

# **PREPARE**

PREPARING YOURSELF FOR THE

# **TO LOSE**

NEXT PHASE IN YOUR LIFE

# **YOUR JOB**

WRITTEN BY

## **IDE DIMA-OKOJIE**

# Prepare to lose your job

Preparing yourself for the next phase in your life

Ide Dima-Okojie

For my girls, Tolu, Zena and Lulu.

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## INTRODUCTION

When I penned down the first sentence in this book in early 2019, I never imagined that the world would ever be grappled with such a pandemic as we are experiencing with COVID-19; my plan was just to put together some of my experiences and knowledge gained over the period of my professional and business career. However, with the impact of the corona virus across the globe, countries, businesses and our lives as we know it have all changed. Forcing people and companies to rethink how they survive this period and hope to thrive in the foreseeable future.

In the age of disruption, the ability to swim against the currents of change becomes an incredibly important attribute for any individual or organisation, and this adaptive quality is what we all need to thrive in our increasingly changing world.

The title of the book 'Prepare to lose your job' is in reference to multitude of changes that happen in our lives. As we journey through life, we need to leave one spot to get to the next. You left your 'job' as a secondary school or high school student to go to university, and you've done the same leaving your job as a university student to enter the workforce.

Throughout our adult lives we also transition through various stages. As singletons to married people, to parents and maybe grandparents. In the professional environment, we start out as low entry-level employees and lose a series of jobs to achieve more senior roles, probably to gain the CEO position in the company.

The book focuses on helping you survive and thrive as you plan for the next phase of your life, either in the professional environment or even from an entrepreneurial perspective. It is my hope that the book inspires and provides you with some knowledge to drive you to act on your ideas, intuitions and dreams.

Cheers.

Ide Dima-Okojie

## **CHAPTER 1**

### **LOSING MY FIRST JOB**

Losing a job can be heart-wrenching. I had escaped or survived several potential terminations with my first company, Airtel, during those transitory years of Celtel and Zain. I watched back then, as my colleagues - old and young lost their jobs due to restructuring, redundancy and other reasons. It was difficult seeing friends come to work one day, receive a letter, pack their personal items, then leave; not to return to work the following day. More distressing, was coming to the office on subsequent days to see empty chairs and wondering if you would be next.

You however never feel the emotional impact of losing a job until it happens to you personally. Yes, you may have to pick up more work in your office or department, since there are fewer people available to do the work. However, going through the grief of losing a job is something completely different. My first experience losing my job happened with my second company, Internet Solutions. I had spent about 5 years at Airtel when I decided to take the risk of moving to a smaller, less known company in another field of telecommunications.

On Friday, the 25th of May 2012, I had spent about one year and five months at Internet Solutions. As was my habit back then; from time to time, typically on a Friday, I would pay a visit to the Airtel Head office to catch up with my former colleagues and friends. I guess this was my way of keeping in touch with my friends, considering the number of years spent there and the relationships I had developed with them over that period.

On that fateful day, Airtel was apparently going through one of those phases when some employees had to be laid off. Unfortunately, some of my friends were affected that day, so my visit turned into a consolatory one. I would say that was probably one of my most difficult visits; because really, what do you say to someone who has just lost their job? 'Aww sorry', 'take heart', 'it is well', and whatnot don't just cut it. However, on that day, I tried my best to give moral support to my friends and former colleagues who had been affected by the wave of terminations.

Suddenly, around 3:45pm, I received a call from my Internet Solutions' colleague, Gbenga (who happened to also be a former Airtel employee) informing me that the Managing Director was looking for me, and it seemed urgent. This wasn't necessarily



out of the ordinary, since I reported directly to the MD. So, I dashed from the Airtel Head office in Banana Island, Ikoyi an exclusive suburb in Lagos to my office which was located in Victoria Island. When I got back to the office building, I went straight to my MD's office, but was told by his Executive Assistant he had asked for me to join him in the conference room, so I headed there immediately, thinking there was an important meeting which he wanted me to be a part of.

Getting into the conference room, there sitting was my MD, and with him, was the head of HR. At that instant, I thought to myself, "why is the head of HR here and where is everybody?" In my typical fashion, I smiled enthusiastically and said my greetings, then I sat down across from my MD. The scenario felt like an interview, and I felt deep within me that something was dreadfully wrong. Then my MD started to speak...

I have to admit that I did not hear much of what he was saying once it became clear my appointment was being terminated. I was just there, numb, I think smiling in shock, and watching his mouth move, but couldn't hear a word of anything he was saying. When my MD was done talking, we stood up, shook hands and said our goodbyes. In retrospect, that must have been really tough for my MD, because his eyes were red, and we had a pretty good relationship. But at that point, I was in shock. I went to my cubicle to pack my things; apparently some of my colleagues guessed what had happened and came over to me to offer kind words and give me moral support. Imagine, they were doing to me, exactly what I was doing to friends at Airtel earlier in the day!

The drive home was the longest ever.

## **CHAPTER 2**

### **LIVING AFTER BEING AXED**

I had been married just over a year when I was let go by Internet Solutions at the end of May 2012. Coincidentally, my wife, Tolu, who was working at Unilever at the time, was preparing to depart in June, to South Africa, where she was meant to spend a year on a secondment assignment. Before we got married, my wife and I agreed to wait a couple of years before having children, so when the South Africa opportunity came, we (she) didn't hesitate to take it; after all, it was only for one year.

But that decision was before I lost my job. So, while I was extremely happy for my wife's opportunity in South Africa, I was now faced with the most significant uncertainty in my life since I left university. However, there was no time to be sad, or even be scared, I had to support Tolu as she was preparing to travel in June.

After she left for South Africa, I was finally home alone, and had the time and space to deal with my emotions. The first two weeks in June felt like I was on holiday, I was apparently in the first of the five phases of grief or loss, following my termination.

### **DENIAL**

I had shut out everything. For those couple of weeks, I was basically chilling; and I could afford to, because Internet Solutions in my opinion, was quite generous with my severance package. In addition to the one month salary payment required in lieu of my termination notice, they also gave me two months' pay; so, I had a buffer of about three months in total to get things together. I am forever grateful to my former MD and Internet Solutions for this generosity, as it came in handy at the time.

### **ANGER**

As I began to come out of holiday mode in the third or fourth week in June, I began to resent the fact that my job was gone. I was angry with myself for leaving Airtel where things were going really well for me, to join a smaller company like Internet Solutions. I was angry with everyone around me, for no reason. I was frustrated waking up and being unable to go to work, I was angry with the world for those few weeks towards the end of June and beginning of July.

### **BARGAINING**

For a couple of days in July, I went through a phase where I tried to figure out what exactly went wrong; what could I have done differently at work to avoid being terminated? I asked myself how I could have been so blindsided, that I didn't see the termination coming. There were also a number of 'what if's' scenarios playing in my mind in those days. What if I had known or had some warning of the termination, maybe I would have been looking for a job? Or maybe I should have put in more effort to the mobile phone sale side business I had started earlier in February. Sadly, I really had no good answers to all these.

## **DEPRESSION**

July 2012 wasn't an easy month for me, I was depressed. I kept to myself throughout this period. I tried to be cheerful during my video calls with my wife; I put up a brave face for my parents, however in reality, I was really not doing well. My self-esteem was at an all-time low; I was embarrassed and I avoided friends and company in general.

## **ACCEPTANCE**

I have never liked being a victim or having the victim mentality, so I did not remain in the depression state for too long. I decided to make my peace with what had happened to me, and move on with my life.

In retrospect, it made a lot of sense that Internet Solutions let me go at the time. The company was going through a major restructuring that required it to considerably reduce costs. From my experience and knowledge gathered over the years, when companies go through this sort of restructuring or cost cutting phase, LIFO (Last In, First Out) often takes effect. The truth was that I was one of the most recent hires, who apparently was earning a lot higher than many employees who had been at the company for years. In addition, I was the Product Manager for Cloud and Communications. My Business Unit was new in the company, and we had the mandate to introduce Cloud-based solutions to the market.

At the time, we were pioneers in delivering IaaS (Infrastructure as a Service) and CaaS (Communications as a Service) solutions to the market. We were one of the first Outsourced Data Centres in Nigeria, and we managed the Data Centre of one of the top international banks at the time. To grow the business unit, I spent a lot of my time supporting the sales team in educating prospective clients about Cloud Computing, and

the benefits of Outsourced Managed services. It was not an easy sell to many IT professionals at the time, who had the perception that they would lose control of the management of their systems.

It was really slow progress for our Business Unit and the reality was that we only contributed around 13% to the company's revenues. So again, in retrospect, if I was in my MD's shoes, I would terminate Ide. Not because he was not a great employee and a valued member of the team, but the reality was that the company had to survive, and in business, hard and difficult decisions need to be made from time to time, even if it means getting rid of a potential high performer.

I recall a quote attributed to Abraham Lincoln (16th President of the United States of America) - *"By general law, life and limb must be protected, yet often a limb must be amputated to save a life, but a life is never wisely given to save a limb"*.

Though difficult, I had to admit that I and a few others that were terminated in May 2012 were limbs that had to go, to save the company. I bare no bad feelings towards Internet Solutions, in fact, I learnt a lot from the experience at the company. I am still friends with a number of people at the company. And as fate would have it, many years later, when my sister wanted (or needed) a job outside of the financial industry, Internet Solutions came to the rescue. Interestingly, today, my sister works at the company that let me go then. Great news is the company is going from strength to strength.

I guess this was fate's way of consoling me for my sad but necessary experience losing my job with Internet Solutions that year.

## CHAPTER 3

### MOVING FORWARD

*"God works in mysterious ways" - William Cowper (English Poet)*

Earlier, in the morning of that fateful Friday, the 25th of May, I had received what I thought to be a weird call from Ghana. A gentleman named Emmanuel, whom I had met at a conference I attended in Accra several months before, called me to enquire if I would be open to potentially relocating to Accra to work for his company.

I recalled having a very interesting conversation with Emmanuel at that conference; apparently, we are both dreamers and futurists so I guess we clicked when we met. I, however, must admit that my immediate thought after the call with Emmanuel was a big "Hell No". At that minute, I loved my job at Internet Solutions, I had only spent a year and about five months and frankly, I had no intention of resigning anytime soon; let alone moving to Accra, to work for a company I had never heard of.

But with the shocking turn of events and the reality which now stared me in the eyes, I obviously became interested in Emmanuel's proposition. Emmanuel was a co-founder of a Mobile Development company in Ghana called Rancard Solutions. This startup was a leading VAS (Value Added Service) player in the Ghanaian telecommunications space. They apparently were also working on a revolutionary solution around 'Social Recommendations' which further piqued my interest (beyond the fact that I was desperate for a new job). At the time, they also had venture backing from the likes of Intel Capital and Adlevo Capital which for me gave them even more credibility.

My first chat (interview) with Rancard Human Resources came at the end of June, and I had series of interviews with different members of the management throughout July. While I was going through the interview process with Rancard, I got myself busy in Entrepreneurship. After all, in almost every job I had till date, I had been an Intrapreneur.

According to the American Heritage Dictionary, an Intrapreneur is "*a person within a large corporation who takes direct responsibility for turning an idea into a profitable finished product through assertive risk taking and innovation*".

## **A TASTE OF ENTREPRENEURSHIP**

I had started a mobile phone sales business in February 2012. It was quite interesting how that business started. I was at a friend's party when someone mentioned that they wanted to buy a phone. I don't know why I said "I sell phones" at the time; but I did. I guess it was my entrepreneurial instinct kicking in.

Truth was I had not 'personally' sold a phone before that day. However, for about two years, I was Devices Manager at Airtel. In this role, I was responsible for Partnerships with OEMs (Original Equipment Manufacturers) to provide different mobile phones, which would be sold at Airtel Shops; so I guess technically, I had sold phones before. In addition, as part of my experience as Devices Manager, I knew and built relationships with a number of mobile phone distributors and retailers.

My plan was to apply the JIT (Just-In-Time) model with my customers. I didn't have the capital to purchase my own mobile phone stock, so I partnered with a number of distributors who provided me with the phones as my orders came in; of course, I added my margins to the final retail price, which was still competitive.

