52nd anniversary of her independence. The commemoration of our attainment of nationhood provides an opportunity both for stock taking and for looking ahead. It is also a good time to reflect further on the challenge of leadership especially at this point in our national life, when our country is passing through arguably the greatest existential threat to its corporate survival since the Civil War.
4. As we survey the African landscape today, we see glaring instances of the challenges facing the leadership. When we consider the continuing crisis of nationhood in our country; the challenge of largely unmet expectations in post-Apartheid South Africa; the confrontation between terrorist cells and the state in the horn of Africa; and the tentative steps being taken to manage the aftermath of the "Arab Spring" in north Africa, it is easy to fall

into the temptation of concluding that Africa is bedevilled by intractable problems.

5. Yet we also see the outlines of the small beginnings of efforts to meet these challenges. There are bright spots. Nigeria is today in the fourteenth year of democratic rule - by far the longest in the country's history. Somalia is about to have its first real government in over twenty years. Rwanda has emerged from the genocide of 1994 to become one of the fastest growing economies in the world. The success of the recent transition in Senegal shows a triumph of common sense over needless recalcitrance. All of this provides cause for both cheer and caution. The challenge of leadership persists, and to a large extent the project of nation-building in Africa remains very much work in progress.

Leadership and Nigeria's Founding Fathers

6. Mr. Vice-Chancellor, distinguished ladies and gentlemen, both this occasion and the institution hosting it provide us with ample reason to pay tribute to Nigeria's founding fathers. In this regard, we salute the great minds that had the foresight to promote, by their sheer force of conviction, the training of high level personnel in agriculture. We remember our country's first generation leaders who in the immediate pre- and post-independence years laid a solid foundation for national development and in particular the growth of the agricultural sector through careful investment in the architecture of research and training to support our farmers.
7. Across the three, and later four, regions that then made up the Nigerian federation, agricultural research institutes and extension services were put in place to serve the needs of the country and its farming population. From the Agricultural Extension and Research Liaison Services (AERLS) located in the Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria, to the Institute of Agricultural Research and Training (IART) of the University of Ife, to the oil palm research institute in the old Mid-West Region and the institution that is now known as the Federal University of Agriculture, Umudike in the old Eastern Region, our founding fathers enunciated far-sighted initiatives that served our people well not just in the field of agriculture but also in the larger area of human development. Little surprise then that today we remember them for the groundnut pyramids in the north, the numerous path-breaking initiatives put in place by the administration of Dr. Michael Okpara in the eastern region and the marvels that cocoa farming delivered under a progressive administration in the western region. Indeed, it can be safely argued that the Farm Settlement Scheme of the

Action Group Government in the old ywestern Region represented a landmark initiative in institutional mentoring, which promoted the infusion of fresh and vibrant blood into the region's agricultural sector.

8. We have gone on this excursion into the past not merely to romanticize the proverbial "good old days" but more importantly to call painful attention to the road not taken in our subsequent quest for national development. The attributes that made the successes recorded in the 1950s and 1960s possible were in many cases both structural and highly personalized. However, the common denominator appeared to have been the caliber and competence of the leadership that our country had then - persons who were obviously well prepared to step into the shoes of the departing colonial oligarchy. It has been argued, with some merit I must say, that if only Nigeria can return to the standards and achievements of those years, that would be a tremendous breakthrough indeed. In this regard, it should be said that our country must be one of the very few in the world to measure its progress by how much it can replicate the past!