I put the word out, informing my sphere of influence that I now sold phones, and some orders began to roll in. One request my customers kept making, was to 'Pay Small Small'. They were basically asking for a credit facility to enable them to pay over a few months. One major thing you learn as a product manager is to actively listen to your customers. Customers directly or indirectly inform you of their needs and their wants, which provides you with an opportunity to provide value to them and subsequently build a business around your offering. Being the avid Product guy, I decided to offer a product financing service to my customers. My plan was to continue with my Just-In-Time model with my suppliers; the only change was that I would pay my suppliers in full, while my customers paid me over a few months, while I added an interest for this service.

I raised about Two Million Naira and started offering the Financing option to my customers. I charged an interest per month to provide the financing to customers. Initially, I allowed customers to pay over three months. However, with the level of demand for this service, most of my funds were quickly depleted and out with customers. At this point, I would ideally need to recapitalise to cater to the growing demand. However, I decided to limit financing to two months only.

Most customers repaid their debts without any issues; however, I recall that in the months that I ran the business, there were two customers who did not completely repay. This happened in the days when I still allowed financing over 3 months. The first person apparently lost his job after the second payment and was unable or unwilling to pay the third instalment. The second person had a problem with the phone, which tends to happen with phones from time to time, and she used this as an excuse to not complete her payment.

As a side note; it is often said that "*the customer is always right*". The reality is that there are many dishonest customers out there, and as business owners and managers, it's our responsibility to know that *the customer is NOT always right, but we must ensure we treat the customer in a way that they feel like kings and queens.*

## **GETTING BACK ON THE HORSE**

In August 2012, after a visit to Accra for the final phase of my interviews with Rancard, it was confirmed that I got the job, and I prepared to move to Accra in September. Arriving at the Rancard office on my first day of work was quite an experience. Apart from the expatriate treatment from my accommodation, to the ride to work, the courteous and warm welcome by the Rancard Team, I was most blown away by the proactive preparedness of the HR team. On my desk waiting for me was my MacBook Pro Laptop, printed Business Cards, and I think a branded Mug. For some people, this might not be a big deal; but for me, it meant the world. The truth is, that was my very first experience of a company's HR going above and beyond to wow me as an employee. It's sad to note that many companies don't go through the effort to wow their new employees when they resume. In fact, from personal experience, in certain cases you have to wait weeks to get some equipment required for work.

Settling down to a new company can be a daunting task; especially when you consider the fact that you need to build relationships with new people, learn new methods to doing work, and understand the company processes, politics and culture. Even more important, is the fact that you have to prove yourself to your Boss(es), colleagues, and in some cases, depending on the stage you are, in your career, you may also have to prove yourself to subordinates. It can be a little taxing when it's your first job, or a job in a totally different field or industry that you have been working in. For me, settling down at Rancard was a little different, considering that I was in a different country. In the beginning, I went about things with my typical vigour, which in retrospect, I must have played right into the typical Nigerian Stereotype to my Ghanaian colleagues.

Apart from the fact that I tend to be quite into my work, there was the little matter of my probation which was due in three months.

I went into the work with such intensity, that I took my developer colleagues out of their comfort zones. They must have had thoughts like “this crazy Nigerian guy is not serious, giving us these unrealistic targets. We will deal with him; sooner or later, he will either calm down or leave the company.” In my second month at Rancard (half way to the end of my probation period), I went through a self-assessment of my time at the company. The truth was there was a lot of activity, but not a lot of progress on the targets I had been given. During this self-assessment, I came to the painful realisation that I had made the work all about MY targets. I had not done a good job to get my team aligned to my targets. Something obviously had to change if I was to get the team motivated to work with me to achieve our targets.

I had to change my tactics...



## **CHAPTER 4**

### **GETTING THAT NEW JOB**

There are not many emotions that beat the feeling of getting the news that you've sailed through the interview(s), and that you've gotten the job you've been after. For me, maybe learning for the first time, that a love interest loved me back, my wedding day was another; the days my girls were born are at the top of the list, alongside the day they spoke their first words and took their first steps. Apart from these, the news of the new job has always been such a joyous moment for me.

A new job represents quite a number of things in a person's life. For the fresh graduate, it represents a rite of passage to a new phase in their life, where they can learn a skill or more, earn a living, become a little more independent and add value to their community and society at large. For the person who has spent time gaining experience on a job, and/or has spent time going through a professional course or training for that extra edge; getting a new job, especially if it's a higher position or a position with more pay, this can be a much needed validation for the investment in time, effort and sometimes, cash spent in building themselves up. For the person who lost their previous job like my experience at Internet Solutions; a new job is a lifeline, an especially important one if you have people depending on you.

After the euphoria of the announcement of the new job, for some people who I have spoken to, sometimes anxiety follows when they begin to think about the prospect of actually beginning the job; it is ok to feel this way as long as you don't give into the fear of change or the fear of the unknown. I say the apprehension that comes sometimes with starting a new job is completely natural because with the new job comes certain pressures to be liked or respected by superiors and peers, to have the capacity to understand and excel at the work.

### **THAT FIRST JOB AFTER SCHOOL**

Getting your very first job after you graduate from school is one of those experiences that happen only once in your life. Every other job you'll have will be just that, 'another job'. For many people, their very first real job holds a special place in their lives, and often shapes their careers in the future. In many cases, your very first job may not give

you clarity on what you want to do with your life; however, this job may be an important indication of what you do NOT want to spend your life doing. For example, my sister who happens to be an up and coming, yet recognisable actor in the Nigeria movie industry (popularly referred to as Nollywood), started her career working in an asset investment firm in Lagos. I recall her being not too happy with the work she was doing for most of the time she spent there. However, she made the best of her time at the company, she built relationships and performed at her work. She then made up her mind to follow her dreams to be an actor, and when the time was right, she left her job, and enrolled to the New York Film Academy.

In my case, I was lucky to start out my career in the company I always wanted to be a part of. In my third year of University, I went on an excursion to then Econet Wireless (now Airtel Nigeria). This was 2003 when the mobile telecommunications industry was just starting out in Nigeria. To give some background on the impact of that excursion to me; GSM (Global System for Mobile communication) was launched in Nigeria in 2001, with Econet and MTN being the first companies to begin operations in the country in the same year. Globacom and Etisalat (now 9Mobile) would enter the market after. Just before this time; Nigeria, a country with almost 200 million people had just over 100,000 telephone lines. This was the period when you had to pay over twenty thousand naira (approximately 50USD today) to purchase a SIM card. This was also the period that heralded significant growth in technology innovation and this helped to boost the Nigerian economy generally.

So for me, getting the opportunity to visit one of the companies changing the face of Nigeria was just surreal to me. I recall, being students from the Computer Department, we visited the engineering building, and we were shown some of the equipment and software that helped to make mobile communications possible. Even more memorable that day was the lunch we had. I don't recall if it was at the Econet canteen or a restaurant nearby, but all I recall was the meal that day was glorious! The food was delicious, and the portions were to die for. I made up my mind that afternoon that I would work for that company.

I started out my first job in the Network Quality department in the Operations Group of Vmobile Nigeria (formerly Econet Wireless). Most of my colleagues who started out with me had some sort of core engineering (mechanical, electrical) degree from University; I had a Computer Science degree so I was a little out of water with my first job. Based on my degree, I was made responsible for managing the Software that was

used to plan the RF Network (Radio Frequency), basically the basestations that provide the mobile network throughout the country. I must admit that I wasn't very confident with the work I did then, but I put 110% to learning and I made sure I delivered on any tasks given to me. I also went out of my way to help out whenever someone needed my help.

My innovative side began to show early in my career; I remember back then, I was responsible for generating a weekly report required by the top bosses in my group every Monday for management meeting. Generating this report was no small feat. Every week, I literally spent an average of four days preparing this report (i.e. Thursday, Friday, Saturday and Sunday). Apart from the fact that I had to work with humongous files that slowed down my computer to a crawl; I also had to work with three different systems for our three main vendors, Ericsson, Motorola and Huawei. These three systems had different methods to pulling out data, and the way they named their base stations were different, which made my work so much difficult because I had to rename all the base stations and accompanying cell (RF Engineers will understand) for the management reports. For example, Ericsson could name a base station in Lagos with five characters LG123, Motorola would have six character LAG124 and Huawei would have something completely different, probably 101122. It was such a mess and made life difficult for me.

As we were aggressively growing our network, I did not see this situation being sustainable, plus I needed to reclaim my weekends, so I decided to come up with a new system for naming the base stations, I literally started from scratch, and converted each vendor's naming convention to my own new format which could be used universally. When I was done, I showed this to my immediate boss and presented a justification for why this change had to be done. She agreed with my position and took this case to our Head of Department (HOD) who also saw sense with what I was proposing. However, we could not unilaterally make these changes because it affected other stakeholders. First of all, the vendors themselves who would have to change all their base stations on their core systems, we also had the guys from the Transmission department, and finally we had the guys responsible for the physical base station. If a project to rename all base stations was to happen, the company would have to physically change the labelling on base station sites. After many weeks or even months of meetings, back and forth regarding the proposal, it was finally approved, and over a few months, the project to rename the entire base stations in the company was executed.

This was the first time it dawned on me, that a single person could change a lot. I was only in my first year working and I had initiated such a monumental change in the company. It was such a great feeling, and after many months of not being sure of what I was doing, I had an achievement that helped grow my self-esteem. Also, I was able to free up my weekends and added some balance to my life. Without a doubt, this was my biggest achievement throughout the year and half I spent in the Network Quality department. Interestingly enough, almost throughout the period when I was in the Network Quality department, I would tell my colleagues that “I am going to Marketing”, I don’t know why, but I felt I would do better in Marketing, and frankly I didn’t know how I was going to transfer to the Marketing department. Maybe it was because my friend, Chris whom we started together, had moved to Marketing a year into the job, and he seemed to be enjoying his new role.

Anyway, three months after Chris had left, there was an opening in the Product Development department in Marketing and my boy, Chris recommended me for the role. I did well enough to get the job, and I did not think twice before accepting it. I was all too happy to leave my engineering job for the new role in the marketing department.

In retrospect, words are truly powerful...

The words; “I am going to Marketing” made so much difference in my life.

## CHAPTER 5

### LESSONS FROM MY FIRST JOB

I recall that phone call from Venessa, the then Vmobile (now Airtel Nigeria) HR Business Partner like it was yesterday. She told me I had got the job; I was so elated, deeply grateful for the opportunity, and frankly glad that I could stop going around Victoria Island and Marina dropping my CV with security guards. Back then before the advent or popularity of job sites like jobberman and professional social platforms like LinkedIn, our options to searching for a job (besides connects from your parents and family members) was to scan the Guardian Newspaper on Tuesdays (popularly called Tuesday Guardian) or good old-fashion leg work, going from office to office dropping your CV at the gate where a lot of times, you got a scowl from the security guard or if you were lucky, you made it to the reception where your CV was less likely to be thrown away with the day's trash.

At the time I was starting out at Vmobile, I have to say that my confidence was probably at the lowest it had been ever or at least in a very long time. Thinking about it now, there were a couple of reasons for this. First was the fact that I got a Second Class Lower result for my Computer Science degree when I graduated from University. This situation was even more painful as I missed the Second Class Upper mark by 0.01point. The truth is that I wasn't really serious with my academics in my first two years in university, I didn't even know about the CGPA (Cumulative Grade Point Average) until after my second year. Obviously I had to sit up for my final two years, so like we do with the Super Eagles (Nigeria's National Football Team) trying to qualify for a World Cup last minute, I did all the mathematical permutations for me to graduate with the Second Class Upper; and I worked really hard to achieve the target grades. Sadly, I earned a C instead of a B in one course and that led to me falling short of my target.

*"Lose an hour in the morning, and you will be all day hunting for it"*  
*-Richard Whately (English academic)*

The second reason I had a dip in confidence probably had to do with events during NYSC (Nigeria Youth Service Corp - Mandatory one year national service for all tertiary education graduates). I served in Kebbi State in North West Nigeria, interestingly it was the same city that my dad had served almost thirty years earlier. Unlike a number of people I knew back then, I did not redeploy back to Lagos or to one of the other

tier one cities, instead I chose to stay the entire year in Kebbi. I was curious to experience the true North (not Abuja the Federal Capital Territory), to learn about other people and cultures, and learn I did. I was the Public Relations Officer for the Tourism club, which meant that I did quite some traveling within the state in that year.

*As an aside, I'll use this opportunity to express my opinion about the NYSC. I hear a lot of people voice out the need to scrap the NYSC program. When I engage a lot of these opponents to the NYSC, I discover that most of them served in Lagos or other top Nigerian cities. I can empathize with many of them because a city like Lagos is very difficult to live in, let alone a situation where you are sent here and God forbid you have no relations or connect in the city. It would be a horrendous experience. However, when you look at the NYSC from a different vantage point, you may appreciate the huge impact of the program to many cities, towns and villages in the country. For many areas in the country, NYSC provides a source of important Human Resources in the form of Doctors and Teachers to towns and villages that would never be able to sustainably attract these professionals without the NYSC. The NYSC's original mandate set after the Biafra war in 1970 may or may not be relevant today (the original mandate was to act as a platform to integrate young Nigerians from different regions in the country to aid the reconciliation, reconstruction, and rebuilding of the nation after that awful civil war). However, the NYSC still provides young people with the opportunity to be exposed to other cultures and people within our country, and more importantly, NYSC serves as a lifeline to provide badly needed professionals in many deprived communities.*

## **SERVING THE NATION - NYSC**

For my service year starting in late 2004, I was posted to the Criminal Investigation Department (CID), of the Nigeria Police Force in Kebbi State which is in North West Nigeria. There were six corps members posted to the Police Force in my batch, four ladies and two guys. The ladies were posted to the Finance Department, while Debo and I were sent to the CID. On resuming at the CID, I was directed to an office with four tables which had typewriters on each. There were two men in civilian attire sitting at two of the tables while another man in Police uniform with the rank of corporal was standing, talking to the two seated men.

As I entered the office, the gentlemen instantly ended their conversation and directed their attention towards me. I greeted them and introduced myself, then one of the men

asked me what I studied in university. When I mentioned that I studied computer science, both of them smiled at each other, and the man who spoke clapped then pointed to one of the tables with the typewriter on it, saying that they have been looking for someone to man one of the typewriters. In that instance, I viewed my entire NYSC year being a typist, not even with a computer, but with some old school typewriter. I immediately responded that I did not know how to type, they looked at me in shock and then confusion. I then went ahead to explain how computer science was about the science of computers, that I knew how to build and repair computers, but I had never typed a day in my life. Obviously this was not true, but in that instance I felt I had to save myself from being a typist with the Police in Kebbi for a whole year! With disappointment showing all over their faces, the men said that there was nothing there for me to do and I could go.

I left the CID only to return on my very last day in Kebbi. I pretty much spent the year getting to know the culture and different parts of Kebbi State in my role as Public Relations Officer for the Tourism Club, each week I would spend some days with the corp members in the finance department, which was a lot more fun than being at the CID. I also learned a lot about art from my three house mates who were artists. At this point, while I was playing tourist in Kebbi, a number of my friends serving with me were actively going on job interviews, and some of them eventually got some really good jobs, one of my friends got a job as an engineer with Total, the major international oil company, another friend got an offer with Deltatek, a major oil servicing company; and yet another friend got a cabin crew job with the now defunct Virgin Nigeria airlines, which was really cool at the time. All these job offers were secured by my friends while we were still serving at Kebbi; I was really happy for them, but I couldn't help feeling sorry for myself at the time. I was really struggling with insecurities related to me getting the second class lower grade, and in addition, I did not know what I was going to do with my life.

## **ADVISE FOR NEW GRADUATES**

Many young people joining the workforce get in without any guidance on what to expect, or what to focus on. This sadly leads to many years of stagnation and frustration for many. I would like to share a few things I learnt from my first job, which has helped my career so far. While this is originally intended for people new in the workforce, it is applicable to all phases of life.

Let's take a quick look at them:

- **Develop your skills**

Thinking back to my first job in the Network Quality department at Vmobile, I had absolutely no idea about the job. I was however excited to be learning new things. Fortunately, there were extensive trainings from our main vendors - Ericsson and Motorola at the time, and this really helped to expand my knowledge of the job. I also got to learn to use Microsoft excel extensively because I was put in-charge of putting together a weekly report which I must admit is not for the faint hearted. I had to research and learn so much just to be able to execute this task. Apart from the fact that I needed to study far and wide just to be able to effectively carry out my tasks, I was also under some pressure because my colleagues who all started work around the same time, all seemed to have graduated with engineering degrees, and thus were more comfortable with our line of work. I, on the other hand studied computer science and had to study even more just to keep up with my peers.

After all these years, I can say that probably the most important thing for a graduate to do is expand their knowledge and develop their skills. This sentiment has been echoed by many successful professionals and business people I have spoken to and interviewed. In my time, I was lucky to have the opportunity to be hired without any identifiable skills apart from my degree. However these days, graduates need to show some level of skill during the interview process, else they might never get the job. In many cases, this is an important requirement in the employment process.

Even after being employed, I observe a lot of young people not actively studying or applying themselves to expand their skills, too many of them seem to be stuck on what they studied in school; I find myself saying the same thing to many young people starting out in the workplace. “What you studied in school is just the foundation, you may or may not actually have a career based on what you studied in school, instead focus on gaining more skill in a variety of areas that you are exposed to, because these will be the factors that will be considered as you get ahead in life.”

- **Offer your service to help others**

As someone new to the workplace, it is important that colleagues and especially senior people like you, or refer to you favourably. This means that as opportunities come along, you may possibly be recommended for training, trips or projects that could expose you and provide visibility with other senior managers. One way to position yourself to be liked is to actively offer your service to help others; not just senior members



of staff, but also to colleagues. I stress the latter because as one of my early bosses told me “the walls have ears, everyone is watching”. Everyone is literally watching you when you start out in a new job. Your peers will keep tabs on you and senior people will observe you from afar while forming their impressions of your personality in their minds. These opinions can easily be transferred to other senior people, who may then react to you based on the information they have heard from other people.

Unfortunately, some young graduates start out in the workplace with a negative attitude, some even go as far as being obnoxious. This is a horrible way to start out your career, this behaviour will not endear people to you. Instead, actively look out for opportunities to be helpful, become so useful to people around you that you build a reputation for delivering on tasks given to you. One of my mentors once said to me, “Make sure you do the work, and especially make sure you are seen to do the work”.

- **Soak in all the knowledge you can**

There is often a huge gap between academia and the real world, so starting out in the workplace can be daunting for many new graduates. The trick is to keep an open mind and learn as much as you can from your new environment. In some cases, you have to unlearn some of the things you learned in school to be successful. For example, the very process of school subconsciously teaches students to work alone, except in the few instances where you have team assignments or team projects. In the workplace however, depending on the company and the type of work you do, you may actively need to partner with other people to succeed at your own work.

Another trend which has taken root over the past few decades is the focus on a certificate. In some cases, people attend trainings or courses with little or no interest in the actual content of the course, their focus is squarely on passing the time and getting the certificate. This goes in line with the popular saying in Africa - “you went through school but school did not go through you.” Sadly, this has led to the situation where graduates from university can’t answer simple questions, write a simple letter, or analyse a situation during a job interview.

In addition to skill and information to do with the work, actively learn the other soft skills required to grow. Also, do not turn down opportunities to get involved in some-

thing new, even if this activity takes you out of your comfort zone. Learning is continuous throughout life, but it is especially required in those first few years when you start work. Learn fast, learn even in the instances you fail, and most importantly, learn from others.

- **Be innovative - improve on the systems and processes you meet**

In today's world of hi-tech and software, when the word innovation is mentioned, the first thing people think of is technology. The reality is that innovation isn't always about technology, innovation is actually coming up with new processes or systems that help to improve the way something or an activity is done. One sure way to impress the bosses when you join the company is to show that you are innovative. Where the opportunity presents itself, propose possible changes that would be considered innovative. With this, you should be looking at a process that accomplishes an activity faster, or makes it more convenient. One area many top bosses would be interested in is a new process which significantly brings down the cost of production or the cost of doing business in general.

Be careful with your suggestions however, because in some situations, the introduction of an innovation blocks sources of income for some people; and this could lead to serious resentment or even worse. During my NYSC service with the Police Command in Kebbi State, I once suggested to a group of officers that instead of using typewriters, the Command should look into purchasing some computers. I had very good intentions with the suggestion, but as soon as I said it, something changed in the room; in that instance I couldn't put my finger on what the problem was, but I noticed that some of the officers in the room seemed different, even uncomfortable. After the conversation, when I left the room, one of the officers apparently walked out after me and when I had walked quite a distance, he called out to me. As I approached, he put his hand on my shoulder and said, "you seem like a really nice boy. You are here for only one year, do your service and go home in peace." Looking at his face, he didn't need to say more, I understood what he did NOT say. I thanked the officer, and left for the day. For the rest of my stay in Kebbi, I never mentioned the word 'computer' and I left in peace at the end of my service year. Thinking about the situation now, it is possible that a group of people were benefiting from having typewriters used in the command, and my suggestion of computers must have been a threat to the existing system that they benefited from. Today, I am very grateful for that encrypted warning on that hot Kebbi day, no matter what the officer's intentions were.

- **Work Hard**

It is often said that talk is cheap. After all the talk during the interview process, you have to put your money where your mouth is when the real work starts. You need to work hard, but more important work smart. When and where required, use other people or resources to achieve what you need to achieve, and ensure you are seen; by this I mean make sure you are visible to the people who matter in your department and company at large.

- **Start building your network**

I cannot over-emphasise the importance of people in your life. Be intentional in your habits to grow the depth and breath of the relationships around you or your network. By depth, I mean how close you are to another person or the extent of your relationship, you may be linked by shared interests, or may have been introduced by a third party, and over time you get really close to this individual. People with deep relationships add value to your life in various ways. They can support when things are really rough and they are around when things are good too. In general they will experience large parts of your life with you.

There is also value in building and maintaining a wide breadth of relationships. These could be colleagues at work, acquaintances from social communities and so on. The interesting thing about relationships with narrow depth is that they tend to have diverse interests or experiences, and may be privy to opportunities that may benefit you. Most of the full time jobs and consultations that have come my way, were referred to me by people within my network that I had narrow relationships with.

*“When bankers get together they talk about art, when artists get together, they talk about money” - Oscar Wilde (Irish Poet)*

- **Adapt, quickly**

Some of us tend to be stuck in our ways; even early in their careers, I have come across young people who are unable to adapt to different situations. They experience small difficulty or discomfort at work and they want to throw in the towel. It is in adapting to different situations that you are truly able to test the depth of your skill, the degree of your tenacity, and the extent of your ability to persevere. In the course of your work or career, certain roadblocks or difficult situations will arise. Your ability to adapt

quickly is what leads to true success. The ability to adapt is a fundamental biological phenomenon. The process of growing up from a baby to an adult is filled with adapting to new situations, new environments, new people and even a new you as you change significantly, physically, emotionally and mentally.

Your ability to adapt to new roles and responsibilities determine how successful you would be when you get promoted to a higher position at work. Would you be able to adapt to leading a team of young people? Would you be able to adapt to representing your company at customer pitches or events? Would you be able to adapt to the physical appearance expected from people in a particular new field which you are joining? Would you be able to adapt to leaving the structured environment of your employment to the unstructured new world of entrepreneurship? The true test of your skills and knowledge gained over the years is your ability to adapt, so you can take advantage of opportunities which come before you.

*“The illiterate of the 21st century will not be those who cannot read and write, but those who cannot learn, unlearn, and relearn” - Alvin Toffler (American Writer)*

## **CHAPTER 6**

### **THE BOSS**

In almost every stage in life, you have a boss. That's someone or a group of people that you are accountable to or you report to. In the wider society, maybe certain dictators and babies have no boss as they pretty much do whatever they want to. For the rest of us however, we refer to others for approval. As a child, my parents and class teachers were my bosses, elected people in political positions are accountable to their constituents, and even the Managing Director or Chief Executive of a company is beholden to the Board of the company.

Your boss is someone you are responsible to at work; the boss is often the person who would define your role and responsibilities in the organisation or department, this person will also be the person to rate your performance at the end of a defined period. As bosses go, it's possible to have the Good, the Bad and the Ugly. An interesting array of people with different characteristics can be found on the Boss spectrum, a certain individual may have more than one of these character traits.