Leadership and Mentoring

9. Mr. Vice-Chancellor, distinguished ladies and gentlemen, leadership has to do with steering people towards mutually shared values in order to accomplish a clear goal. In another sense, it is taking responsibility for what members of one's group, community or society do. Leadership is about envisioning, passion, commitment and challenging the status quo to make one's group, community or society perform better. It goes without saying that leadership is not limited to those who hold political offices, but incorporates everyone that takes responsibility for the activities of other. Therefore, it is safe to say that leadership is pervasive and present at every level of human organisation. It exists in the family, religious groups, corporations, academia, social groups, indeed, in all human entities. The leaders personify the ideals and orientation of their group, community or society. This is the reason why leaders enjoy some privileges, which must never be taken for granted. 10. In a developing society, the demands on leadership are enormous. In Africa, leaders have the duty of not just espousing policies, programmes and projects that will bring about meaningful development and progress that the people are yearning for, but also the singular obligation to ensure that they mentor people that will eventually take over from them. Every leader at any level, in any sector, or any institution has the cardinal duty of ensuring that capable and effective leadership does not end with him or her. As is often said, "In the leadership relay, it makes no difference how you run, if you drop the baton." Mentoring is therefore an indispensable component of a truly successful leadership and in the wholesome engineering of positive

- change. 12. Eric Parsloe of the Oxford School of Coaching & Mentoring defines mentoring as a process of "giving support and encouragement to people to manage their own learning in order that they may maximise their potential, develop their skills, improve their performance and become the person they want to be". Mentoring, he further argues is a powerful personal development and empowerment tool. It is an effective way of helping people to progress in their careers and is becoming increasingly popular as its potential is realised. It is a partnership between two people (mentor and mentee) normally working in a similar field or sharing similar experiences. It is a helpful relationship based upon mutual trust and respect.
13. A mentor is a guide who can help the mentee to find the right direction and who can help them to develop solutions to career issues. Mentors rely upon having had similar experiences to gain an empathy with the mentee and an understanding of their issues. Mentoring provides the mentee with an opportunity to think about career options and progress. A mentor should help the mentee to believe in himself/herself and boost his/her confidence. A mentor should ask questions and challenge the mentee to critical self-appraisal, while providing guidance and encouragement for the career advancement and enhanced life chances of the mentee.
14. In the same vein, mentoring allows the mentee to explore new ideas in confidence. It is a chance to look more closely at yourself, your issues, opportunities and what you want in life. Mentoring is about becoming more self aware, taking responsibility for your life and directing your life in the direction you decide, rather than leaving it to chance. Mentoring makes a tremendous difference in the growth and development of new generations of leaders. In essence, therefore, mentors are role models, confidants, and advisors who help young ones think about their life and career aspirations and to recognize the impact that they can make on society.
15. It is no accident that the countries that have become leaders in the world today are the ones which successfully mentor successive generations of leaders. In a few weeks time, the Chinese Communist Party will hold its Congress at which the next set of leaders of the world's most populous nation will be unveiled. While some would question the democratic credentials of such a leadership recruitment and selection process, the fact that cannot be denied is that emergence into a position of leadership in china is based on, careful preparation. And this process has over the past three decades delivered the stupendous rates of growth that have today transformed China from a backwater into the world's second leading economy.

16. India is another country where emergence into leadership, especially through the Congress Party is based on a process of careful recruitment and preparation. As with China, this process has delivered great results in terms of the rate of progress of the Indian economy. Today, the emergent leaders in the global economy are the BRICS nations - Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa - all of which indicate strong penchant for leadership mentoring.
17. The example of South Africa particularly lends itself to emulation for other African nations. It is instructive that the great Nelson Mandela spent a better part of his tenure as President nurturing younger cadres within the African National Congress to take over from his generation. This approach has no doubt helped in strengthening the institutions of the State and ensured that succession into leadership is smooth and orderly.