Here are a few Boss character traits to watch out for in your career:

#### **The Bulldog**

Having a Bulldog as a boss can be a very interesting experience, especially early in one's career. The Bulldog is a 'go-getter', they are highly ambitious and typically have an incredible work ethic. The bulldog does not have the word 'No' in their vocabulary, nothing fazes this individual. No matter the obstacle, they would find a way to achieve their objective. The bulldog is typically savvy at office politics, they have alliances or leverage the right or relevant people to achieve their targets. They typically have friends in high places within the company, and are often chummy with the folks at HR (Human Resources). The bulldog is also not afraid to go head to head with an opponent. They are no strangers to fighting dirty to get what they want, and often they come out on top, because they are aggressive and willing to do almost anything to get their way, even making enemies along the way.

There is a lot to learn from the bulldog. How to network with the right people, how to work hard, and more importantly, how to work smart. The bulldog exhibits the 'never

give up spirit'. And because of their leadership style, it can be observed that they often lead high performing teams as well.

However, there are some potential downsides to having a bulldog as a boss; as indicated earlier, the bulldog boss tends to be a very aggressive person when it comes to work. Some are aggressive to the point of leaving their reports behind if the person cannot keep up with the pace of the boss. This unfortunate report may have a miserable time working with the bulldog boss and may feel that they lack work - life balance, because they have to stay back at work to attempt to keep up with the bulldog boss and colleagues.

### **Voltron**

Voltron is a reference to a cartoon series from the 1980s which featured a team of space explorers who pilot a super robot called Voltron to defend the hypothetical universe. The Boss who has a voltron character trait is very protective of their team, they are typically very supportive and are often great teachers and mentors. More important is the fact that they would defend individuals and the team as a whole no matter the circumstance. Even if someone from the team messes up, as long as others people from other departments are present or making accusations, the voltron boss will defend the person to the ends of the world.

I remember having a boss with this trait early in my career. We were part of a major cross functional project, and we had a deliverable which a colleague and I were responsible for. It is safe to say that we messed up big time, and looking back, it was quite an embarrassing situation we put our boss in. At the cross functional meeting which had different heads of department in attendance, There were many accusations flying around the room, of how our actions or inactions would delay the project, my boss defended us with such vigour that the people making the accusations had to back down, and there we were, sitting at a corner of the room, straight faced, scared, with nothing to say. My boss was a real champion in that instance. Getting back to our office was a whole different thing, my voltron boss gave my colleague and I the verbal lashing of our lives. But I was happy to take it; she had saved our reputations in public, in private it was time to face the music.

### **Gaddafi**

This is in reference to Muammar Gaddafi, the former Libyan leader who ruled from 1969 via a coup d'etate till 2011 when he was killed by anti-Gaddafist militants. The

boss with the gaddafi character trait is a political beast. This individual is great in office politics, they know how to play the game, they are ruthless in their ambition to climb the corporate and social ladder, and they will aggressively go after anyone or team that stands in their way. This kind of boss is great at putting themselves out there, they get drafted to important projects, they are great at delegating work, and know how to effectively use resources available to them; The gaddafi boss will typically take all the glory from a successful project or initiative.

It is actually quite educative to observe a boss who has a gaddafi character trait. They would teach you the art of networking, how to charm your way to people's hearts, how to earn goodwill around, how to create and leverage opportunities to grow in your career. They work smart and are ready to do the dirty work if it is a means to the end they want. Be careful however, the gaddafi boss would typically demand complete loyalty from their team members, while they themselves are not loyal to anyone; their actions are all about themselves. They will throw you under the bus without thinking twice if you are not stepping up to the plate with your work or if they sense that you are not loyal to them.

### **Diva**

In many ways the diva boss is similar to gaddafi, it's all about self with them as well. They are also great with office politics and are able to charm their way to the halls of power. The major difference is that they have a more hands-off approach to getting what they want. The diva would get themselves assigned to an important project, but don't expect them to do any of the heavy lifting, or any of the dirty work. They are effective resource managers and will use people around them to achieve their goals, and like gaddafis, they hug the glory and accomplishments and would often be recognised and rewarded by senior leadership, often getting rapid promotions while their team mates and subordinates are often not acknowledged.

### **The Specialist**

The specialist boss is very sound, technically. However they may not always be the best of bosses from a managerial perspective, they may not be very politically aware or savvy, and their engagement and interactions with other bosses is often less than desired. In many situations, units or departments led by specialists suffer because they are unable to secure needed resources due to the lack of political influence in the company. The specialist boss is typically effective in their work, and often are left to do

the main and sometimes dirty work in a project; but don't necessarily enjoy the benefits of their accomplishments, and are not adequately recognised by senior management.

This situation often causes resentment by teams led by specialists and in some cases leads to a lot of friction between different departments in the organisation, which again leads to delays in major projects, and infighting within the organisation. Due to the technical nature of some functions or departments such as IT, Engineering, Finance and so on, they sometimes tend to be led by individuals with this specialist character trait, who grew through the ranks of the department but may not be savvy political players in the organisation. This is not always the case however, and here's why I have this line of thought; I was once in an organisation where the Marketing Director had the specialist character trait. It was a weird feeling for me to experience this in a Marketing department, because up until then, I had only seen such a situation happen with a leader in a more technical department or function.

In any case, it often falls on direct reports or other subordinates of these specialist leaders, to do a lot of the back-dealings to influence certain decisions to go in the favour of such specialist led departments, or to push for certain projects to run smoothly, sometimes, even without the knowledge of the specialist boss.

### **Buddy**

The Buddy is a happy-go-lucky kind of boss who is very friendly with the people in their department. Reports and members of the department are very free with their boss, and morale is typically high in such departments. People are free to say their minds and tend to take advantage of freedoms that come with such a relationship that is made possible by the character of the boss. This boss is caring and goes above and beyond to be involved in the professional and personal lives of people in their department.

The possible downside to the buddy in an organisation, is that their reports sometimes take the relationship with their boss for granted, and may begin to be borderline rude in certain cases. They may also openly challenge their boss on issues within the department. Depending on other characteristics of the buddy leader, they may or may not be able to rein in discipline within their team or department. Where the buddy is able to enforce discipline, then the people align to the directive. However, in the case of a buddy leader who is not able to effectively enforce some level of discipline, the people openly revolt and run amok, causing a lot of friction with other departments and the company at large.



## **The Micromanager**

According to investopedia.com "A micromanager is a boss or manager who gives excessive supervision to employees. A micromanager, rather than telling an employee what task needs to be accomplished and by when, will watch the employee's actions closely and provide frequent comments and criticism of the employee's work and processes"

It is not always easy having a micromanager for a boss, especially if you are a free spirited person like me. I once had a micromanager boss, while it was not easy, we had a pretty good relationship. It is my opinion that reports or subordinates have the responsibility to understand their boss and learn to work around your boss' characteristics. In my case, being an independent person, I struggled with my micromanager boss for the first few months. I would go ahead doing my work, understanding the processes in the company and taking some personal initiative on some activities, and he would complain and query my actions, even when they were the correct things to do. After a couple of months, I did a self-evaluation and realised that my boss was a micromanager who wanted or even needed to be part of every decision made.

So, I decided to change my tactics with my boss. Even when I knew what to do on certain tasks, I would inform him about the situation, allowing him tell me what to do. If I was to write a memo, I would reach out to my boss as if to get permission to write the memo. Every single obvious thing, I ran through my boss, and guess what? Our working relationship got better. We actually had a great working relationship, even though I did not necessarily like the process, but in the end, it all worked out well for me.

## **YOUR BOSS' BOSS**

This is the person that your boss, manager or immediate supervisor reports to. Depending on the type of organisation, culture, size, and the hierarchical structure in that organisation or department; you may or may not have direct access or interactions with your boss' boss.

It is important for your career growth to be noticed and known by the bosses, including your boss' boss. And by being noticed, I mean to be known to be smart, efficient and productive person. To be known to be innovative, a team player and generally one who is able to deliver on projects. This tends to open up opportunities for growth in the

organisation; there might be a project that is being thought of by management, and your direct boss might not even be in the know of these plans. However, if you have a positive reputation with your boss' boss, it is possible they might consider and recommend you for such a project, which gives you another opportunity to deliver for the boss.

A very important rule of thumb in any situation at work, in business and life in general is; **NEVER OUTSHINE YOUR BOSS**. This is so important, that in Robert Greene's bestselling book, 'The 48 Laws of Power', "Never outshine the master" is the very first law.

The book advises the reader to "**Make your masters appear more brilliant** than they are and you will attain the heights of power", it also stresses that "when it comes to power, **outshining the master is perhaps the worst mistake of all.**"

Never take your position for granted and never let any favours you receive go to your head that you begin to outshine your boss. This could lead to a lot of friction with your boss and could negatively impact your career, especially in that organisation. Loyalty is a virtue that is appreciated by bosses.

## **MANAGING PEOPLE OLDER THAN YOU WHEN YOU ARE THE BOSS**

For some people, they climb the career ladder quite fast, and come to some level of leadership quite early in their careers. I was fortunate to be one of those people, as I climbed into middle management, becoming a manager at a major telecommunications company at just 25 years. In such a position, it is possible to have other people reporting to you, even more interesting is the situation where your reports are significantly older than you and probably have more experience than you in the business or organisation.

In such a situation, whether it's obvious or not, people will be looking out to see how you manage your reports as well as colleagues. There will be people who will be genuinely happy for you, who will be inspired by your situation and will look to learn from you and support you. There may also be people, who due to personal insecurities, past experiences or having some level of entitlement, believe that you do not deserve the position. This 'Bad Belle' (a slang in Nigeria meaning jealousy) could lead to them working against you or generally working against your success.

You will have to be prepared for all these, and be able to manage and deal with these circumstances as they come. You need to be confident in your abilities; however, at the same time, be humble and respectful to all around you including your direct reports and colleagues. It is important that your new found leadership role does not get to your head. Do not be carried away by people referring to you as sir or ma or boss. I recall a story I was told about this young guy who was made the head of Sales at a fast moving Consumer Goods company. This gentleman was apparently great at selling, and by virtue of his performances over the years, he was shortlisted for leadership. Another thing that made him special in the team was the fact that he was the youngest in the team so he got this promotion which obviously came with its perks and with leadership over peers. The story goes that this young nice guy suddenly became a monster. He was verbally abusive to his reports, he became brash and impatient with his team. I can't say if it was the pressure of the new role, or ego; however, I can tell you that he took the wrong path with his team, and over time the team began an active campaign of sabotage to make him look bad. I hear that people were so hurt that they were willing to be fired just to bring him down. As you would guess, after some time, he was given the choice to step down or leave the company and sadly, he chose to leave the company.

When you are a younger boss or you've got older people reporting to you, you have to be sensitive to the situation with your colleagues and reports, more importantly, be professional to all around you, whether they are your colleagues, your bosses or even the lowest people in the company. Everyone deserves the dignity of respect. This is not saying you shouldn't be firm or disciplined in your work. By all means, chase your goals and carry the team along, but treat your colleagues and reports the way you would like to be treated if you were in their shoes.

## **CHAPTER 7**

### **UNDERSTANDING THE CULTURE IN THE WORKPLACE**

Every single organisation has its culture and traditions; these may be written rules or norms that guide how the people in that organisation behave. In many cases, these traditions are known but unwritten rules guiding how people behave and progress within the company. Departments and teams may also have their culture which could be behaviour established over time by the team or behaviour defined and enforced by the leadership of the department. Some teams for example are hyper competitive while others are laid back. In some companies for example, you are not expected to close for the day before your boss leaves the office; whether you are done or not, you are expected to sit at your desk till your boss goes home.

Getting into a new company or a new department is like moving to a new city or country, your first instinct should be to know and understand the laws and regulations of the new city or country, with the aim to ensure you align to them. Even more important is understanding how the people in that department operate, and how to thrive in such an environment. To be honest, in many cases, there may be positive or negative cultures which are unspoken and unwritten, but the people in that team live by them every day.

Being a newbie at a company or a department, it is important to do your homework before you join that company. Try to gather as much information as you can about the inner workings of that company and this could be done by researching online, looking out for threads about the company on social media. However, the best way to get real information is to speak to someone who is already in the company. If you are lucky to know someone in that company, then milk all the information you can from them before your first day of work. I have a major caution here though; while I advise you gather information from a friend or acquaintance in the company, never act on this information; go into the company with the knowledge you have gathered, but keep an open mind and learn for yourself how the company works, who the power brokers are, which individuals are influential and whom you should avoid if you can. The trick here is to verify every information your friend gave you, because your friend may actually get a lot of things wrong, after all, they are only human.

In one of my former companies, a new head of operations was hired. By all indications, Stan, the new head of operations seemed to be a smart guy. However, it was common knowledge that he went to school with one of his direct reports, called Andy; and there

is a high probability that Andy fed Stan a lot of information about the company before he resumed work because from the get go, Stan seemed to know a lot of the inner workings of the company (which is great to be honest). However, Stan also seemed to have some prejudices or some preconceived opinions about certain individuals and teams in the company. Now, the problem in this situation was that Stan started off his career in the company being antagonistic to the Head of Sales, a gentleman called Segun. In a company where the Sales team is extremely influential, and one where Segun was highly liked and respected. Segun is a people person, as described in the chapter 6, he embodied characteristics of a Bulldog, Voltron, and a Buddy all at the same time. What Stan may not have known, was that Andy and Segun often clashed and it can be assumed that Andy didn't like Segun very much, but Andy obviously needed to work with the sales team to be able to achieve his work. In the process of gathering information about the company, it can be assumed that Andy transferred his prejudices about Segun to Stan. Stan unfortunately took this information from Andy, resumed his new position as Head of Operations, and by default made Segun a rival. I can tell you it's not been an easy ride for Stan at that company.

Some organisations have a highly charged political atmosphere, where people in the company form factions or groups. Highly political companies or teams can be difficult to manoeuvre for a newbie. You need to learn the skill or the art of observation. It is extremely important and in many cases it is a matter of survival to be able to read the political climate in a room or in the company at large. Having the skill to understand what is said and especially what is NOT said in a conversation or in a meeting is of utmost importance. Who are the people that tend to hang around each other, or spend time outside the office? Who are the people with shared interests and are therefore allies on a project? Do you know how to observe the body language of the people in the room, to know if they are happy or upset about what is being said or proposed? These are just a few things you may need to know or learn to effectively navigate a highly political environment.

Early in my career, the political situation in the company was at a boiling point, it was very obvious even to we the young employees that there were deep divisions. Managers and Department heads actively played the politics to get favour from management, to get juicy projects, and further their growth and influence in the company. I recall that a lot of colleagues at my level which was relatively low at the time, would tow the hardline stance of their bosses whether it made sense to the project or not. I understood that they were trying to be loyal to their bosses; however, their actions and many of the

actions of their bosses were detrimental to our project and to the company as a whole. My boss, a very brilliant man whom I respect and like, was a straight shooter, and expressed his opinions plainly. He would always call other people out on their nonsense, and frankly, he wasn't liked by a few other bosses from other teams on the project. That made almost some deliverables from my team to be sabotaged or blocked by other teams (because we needed the other teams to sign off our work to progress on the project). I was frequently frustrated by this.

I subsequently made up my mind to overcome the political challenges I was experiencing on my projects, regardless of the fact that some of the other bosses did not like my boss. I became deliberate in many of my actions, I made friends with colleagues at my level in other departments. I ensured I was the go-to guy in my department whenever anyone from other departments needed help from my department, I even went as far as helping to persuade my boss to sign or approve certain memos or projects. I was very helpful, and gradually built up a lot of goodwill with people in other departments. This goodwill began to bear fruits over time, to the extent that when other projects from my department were actively delayed or 'sabotaged', my own projects would be pushed along and approved. People were willing to overlook the fact that they didn't like my boss, and were willing to go against their natural or original position on a project because they liked me.

## **BECOMING THE YOUNGEST MANAGER IN MY COMPANY**

In retrospect, this was probably how I got promoted to the position of a manager, being the youngest one at the time to achieve such a level in the company. Almost a year before my promotion, Etisalat (now 9Mobile) came in as a new entrant in the telecommunications (telco) space in Nigeria. Back then, there was a lot of talk about this company because it was said they were coming in with a lot of Middle Eastern cash. People were extremely excited and obviously applied for a variety of roles in the new telco company. I recall those days, from our Banana Island office, I would see people walking over to Etisalat's office in suits, obviously going for interviews. To be honest, later on, after the first wave of people had already left to Etisalat, I also went for interviews there myself and actually got a job offer, but I felt the salary offered was not significantly higher than what I was being paid at the time, so I decided to reject the offer. My manager was part of the first wave of people who got jobs at Etisalat but what was more interesting and a little scary was that my manager and Head of Department both resigned around the same time. To put it in perspective, my boss and my boss' boss

both left the company around the same time and they were not alone, it was a period filled with uncertainty as many people flocked to the new telco.

Over the next few months, I went through a number of temporary managers who oversaw my unit from a couple of weeks to a few months before they jumped ship to the Etisalat or left for somewhere else; during those months, a total of four managers sort of oversaw my activities. The reality however, was that I took full responsibility for my work during those months without dropping the ball. I wasn't really bothered about the frequent changes in managers I was experiencing at the time. Throughout that period, I remained calm and steady, and showed that I could take care of the unit even after losing my manager and Head of Department; and like everything else in life, when you are diligent, people take notice.

Around this time, Ladi my friend and colleague had a job offer from another telco. Ladi was in the same department with me, but in another unit. We were basically in the same predicament, we were both specialists (a level below a manager) and we had both lost our bosses to another telco, while holding the fort in our relevant units. Apparently, the news got out that Ladi had a really good job offer from another telco, now because Ladi and I were really close, other Heads of Department within the Marketing function suspected that I also had an offer. According to the story I heard later, there was panic that if Ladi and I quit, literally the entire department would come to a halt as we were the main resources keeping things moving. So, some Heads of Department began to push for Ladi and I to be promoted to Managers. The gist then was that our Chief Marketing Officer (CMO) was against it, especially my promotion, but I heard that Banke, the HOD of another department, who had a reputation as a Bulldog made a particular strong case for my promotion. After some pressure, my promotion was finally approved by the CMO. All of this took place within one week, and at the time, I had no idea what was happening. I was just called into the CMO's office one afternoon, where he handed me my promotion letter. During my chat with the CMO, he congratulated me on the promotion; he however admitted that he was against the promotion, but eventually agreed because a number of people he had high regard for came to speak to him about my case.

Before I left my CMO's office, he mentioned something that I have always held on to from a financial perspective. He said *"people are always excited about being promoted, because of the increase in remuneration or salary that comes with the new role. Remember that the joy that comes with an increase in salary only lasts for about*

*three months. After that, it's all back to normal, with the feeling of needing more money."* Over the years, having had a number of opportunities to earn more, mostly by moving on to a new job, I can say that my CMO was totally correct.

## **7 THINGS TO DO WHEN YOU START A NEW JOB**

Since my very first full time job, I have learnt that success in the workplace depends on two major factors; first is your professionalism, which basically is your work output, your skills and your ability to deliver on tasks given to you. The second, and in my opinion even more important for growth in your organisation, is the ability to effectively navigate and leverage Office Culture; some might refer to this as navigating office politics. In any case, it is absolutely important. Humans are social beings, and in any group, be it the workplace, social group or even in the home, there are social nuances that have impact on power and influence. The ability to leverage this can be the difference between success and failure. Here are few things to help you navigate the new environment effectively:

### **1. Build your Personal Brand**

When you are new to an environment, existing players in that environment watch out for the new entrant to the environment. This also plays out in the workplace, when a new person joins a team or a company, everyone is watching you whether it's obvious or not. It is often said that first impressions last the longest, so it is important you make the very best first impression with colleagues, bosses and even subordinates or reports when you join a new company, because they will hold on to it. Being new, you would want your enthusiasm to show when you interact with your new colleagues, make out opportunity to introduce yourself to people around the business or get your manager, HR on-boarding representative or someone you possibly know in the company to introduce you to people.

Remember, you want to put your best foot forward during these introductions, so be observant, watch out for body language signs that show if the person you are being introduced to is very busy and needs to get back to work. In that case, make the introduction short and give them space; however, if the person seems like they are free and open, take that opportunity to get to know them. Throughout this process, remain observant, listen attentively, and try to memorise names. Pay attention to your surroundings, don't interrupt a meeting just because you want to introduce yourself, and don't talk too loud in an open, communal area. Remember the objective is to create



positive awareness for your personal brand by being respectful, professional, and diligent in your work.

## **2. Observe, Listen and Ask Questions**

When you start out at a new company, it is best to gather as much information as possible; you need to practice the act of asking questions at the right time. As I previously indicated, you should be observant because most communication is not verbal, there are many ways people communicate with body language; and in many cases, people are not even aware they are communicating without talking. For example, in certain instances, when someone doesn't like what they are hearing or if they are generally not comfortable, they tend to fold their arms which for many people, is a self-comforting or a guarded position.

Have you ever been in a situation where you are on a journey and not sure of your way, and you need to ask someone for directions? I have experienced several instances when the person giving the direction says something like "...at the end of the road turn left", but I noticed that with their hand they were pointing right. Personally, I always go with the hand signals and always find that this is correct. Same thing in the workplace, when you are in meetings or interacting with people, pay attention to the body language, observe everything and actively listen to what is said, and what is NOT said (but inferred). I have found that people are often willing to share information when you are new. Of course, the timing and how you ask matter. Even in cases when they are not forthcoming to a direct question, their silence often gives you an indication of the answer. For me, the most important aspect to gathering information is understanding the culture of the organisation, and this has helped me over the years in my different roles. I once decided that a company I joined was not the right fit for me just after one week of going through my information gathering process. By talking to colleagues and asking questions, I realised that many practices in the company were not aligned to my values as an individual, and within a few months, I left the company.

## **3. Seek out a Friend**

Warren Buffet is attributed to the quote *"it is good to learn from your mistakes, it is better to learn from other people's mistakes"*. One of the most effective ways to settle fast into a new company or team is to have a friend who is willing and able to show you the ropes. This could be someone that you had previously known, or it

could be someone whom you just met. In either case, their knowledge can be invaluable to helping you know the pitfalls to avoid or the cultural norms to be aware of. I was once with a company that had quite a number of perks; the catch however was that these perks were not indicated in my employee contract and HR would never tell you about them. You benefited from the perks only when you explicitly requested for them. I only had access to these perks because a friend I made in the company mentioned it in passing, and of course I engaged HR to request these entitlements.

#### **4. Set Boundaries**

In a number of Hollywood movies, the story has the protagonist or hero being sent to jail for one reason or the other. One of the first things that happen when the hero arrives at the prison, is that someone (usually a big, muscular guy or lady) tries to bully or take advantage of the new in-mate. In many movies, the hero surprises everyone by beating up the bully; subsequently, no one disturbs the hero after this. Something similar happens sometimes in the workplace. You will find in a company there is just the loud mouth who tends to get their way most times; in other instances, it's an individual who often shifts responsibility for difficult work to other team members, but will always be there to take the glory when the work is successfully done. I've found that these sorts of people test you; they try to push you or see how much they can get away with.

In some cases, by their nature, they are just simply oblivious to the fact that they rub many people the wrong way, and because nobody says anything, they get away with a lot of rubbish. Usually, my position is to set boundaries on such people. I am a proponent of being nice, helpful and friendly, however you must also be firm, and not be a push-over. I will take being not-liked and respected any day over being liked but a pushover. In my previous company, there was this lady called Hannah, she was a supervisor in the operations department, and she had been with the company for well over twenty years. It was a known fact that she was very close to the Managing Director. In fact, Hannah was suspected of being one of those who feed information to the MD; to top things up, she really had a bad attitude. It so happens that one day, a customer had an issue that was escalated for investigation to Hannah's team. While the customer waited, I sent one of my reports to fast track the investigation. When I realised that my report had not returned after an hour, I went to Operations facility myself. When I got there, I realised that Hannah and her team were not being supportive, and to make matters worse, she was raising her voice at my report and saying a lot of things that we in management would not approve of. She continued even after

seeing me. In retrospect, I guess she thought she could get away with it because I was new and possibly relatively young. She clearly wasn't prepared for my reaction, as I started my tirade about how a customer was waiting for a long time for something that could easily have been resolved. With shock and embarrassment on their faces, they were able to resolve the issue. Looking back, it is clear that Hannah did not like me throughout my stay at the company; however, I know she respected me and my team enough to resolve all subsequent issues promptly.

## **5. Choose Work Battles Wisely**

Steve Jobs said *"It's only by saying NO that you can concentrate on things that are really important."* Through the course of one's career, there will be battles which may be with colleagues, or rival teams. In most cases, you must take them on because your image and the progress of your work may depend on you coming out on top. There are certain battles however that are un-winnable; some may come up with your boss, others may prop up with people with more power and influence than you within the organisation, and some may have to do with a project that a powerful person is against. Whichever the case, knowing when to walk away from such battles can mean the difference between survival and total loss. Robert Greene's *48 Laws of Power* tells us in Law 19 to "know who you're dealing with, do not offend the wrong person", so walk away, to be able to fight another day.