The Nigerian challenge

18. In Nigeria, as in most parts of Africa, many leaders, especially at the political level, are pre-occupied with succeeding themselves that often, they leave a leadership vacuum or confusion behind them. Mohammed Siad Barre, the former strongman of Somalia was reported to have boasted on the eve of his eviction from office: "Après moi, chaos" (after me, chaos). How right he was - Somalia is only getting its first real President twenty years and countless casualties later! The Siad Barre approach would however seem to be the preferred template of many of the continent's political leaders.
19. Sadly, it appears that this unwholesome scenario is not limited to the political leadership; it is also a critical issue in the public service as well as in corporate and civil society organizations. The failure of leaders to be purpose driven rather than self absorbed and to design credible agenda for leadership renewal in the form of mentoring has given rise to the pervasive and recurrent multiple malaise now plaguing our country and our continent.
20. Having denied our youth opportunities for self-expression via the sit-light syndrome and having not demonstrated wholesome leadership values to them, we patronise them by calling them the leaders of tomorrow. Yet we do not yield an inch of space and they are intelligent enough to see through our insincerity. We also insult their sensibilities by quoting at them the much-touted part of the inaugural speech of the late US President John F. Kennedy that they should not ask what their country can do for them, but what they can do for their country. But we fail to tell our youth that the United States of America is a land of opportunity where even the most disadvantaged at birth can have a shot at the highest office in the land - as the presidency of Barack Obama has shown. We also fail

to admit that many of the present leaders were assisted, maybe even pampered, by the Nigerian state to attain their present status. Perhaps it is high time we as leaders in our various capacities started reversing the question to ask what Nigeria has done for its youth.

21. I wish to enjoin our youth to learn the appropriate lessons from the non-strategic stance of the adults who constitute the bulk of leadership in our country and continent. These leaders fail to mentor those who are to take over from them and what we have instead are sit-tight leaders who desire to die in office. Examples abound on the African continent. Zine Abidine ben-Ali of Tunisia had to flee from office after 23 years in power. It took a popular revolt to get Hosni Mubarak off the seat of government in Egypt after 30 years; in his 42nd year in office, Muammar Gaddafi preferred to be killed to pave way for a new crop of leaders in Libya; Abdoulaye Wade, having spent twelve years as President of Senegal, wisely decided to hurriedly vacate office after defeat at the polls; and though flagged out by age and ill-health, Robert Mugabe is still trudging on in Zimbabwe - a full thirty-two years after first taking office. Even in Nigeria, the ill-fated attempt to alter the Constitution to allow for a third term in office for the President was seen as a local manifestation of an African malady. It has been argued in some quarters that the instability of the post-2007 dispensation and a lot of the threatening challenges of the present times are probably consequences of the lack of sincere mentoring and our leaders' preference not to pay sufficient attention to succession planning. Some have even posited that the emergence of late President Umar Musa Yar'Adua was a half-hearted, some say cynical, option that was hurriedly activated following the failure of the third term bid.
22. The moral from this state of affairs is that mentoring should be central to a leader's preoccupation. Success in office will be enhanced when leaders empower their associates or followers with opportunities to actualise their potentials, and when they leave behind a pool of people who could be better leaders than they were. Leadership and mentoring are intertwined, and so mentoring should be seen as a key leadership deliverable by all incumbents. This is the path that forward-looking societies and organisations toe. I am persuaded that the African continent, nay Nigeria, will only be placed on the path of progress, growth and development when we start to prepare our youth for leadership. Proper tutelage is indispensable for success in any vocation and Nigeria must urgently start the process of disallowing untutored and untested persons from mounting the saddle of leadership.

Three proposals

23. Mr. Vice-Chancellor, distinguished ladies and gentlemen, let me at this point make three modest proposals that bear out the necessity for careful mentoring and which could be critical for the future growth of our country.

The first has to do with the modalities for choosing people into second command positions to various political offices at all levels of government. You would agree with me that lack of planned succession is what results in accidental leadership. Today, we are all living witnesses to the dire and painful consequences of accidental leadership in our national life. I wish to propose that we give further thought to ensuring that the choice of deputies is underlined by the requirements of competence and a modicum of collective enlightened self interest so that we can avoid future recurrence of situations where unprepared deputies suddenly find themselves in positions of power. A situation whereby aspirants appear to prefer unsuitable or compromised persons as deputies does not augur well for the growth of our democracy.