## **6. Learn How to Navigate the Workplace**

One of the things I try to learn early on in a new company or job is to know how to easily navigate through the bureaucracies and politics of an organisation. A way to do this is to determine the people who have active and passive power or influence in relevant departments. For example, the obvious options for active power are the bosses, you would be naturally looking at the CEO or MD, the Directors or CXOs and even managers or supervisors within the company. The thing is most people spend all their energies trying to court the people at the top, the people with the obvious power in the organisation, which to be honest is okay. However, a mistake often made, is ignoring or not spending enough time getting to know the people with passive power or influence. These are the Personal Assistants, Secretaries and other people in supporting roles to the power brokers. These people have immense influence that many people take for granted. Having a great relationship with the MD's PA could mean the difference between having your project approved or rejected.

I recall one instance early in my career when I was actively trying to get an Initiative approved by management, the practice then was that all functional Directors had to sign off on the project before it could start. Now, I was a little behind schedule based on the plan I had, and I had submitted my memo to the office of a Director who was one of the last signatories on the document. Apparently, the week I submitted my memo was a really stressful one in that department, and sadly most requests submitted that week were rejected. In my case however, the Director's PA held back my memo, she actually did not submit it because she guessed it would be rejected as well; and I would have to start the process of signing from the beginning. To help me, she held on to my memo for over a week, till her boss was in a better mood, then she submitted it, and I got the approval. I didn't know all this at the time, as I kept going back for updates on my memo which seemed to be delayed. It was many weeks later during a conversation with the lady that she told me what she actually did. And the only reason she did that for me, was because over time, I had developed a friendly relationship with her. While we were not really close in my opinion, she liked me enough to proactively work for my benefit.

Learning to navigate the workplace is a skill I actually learnt, listening to my mum talk about her office. She worked in one of Nigeria's top banks for almost thirty years, and I always noticed that in her stories, a lot of important information came from secretaries or assistants. Another group of people she was always close to were people in Human Resources (HR). In every organisation, The HR team is extremely important and powerful. In my career, I have made it a duty to be friends with people in HR, having realised that being close to them has so many benefits because one way or the other they are close to policy making and execution on things that have to do with staff. With access to such people, you may get credible information that could help your work and progress in the business.

## **7. Deliver on your Work**

Just get the work done. Nobody is really interested in your effort or the time spent TRYING. The Business wants output and that is why you were hired. A lot of people have an entitlement mentality because they have spent a lot of years in a company; however, time spent doing something doesn't equal impact or productivity. This is probably one of the major issues we have in Nigeria, especially in sectors like the civil service. There is a lot of talk about how long someone spends in an industry or on a

job; for me what's even more important is what was achieved in that time. I recall reading about how the Director-General of the Nigerian Raw Materials Research and Development Council mentioned the development of a technology to optimise kilishi production as one of their major successes in the 33 years of the agency's existence (Kilishi is a spiced meat delicacy made from beef and is popular in Northern Nigeria). This is an example of the time vs productivity conundrum. Same thing happens in the workplace, too many people spend time and effort working but are not necessarily productive at the end of the day, then they feel cheated when someone else with perceived "less experience" gets promoted to a more senior role over them. A former boss and mentor once said, "To be successful, you have to do the work and be seen to do the work"; in other words, deliver on your work, and make sure everyone (who matters) knows that you delivered on that activity.

## CHAPTER 8

### LEVERAGE OR DEVELOP SOFT SKILLS TO THRIVE IN THE WORK-PLACE

Many people start their careers, jobs or even businesses thinking they just need to know the work and everything will fall into place. The reality is that, in most cases, you need to be deliberate to make things work for you. This reminds me of a conversation I had with an old friend who was not having a great time at work; apparently, everyone in his team got a promotion except him. That is a difficult situation to be in, where everyone in the unit or department is celebrating, and you alone are left in the cold. The sad thing was that my friend said he was great at his work, apparently he delivers on his work. This led me to ask him a series of questions, which revealed that he was not playing the game properly in his office.

As I mentioned in chapter 7, there are two major things that are required to succeed in the workplace, first you have to deliver on your work, and the second, which in certain cases is more important, is to effectively navigate the culture or politics in the organisation. After talking to my friend, I realised that he was the kind of person that would come into the office, not really talk to anyone, sit at his desk and do his work. In primary school, this might have worked, but in the real world, this simply is not enough. Even if you are the quiet or shy type, you need to get out of your comfort zone, and work towards developing skills which are not natural to you. These interpersonal skills which are also referred to as soft skills, may mean the difference between being promoted with your colleagues, or being left to rot on your own. Here are a few soft skills that may be useful in the workplace:

- **Build Rapport, Build Relationships**

This is perhaps one of the most important soft skills. It is often said “No man is an island,” and this quote basically infers that no one can make it in this life alone. As you go through life, you encounter people; some stay, some pass through and go, but in many of these situations, people have an impact on your life. Building rapport is simply the process of building a connection with someone else. Rapport is achieved when you are able to build some level of trust between yourself and the other person. There are different ways to build rapport, which is the first step to building a relationship with someone. The most effective way to connect is based on shared interests. This could be as simple as being assigned with someone to work together on a project, while you

both enjoy having drinks together. Rapport can also be built via mutual friends or past experiences, like going to the same university even if you did not know each other when you were both at school. Developing relationships with people helps to extend your influence in an environment; and people who have some level of positive relationship or rapport with you tend to look out for your interest if they are in a position to influence it. It is by having good rapport with someone that they think of you when there is an opportunity.

Such an opportunity presented itself to me at a point when I wasn't too happy in the company where I worked. It was a global technology company with really good pay, but I was just not aligned to the way business was done in this company. From the blue, my friend Victor, whom I had not even spoken to in probably eight months called me to tell me about a job opening to head marketing at one of the top logistics companies. To be honest, once I heard logistics in my mind, I shut down the idea. I however did not say anything to Victor to indicate that I was not interested, to the contrary I told him I was very interested and I would appreciate more information. I did this for several reasons; first of all, in that instance, I did not have enough information on the opportunity to just turn it down in a whim. That would not be prudent. One of my mentors once told me "always keep an open mind to opportunities that come your way, but never rush to take action on the opportunity. Keep the opportunity alive, but do your due diligence before you leap". I had these words in my head when I told Victor I was interested. The second reason I did not say no outright to Victor was because I was grateful that he even thought of me when he heard about the opportunity. This was a guy I had not seen or spoken to in many months and he calls me from nowhere with a job prospect? If I had just shut it down, there is a possibility that in the future, if he runs into an opportunity that would benefit me, because of how I shut down the previous opportunity, Victor may not even reach out to me to tell me about such a potential opportunity, be it business or a job.

Up until that point when Victor called me with the job opportunity with the logistics company, I had only worked in telecommunications or technology organisations, and in that instance, I didn't see myself joining a sector like logistics which I assumed at the time was old and uninteresting. However, when I started thinking and analysing my situation and the opportunity at hand, I remembered a statement Jack Ma (the founder of Alibaba) made at an event. He mentioned that "technology, logistics and finance were the three major sectors that made eCommerce possible." This statement

led me to become even more curious about the possibility of switching industries. I followed through on the interview process and eventually got the job.

There are so many benefits to building positive relationships with people, one of which is that it helps to reduce isolation in the sense that people are around for you during good times and especially rough times. People who have great rapport with you act as your advocates when you are not around. Relationships enable you collaborate and share the burden by working together where required, and it provides very important networking opportunities that could lead to you benefiting from available opportunities.

- **Negotiation**

Wikipedia defines negotiation as “a dialogue between two or more people or parties intended to reach a beneficial outcome”. In almost everything we do in life, we negotiate. This may be haggling with a retailer on the price of a product, or justifying a project to your boss. My kids attempt to negotiate with me every time I send them to bed at night, and negotiation is at the heart of every job interview. In wooing prospective customers, a lot of sales people definitely go through a series of negotiations, and sometimes when I am in a difficult spot, I have found myself negotiating with God, promising to change a habit if He gets me out of that difficult situation. Even something as mundane as crossing a street is a negotiation. The act of negotiation is always with us; however, sometimes when the topic of negotiation comes up with people, they often tell me they don’t know how to negotiate, or probably they don’t like to. In reality, without knowing it, we all probably engage in one form of negotiation or the other at least three times every day.

In life, as in business and the workplace, there may be times when you need to talk yourself into an opportunity; this may be an interview to a new job, or trying to get a good deal on an apartment or a car. You may also need to talk yourself out of an uncomfortable situation, like explaining to a boss why you should get a higher grade on your performance appraisal. In these and many more scenarios, you need to be adept at negotiating to get the outcome you want out of the situation. I must admit that as people, we are all different, and we all have varying levels of skill when it comes to negotiating. For example, I recall a friend from my boarding school who was just blessed with such a high level of emotional smarts that he could always talk himself out of difficult situations. When a group of us got punished for being late for an activity, he always seemed to escape the punishment. He had fascinating, yet believable



stories that almost always persuaded the teacher to let him go. Of course back then, many of us resented him for this skill, but thinking back, we probably all wished we could be like him.

If like me, you are not like my secondary school friend who is blessed with extensive negotiating skill, here are a few tips to help improve your negotiation abilities:

- **Put yourself in the other person's shoes**

In almost every situation, people think of themselves first. This is all the more true in the work place. No matter the situation, the interest of an individual, their team, department or even their company comes first in any project or partnership. So, in attending a meeting where you need to go into a discussion to reach an agreement, you have to put yourself in the other party's shoes. You need to think what they want out of the agreement; you should analyse all possible positives and negatives in the agreement, and consider where they may be able to compromise. By going through what I call the 'self-interest' analysis, you become better prepared for almost everything the other party throws at you during the meeting. Some people use extreme requests as a negotiation tactic, where they insist on an outrageous request, just to unnerve you but if you effectively go through the self-interest analysis before the meeting, nothing they introduce will unnerve you.

Another way the self-interest analysis helps, is when you need to get something from someone. Avoid using the word "I" as much as possible in conversations; instead use 'We' when talking, with the aim to associate the other person with the objective. The use of "I" subconsciously informs the other person that whatever you are proposing is for your own benefit and in most cases, they would resist whatever you are trying to get from them.

In putting yourself in the other person's shoes, consider the following situation where the financial controller for a company whose long-time customer had stopped paying their bill because of some financial difficulty the customer was going through. In this example, the controller sent the following message to the customer.

*"...following my repeated attempts to reach you over the past couple of months as regards your outstanding payments, I wanted to inform you that in order to continue enjoying our services, you need to pay your outstanding balance in full by the end of the month."*

The above statement lacks tact, it is aggressive, rigid and frankly very stiff like many corporate communications. The way the communication has been crafted, it's all about the company, and the typical customer in a difficult situation is less likely to respond positively to such a message.

Here is a possible alternative communication to the indebted customer:

*“...we thank you for choosing ABC Company as your preferred service provider, we are especially grateful for the many years we have been opportune to serve you. In these economic times, we understand that many businesses may be going through difficulties. We are here to work with you through this unique situation, and would appreciate an opportunity to speak to you at your convenience about possible payment options for your account.”*

Compared to the first message, the second one is more compassionate and is empathetic in tone. The communication also acknowledges the customer's situation which subconsciously communicates that the company has the interest of the customer at heart, and as a result, the customer would most likely respond to the requests for a chat to talk about possible payment plans. This tactic has a very high level of success, whether it's in a verbal or written situation, therefore, always communicate with the other party's perspective at the back of your mind.

- **Body Language**

In chapter 7, I indicated that most communication is non-verbal, so you need to be able to observe and understand the many sub-conscious ways people communicate. This skill is immensely important when you are trying to reach an agreement with someone. I had mentioned earlier that a lot of people subconsciously fold their arms when something is said that they are not comfortable with. In a negotiation, such non-verbal movements should tip you off that you may have proposed something that the other person feels strongly about, and that it may be a sore point in the conversation. The knowledge of this, even though the other person did not verbally admit to it, gives you an opportunity to either backtrack on the statement, or present it in another way that may be acceptable to the other party.

- **Mirroring**

In his book, 'Never split the difference', former FBI negotiator, Chris Voss introduces mirroring as "a technique that follows a very basic biological principle; we fear what's different and are drawn to what's similar. As the saying goes, birds of a feather flock together". Mirroring is basically the act of repeating the last one to three words of another person's sentence or phrase. For example:

"Ide put together a memo, we need to justify the project."

I could mirror the above statement like: "justify the project?"

What would happen next, is the other person would typically go on to expatiate their intention or clarify the request. This is a technique which targets the subconscious need for humans to be heard, and by repeating the word(s) of the other person, you have created the atmosphere for them to express themselves even further. Since learning this technique, I deliberately use it in my conversations to get more clarity from people. A lot of people do not communicate properly. The sad part is that they don't know this. Often, they say something that is not clear but, in their minds, they probably thought they communicated properly. This situation causes a lot of friction and sometimes, resentment in the workplace where someone (maybe the boss) thought they were clear in their instructions; but in reality, the communication was either not complete or not clear. By using the mirroring technique, you can save yourself a lot of headaches.

I once used mirroring to get out of doing a task that my boss asked me to do, but I thought was not necessarily right. My boss at the time asked me to send an email to his contemporary, copying everyone on the project. Basically, the mail was intended to show that the other department was the reason the project was being delayed, which was true. However, I felt that calling the other boss out formally would not help, as my department needed the project and the other department was only supporting, they had nothing really to lose if the project was delayed or closed altogether. Even worse would be the fact that, I being lower in position would be sending that email.

The conversation between my boss and I went as such:

*My Boss: "...Ide, these IT guys are a pain, we need to get them to move, send the manager an email copying everyone"*

*Me: "Copy everyone?"*

*My Boss: "Yes, I know sending a mail and copying everyone can be a bit messy, but mails work sometimes"*

*Me: "Sometimes?"*

*My Boss: "This may be a tricky situation for your Ide, you know what? Hold on the email, I'll get back to you."*

In the conversation above, I effectively used mirroring to get my boss to rethink his directive. The two mirrors made use of his last two words and last word respectively. The first mirror got him to think; he basically was negotiating with himself, admitting the fact the emails may not be the best tact, but also affirming that emails often work. The second mirror latched on the doubt in his second statement, and allowed him to further evaluate the potential risk of me sending the mail copying all members of the project. He eventually ditched the idea and asked me to stand down.

In this scenario, I was able to influence my boss to my will without arguing or being insubordinate. I have used this tactic many times with success. The great thing about mirroring is that the second party thinks they were the one who came up with the decision. In negotiating on a subject, this is extremely useful, because the agreement will be reached with the other party thinking they got all that they wanted, but in reality, through mirroring, you got them to agree or do what you wanted, without them knowing what really happened.

Try it. It works.

- **Poker face**

Poker face refers to having a blank expression. This is another technique that relies on the fact that most communication is non-verbal. When you are in a conversation with another person, or when someone is talking to a group, the speaker often relies on the listener or audience to agree with what is being said. In many cases, the listener(s) nod their heads or smile or even "hum" in agreement. This minimal show of affirmation encourages the speaker, it's a positive vibe that communicates to the speaker that they are making sense, and in most cases they would continue or emphasise what they are saying.

If you are in a conversation or part of a small audience, or you are in a meeting and you apply the poker face instead, the speaker is likely to notice you; they may continue the trajectory, speaking on the subject, however they will from time to time look back

at you, subconsciously looking for some type of affirmation. If you keep your poker face up, they begin to get worried. While they might continue speaking, in their minds, they are wondering what is going on in your mind, they begin to doubt that they are making sense, and often would try to justify what they are saying, giving reasons (that nobody asked for) for why what they are saying is correct. Depending on the situation, if it's a one-to-one conversation, the speaker would eventually ask for your thoughts on the subject. If it's a meeting or a large group, the speaker may wait till after the event or meeting, and find a way to reach out to you to know your thoughts on their speech or what they were saying.

With this, you have an opportunity to sell your position or point of view to the speaker. By maintaining the poker face, you had positioned yourself as someone who is knowledgeable, with possibly another perspective to what they were saying. They will want to know your perspective. This is a major opportunity for you to make an impression and you must ensure you take full advantage of the opportunity to get what you want or influence the speaker.

## **MANAGING CONFLICT**

Conflict is always around the corner when a group of people come together. In the workplace, different people and teams have differing interests, which often lead to overt or covert conflict between people. You should be prepared for conflict because as in life, people may want to ride over you, especially if they think you would not fight back. If you find yourself in a situation where you are being attacked by another person or team, or you have no choice but to be the aggressor to survive or even thrive in the workplace, there are certain things you want to keep in mind or ensure you do when you are faced with a conflict. These include:

- **Understand your rival**

There will always be rivalries in the office or in business. Most times, these are friendly rivalries, other times, they become a little more serious and eventually lead to full scale conflicts in the office. In many cases, colleagues are aware of these frictions and alliances are formed, while relevant parties push for their interests. If you are part of such a conflict, you must actively work to understand who you are dealing with, you should strive to know your rival's personality, seek to know their allies and people they depend on. You should also find out how connected they are to leadership and how influential they are. These are all factors you must consider as you

work to survive the attacks or even press on your advantage in the workplace. Do not go into battle unprepared, especially because as you rise in the organisation, traps are set for you if you are actively in a conflict situation. You want to be able to predict your rival's next moves, or even be able to recognise a trap set for you. You can't afford to be naive or ignorant of what your rival and their allies are up to, else you will lose. Work to gather information about your rival which you may use at an opportune time to press your advantage. It is best to gather this information yourself, however if you have to rely on other people, you must be careful and skilled in collecting this information so it is not obvious what your intentions are. This is important because your action could backfire and put you in a bad light for people who come to know about it.

- **Be careful, and pick your battles**

One of the most important skills in life is knowing when to say 'No'. There is a time to go all out to war, and there are times to lay back and do nothing. You need to have the information and wisdom to know when you are not in a position of strength. In these instances, bid your time, work behind the scenes to ensure you deliver on your work or project, work actively to position yourself positively with superiors and work to get to a position of strength. If you think you cannot win a battle, be humble enough to stand down. There's always another day.

This reminds me of an old Ethiopian proverb; *"When the great Lord passes, the wise peasant bows deeply, and silently farts."*

- **Do not be seen to be petty**

With conflicts in the workplace, the thing is that most people are aware of the situation. It's either the people who know about it choose a side or they stand aside as observers. Even the bosses and senior management are often aware of or involved in these conflicts. Sometimes, someone might even use such frictions to attempt to push their own interests with the relevant parties having the conflict, knowing there is an active rivalry between the two parties. If you are one of these parties or you are an active player in the conflict, you need to be tactful when you are attempting to score points against rivals in meetings or other situations. There are times when you have the clear advantage in an argument or conflict; you must be careful not to gloat or unnecessarily embarrass your rival in public. Be graceful even in victory, because you will be judged by superiors, colleagues and subordinates on how you treat a defeated rival.

- **Try not to make things personal**

It's very easy to get sucked up with work, after all, many of us spend most of our time in the office. Some of us love our work so much, that it becomes an extension of us, our identities are tied to the work, and we feel strongly about it. You however need to be careful not to take things personally at work. This may lead you to make rash decisions or make unnecessary mistakes because instead of acting logically, your emotion drives your responses in a conflict. Never send an email or do anything when you are angry or upset. Take a walk, or do something else to get you relaxed before you respond.

I am generally comfortable with conflicts; it helps you set boundaries with other people. If they know that you are ready to go to war for a certain reason, they are less likely to do that thing. However, ensure you manage your words and actions, so you do not go too far or too personal. At the end of the day, you want to be able to amicably resolve the conflict when the situation is right for you.

## CHAPTER 9

### GETTING STALE

In a lot of companies, it is possible to have some individuals who have been in the company and on one spot in what seems to feel like forever. They don't aspire to move within the organisation; sometimes, there might be opportunities for growth within the organisation, and still, this category of people will not apply. They are usually very happy where they are and make no effort to develop themselves beyond what they already know. In some cases, these people have an attitude to work, and display some level of entitlement because of their length of time with the company. More often than not, these people have to be cajoled to do their work. Sadly in many cases, the entire company is held to ransom because such people wield access or historical knowledge of a particular function or job within the company, so while the entire company grumbles when they have to deal with this person, people in the organisation have no choice but to do whatever they must to get their work done. These might include begging, flattering, feigning friendships, and even bribing them to get the work done.

Interestingly enough, these people see themselves as the big fish in their area of expertise. In reality, they are big fish in a very small pond; and people in the company tolerate them until they don't have to anymore. These are the kinds of people that will never train others or let them know the intricacies of the job. They will never go on vacation; in truth, because of their insecurities; but they tout the fact that they don't go on leave as if they are doing the company a favour. Of course, the truth is these people do not want to give any opportunity for someone else to know the job; in their minds they think they are indispensable. Unfortunately, what they fail to understand is that no one is truly indispensable. One way or the other, they will leave the company, they might be fired or let go, they might resign on their own accord, or be forced to do so, or they might even stay for a long time till they are forced into retirement. However long they stay on the job, they eventually lose it and this situation is true for the rest of us, thus it is prudent to always have this at the back of your mind and prepare for the future.

### COMFORT AS A DREAM KILLER

Curtis "50 Cent" Jackson in his book, 'Hustle harder hustle smarter' describes "*comfort as a dream killer*," he further stresses that "*comfort drives complacency, it zaps ambition and blinds vision*". Many of us get too comfortable in our current positions, we get used to the company, the people, the salary and people looking up to us. From a



business perspective, many companies get used to the status quo and how they do business, they get used to their existing business models, and how they serve customers, they get stale and stop innovating. History is filled with many stories of brands that were overcome by upstarts because they simply could not or would not evolve to something else. There is the story of how Kodak lost to the digital camera, something they actually had the technology for, but couldn't bring themselves to change. There is the story Blockbuster whose business model was turned on its head by the innovative Netflix. Again and again, comfort in the status quo can be very dangerous.

Nigeria's telecommunications (Telcos) industry over the past few years, has also become stale. For many years, they enjoyed the boom of the VAS sub sector. VAS is an acronym for Value Added Services; these are typically information or entertainment (infotainment) services that were delivered to subscribers primarily via SMS or sometimes as audio. At the end of 2018, the VAS market in Nigeria was estimated to be worth about 300 Billion Naira (USD830 Million). This was an exceedingly profitable sector, which consisted of an ecosystem filled with a lot of players including content providers, technology providers, aggregators and the telcos at the top of the food chain. For well over a decade, this sector had grown year on year in value. Throughout this time, the delivery medium, SMS remained the same, even with the growth in smartphone usage, and the related change in consumer behaviour. The commercial model was also very skewed in favour of the telcos where they earned anything from 70% of the revenue generated to 90% in some cases; leaving the scraps for the other players to share - the aggregator and content provider. Now, these scraps were still significant in the larger scheme of things; to put things in perspective, a friend of mine ran a VAS company that generated about 40 Million monthly Naira (about USD111,000) on average; and this was a relatively small company in the sub sector.

In early 2019, the NCC (Nigeria Communications Commission) - the regulator introduced sweeping reforms to the industry, one of these was the introduction of a mandatory double opt-in by subscribers to every service. In other words, a subscriber had to confirm a second time that they wanted to opt into a service. Before this, subscribers only needed to accept once, tap or respond okay to subscribe to the service. It is alleged that many players in the industry abused this simple process and often mass-subscribed customers to different services. Now because the subscription rates were really small, some as low as 50 Naira (about 20 Cents), a lot of mobile users would not notice. As someone who was formerly employed in the Telecommunications industry, I always knew that someone had forced subscribed me for a service. My line would typically be

billed between 50 Naira and 100 Naira very early on Saturday mornings. Now imagine how much would be made when 100 Naira is billed from millions of mobile users.

Because of the vast revenue that was being generated in the VAS sub sector, players from the bottom to the top, and especially the telcos became complacent, they became so stale that the simple introduction of the double opt in, which was meant to protect mobile phone users crashed the VAS market from 300 Billion Naira at the end of 2018 to a mere 76 Billion Naira by October 2019. My friend's company was literally struggling to generate 1 Million Naira. The situation was incredible! After many years of unscrupulously billing mobile users, many of these VAS companies could not genuinely provide value that mobile users would be willing and able to pay for. Many of these VAS companies are dead now.