24. My second proposal touches on the core mandate of this institution – the development of the country's agricultural sector. Studies have shown that our farming population across the country is ageing fast if not disappearing altogether. And yet we have a situation whereby many State governments across the country have been importing farmers, mostly from southern Africa to boost agriculture. While the merit or otherwise of this approach can be debated, I am of the opinion that the greater challenge for LJS is to ensure that our young people, especially graduates of institutions such as this, use the expatriate farmers initiatives as learning opportunities so as to rekindle youth interest in agriculture. I therefore propose that young Nigerian farmers are attached to the farms being established by these expatriates so that they can be exposed to those practices and attributes that make farming an attractive occupation in other climes. In so doing, we should also support them with the inputs and requirements needed to make farming a worthwhile vocation.
25. Thirdly, we must seek to build a system that enables us make creative use of people who have occupied leading positions in our national life to gain useful experience. Today, our country has such a huge reservoir of people across all sectors who have occupied leadership positions and whose input could be vital to meeting present and future challenges. Sadly, no credible system of debriefing has been put in place. Rather, much of this resource is frittered away in needless ego battles. We should learn to use the insights and experience of people who once occupied sensitive positions of leadership, convinced that even if we rate them as failures, there could be something to learn from them on how not to fail. Leadership is about hard choices and how you live with them. Incumbents should learn not to view their predecessors as threats while the predecessors should also cultivate the maturity needed to help their successors to succeed.
26. Mr. Vice-Chancellor, distinguished ladies and gentlemen, we all have a duty to give Nigeria a fresh breath of life. Ours should be lives that bring

light to the current darkness in our nation; lives that make meaningful impact on our environment. We must seek to nurture leaders who know no mountain too high to climb or valley too deep to explore in order to make their society better; not leaders who wish to be the only star in the firmament and who by so doing, deny us the peace and progress that we desire and deserve.

27. Some may wonder why I speak in this manner. The truth is that time may be running out. We should all be aware that the rampant and pervasive unemployment among our youth is a danger to all of us. Daily, we see manifestations of the fact that our youth are losing patience and losing focus. From terrorism in the north, to kidnapping in the east; from militancy in the Niger Delta to the "Area Boy" syndrome in the west, what we have on our hands today are young people banging at the door, seeking to enter. We could choose to let them in peacefully through a well thought out process of mentoring or we could watch them break down the door. The choice really is ours, but as the saying goes, the rich cannot sleep if the poor are hungry.
28. And to the young ones who are students of this institution, let me charge you all to look beyond the present circumstances, daunting though they may be. We enjoin you to borrow a leaf from the contemporary Nigerian artistes, most of who are not as lettered as you are, who realised that without any tangible skill to take to the labour market that is already saturated and without any capital for entrepreneur exploits, they could look inward. They are now exploiting their innate abilities to entertain to conquer the world. They have become very formidable brands that evoke positive emotions around the globe. We are strongly persuaded that with your education, training and exposure, you can bring more creativity to the process of enhancing your life chances and making a better future for yourselves.
29. You must seek to understand the context in which you live, the needs of the people, and your ability to convert all these to good account and the mutual benefits of all concerned. You must seek out mentors who will assist you to navigate the twists and turns of life without too many needless detours.
30. Distinguished Ladies and Gentlemen, all that remains for me is to thank, once again, the Vice-Chancellor Professor Olusola Bandele Oyewole for the honour of this invitation. The Federal University of Agriculture has in the past two decades emerged as a leading institution in a very sensitive sector of our national life. Through its teaching, research and community outreach activities, the University has contributed in no small measure to our country's quest for food security and national development. The relationship between the

management, staff and students of this great institution remains a worthy exemplar on the usefulness of mentoring, which recommends itself to other entities. I wish the institution many more years of success as it continues to work to promote cutting-edge practices and nurture the much-needed manpower for the modernisation of our country's agricultural sector.

31. I thank you all for your attention.

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