The lesson from this situation is all about complacency and comfort, especially when the system is wrong. This lesson is especially painful to me because between 2013 and 2014 when I returned back to Airtel as Senior Manager responsible for New Product Development, I had proposed a number of initiatives that would have forced our VAS partners to be more innovative, with a focus on content and services designed for smartphone users who have a totally different consumption behaviour than users of the usual *palasa* phones (a Nigerian slang for low end phones with no access to the internet). My proposals would also see service or content providers earning more from their services. Instead of the 10% to 30% they earned from services in existing commercial structure at the time, my proposal would see them earning between 50% to 70% of revenue. The plan was meant to encourage and drive partners to develop innovative apps similar to many on the iOS and Playstore, but our Telco like Apple and Google today, would be the platform for billing and access to a multitude of infotainment and utility apps in the country. Back in 2013, we would have had a head start, and overtime would have become so relevant in the industry, but I got so much resistance to the proposal from almost every angle, chief were the Finance people who couldn't see the future. They could not understand how and why they should approve an initiative that would give partners up to 50% of revenue when the company at the time was earning an average of 80% from existing VAS partnerships at the time. So, a watered down version of the initiative was eventually approved not long before I left the company in 2014. Obviously with me, the main champion of the initiative leaving the company, my initiative was probably executed poorly. Today, the banks and Fintech companies have swooped in to provide a variant of the value I was trying to position my telco for. When it comes to providing Value Adding services to smartphone users, the telcos

in Nigeria have lost the war to the iOS Store, Google Play, the banks and the myriad of Fintechs providing service providers with billing solutions. Now, the telcos have sort of been relegated to being stuck as dumb pipes selling voice and data. They are just like Kodak, who had the ability and technology to introduce the digital camera, but couldn't bring themselves to swallow a bitter pill of sacrificing slightly today, in order to gain tomorrow.

A company which was able to innovate by cannibalising an exhausting product was Apple, with the launch of the iPhone after the immense success of the iPod. The first generation of iPods was introduced in 2001 for Macintosh users only. In 2002, Apple released the second generation of iPods which was now compatible with Windows, thereby exposing the product to a wider potential customer base. In 2003, Apple released a third generation of iPods and integrated the iTunes music store with access to about 200,000 songs at 99 cents each. By 2006, Apple's revenue from iPod sales was 7.68 Billion US dollars; the company did not rest on its laurels, they continued to innovate and in 2007, they released the first generation of iPhone; by 2018, Apple generated 266 Billion US dollars from global iPhone sales. It is clear from these numbers that not being comfortable or getting stale with its successes with the iPod have greatly paid Apple in the long run.

## CHAPTER 10

### STUCK IN A JOB YOU HATE

Have you ever been in a situation when the thought of going to the office on Monday just fills you with dread? When you have body aches just thinking about work; or the fact that your brain seems to have stopped working, and it seems that your entire life is on auto pilot? It almost seems like you are on a journey that you have no control over. Numbness and irritation seem to be the order of your typical day, and you may be taking some of the negative energy home to your loved ones. These and more may be symptoms of someone stuck in a job they do not like.

This feeling of being stuck in motion or stuck in a phase can be quite depressing. Oftentimes, it comes when you have stayed on a particular role or company for what you consider to be quite a long time without any perceived advancement. This could sometimes lead to a lot of brooding and unhappiness. In his bestselling book, 'Delivering Happiness: A path to profits, passion, and purpose', the late Tony Hsieh, founder of the online shoe and clothing shop, Zappos, describes Happiness as "*really just about four things: perceived control, perceived progress, connectedness (number and depth of your relationships) and vision/meaning (being part of something bigger than yourself).*"

Let's take a look at these four factors:

#### 1. Perceived Control

That feeling of being stuck fundamentally creeps in when we feel that we do not have control over our lives or our environment. In a job or business, there are many external forces that influence our daily lives. These could include having a demanding boss who seems to have it out for you or a phase of consistent issues on a project you are leading. In a business, it could be having local or state government officials enforcing a law that your business may have contravened, or it could be a situation where you or a loved one has a health emergency. These and many more scenarios often fill us with that feeling of helplessness and having no control over what is happening in our lives. At work especially, it's easy to feel like you have limited control of your life, particularly if you are in a middle or low grade. At this stage, it's usually like you have little influence on the direction of your work or the business as a whole. You may have great ideas or opinions on certain areas of the business but your access to the leaders and

decision makers may be limited, these can be aggravated when other external forces are added to the mix.

In my case, some of the major changes in my first organisation left me and many of my colleagues feeling helpless. Between 2006 and 2011, the company known as Airtel Nigeria today, changed management and Brands four times! That's probably a record somewhere. When I joined the company in January 2006, it had already gone through phases of being Econet Wireless, Vodacom and had transitioned to Vmobile. The Vmobile I joined was a company filled with optimism; while the company was obviously running behind the market leader MTN. What the company lacked in funds or a war chest compared to MTN, it had in heart, the organisation's culture was truly great, people put in blood and sweat to ensure that the company grew notwithstanding the limitations. Even as a low entry level employee, there was that feeling that you mattered and that the company belonged to you. By the second quarter in 2006, the company was acquired by Celtel and with this came new management and another process of rebranding for the company. Being new to the company, this change was okay for me especially as the company became a part of a Pan-African Group which in my opinion elevated the stature of the company. Sometime in 2008, the Zain group acquired the entire Africa operations of Celtel, and we went into change mode which included the introduction of new management, new processes, new vendors and the launch of a new brand.

Again, we adapted to the new ways of the company's owners; of course by this time, employees had lost the notion that the company we worked at was ours. We were simply employees going through the process of earning our daily bread. We pushed on and even with the consistent change in brands, the company did quite well in the market competing for second or third position with Globalcom, and growing steadily in subscriptions. At the end of 2010, lightning struck again with the announcement that Zain had been sold to Bharti Airtel. For many of us who had been with the company for many years, this was not exciting news. It is said that change is the only constant in life, but this level of continuous change was just too much. Going through this change was tough compared to changes we had experienced in the past. There was a period of layoffs which lasted many months and obviously led to low morale amongst staff. We had absolutely no control of what was going on and personally, I felt stuck and feared for what my future would be.

## **2. Perceived Progress**

One of the ways society judges people is by the progress one makes in their life. In the first major phase of life as children, steady progress is made as we go through the school system. We are passed from one class to another and from one grade to another. Some of us skip classes sometimes along this process, while some are sometimes forced to repeat a class sadly. What is constant in the first phase however is the fact that our progression happens annually, as the schooling is planned on a yearly calendar. The situation sometimes changes after school, when we join the workforce or set up a business, while our business and work might be reviewed or judged based on our annual revenues and acquired customers or by our performance appraisal in the case of a job. Unfortunately, for some of us, we still end up doing almost exactly the same thing over a number of years.

This change from the annual progress experienced during the school phase to the fact that one might experience several years on one particular job can be a little difficult to manage for some. When it comes to perceived progress, typically, we judge ourselves or our progress against two things:

### **We judge our progress against our peers**

It's common place to judge ourselves against our peers. It is only natural because throughout our lives, this has been the case. In school, we are graded against our classmates. In the family, parents, uncles and aunties may compare children with siblings, cousins or friends of the same age group albeit subconsciously in some cases. So, as adults, it is not unusual that we rate our achievements and current status against people we consider to be our peers. Previously, I gave the example of my friend who was not promoted while his entire team got promoted. Anyone in that situation would feel terrible, left out, and probably harbour some resentment to his or her boss, the company as a whole and maybe the team mates who got promoted.

### **We judge our progress against our personal expectations**

We also judge ourselves based on certain personal targets or expectations that we may set. It's common to expect to have achieved certain things at a particular age or phase in our lives. When we don't achieve these things by that age, we sometimes fall into deep sadness or even depression. This is why there is a lot of pressure and sometimes people go into mid-life crisis at ages 25, 30, 35, 40 or even 50. These ages are significant in the lives of people and act as major milestones; as an aside, a lot of magazine

articles with titles such as '30 under 30 millionaires' or '40 under 40 leading CEOs' don't help; they pile unnecessary pressure on people. Talking with a lot of friends, I discovered that many of us consciously or unconsciously define certain targets that we should have achieved at some milestone age; for some, it could be marriage, children, or achieving certain positions at work or business by a certain age. When we do not achieve these targets, we get frustrated, and this could also drive us to depression. This situation can be very impactful because we are competing with ourselves, and perceived failures in this regard go to the very depth of one's being.

### **3. Number and depth of your relationships**

There are scientific studies which have shown that having strong relationships have an impact on health. Basically, these studies indicate that having positive social connections or support, triggers a release of stress reducing hormones, which are beneficial to the health. In the same vein, having close connections in business or the workplace is very beneficial. Without this, it is very possible to be left behind just as my friend was left without a promotion. You may also not have the political backing or support to move you through the system or organisation. The depth and even the breadth of your relationships in the workplace are extremely important for your survival and prosperity.

### **4. Vision/meaning (being part of something bigger than yourself)**

Sometimes, we need to be keyed into a vision or a cause that is bigger than us. Some of the greatest upsets in world history have come from people having a cause bigger than themselves. The United States declaration of independence in 1776, and the revolutionary war are interesting and inspiring stories of a people who came together and triumphed against all odds because they shared and acted together towards a cause. The Independence of many Asian and African nations between 1945 and the 1960s were also major causes of note. While the vision or cause don't have to be these grandiose, even in the workplace, there are projects, initiatives, or a mission that enable you and others to come together to achieve something significant. Having such a mission positively affects our morale and could help us to garner the strength to overcome even very tough situations. Being part of a team working together on a cause is definitely something that can be motivating.

Lacking the four pillars of happiness in your job or business could impact the way you feel about it, and could lead to one feeling like they are stuck in a job they do not like.

Now, a few things you could do to begin to get your mindset out of the feeling stuck in a spot include:

- **Define what you do not want (Do a Need vs Want Analysis)**

First thing you may want to do is a self-assessment. Put down your business or professional expectations or plan. Also, write down your achievement to date and compare this to your written expectations or plan. These reveal your professional status, which from today's perspective is your 'start line'. Following this, you may want to carry out a personal need vs want analysis. The reason this is useful is that many of us categorise our wants as needs. By doing a proper needs vs want analysis, we are able to provide some clarity on what we should prioritise in our personal development plans.

Finally, define what you do NOT want; I'm putting a focus on the 'not' because in the situation when you feel like you are stuck in a job you hate, often, you do not have obvious options in the horizon, so start from what you do not want for yourself. Also as humans, some of us know exactly what we want, and if you fall into this category, then you are lucky. For the rest of us, we may not know exactly what we want to do with ourselves, however, it is easier to identify exactly what we do not want for ourselves. This situation happened with my sister once, after a number of years working in the bank, she went back to school for a Master's degree. After her post graduate degree, she had offers from several banks for jobs which she had previous experience in, and with her new degree she was primed for even senior positions. However, my sister was clear she did not want to work in a bank again, and she rejected all bank offers and even stayed several months without a job before she landed an opportunity she was more open to in the technology sector. This may also apply to many of us who are not 100% sure what we want to do with ourselves; in this situation, knock off those areas that are certainly a 'no no' for you.

- **Learn new skills**

Having a feeling of being stuck in one place in your career? Now is the perfect time to expand your skills, this is exactly the time to start reading and exposing yourself to new things. These skills could be as simple as learning to do presentations, maybe learning soft skills like effective networking, or possibly a professional course that will empower you in new areas. Your ability to gain new knowledge would most likely prepare you for possible new opportunities that you were previously not aware of or qualified for.



- **Expand your Network**

I have mentioned several times the importance and possible impact of building your network. At times, when you are at a low point in your career, and feeling stuck in a job; it is very possible that your existing relationships or network consists of a homogeneous group of people who are doing similar things, maybe working in the same organisation, or in the same industry, or possibly they are all members of the same social clubs, which in itself is positive. However, it is possible that due to your similar affiliations, you may all be exposed to the same type of information, thereby limiting possible opportunities you may be interested in.

Now might be a good time to meet and talk to new people, and create relationships with new people in other sectors or social groups. By doing this, you inadvertently expand your access to possible opportunities in places where you previously had no access to. There might be opportunities for you in places where you don't have information or people. Creating new relationships is basically establishing an extension of yourself to new environments, people and possibly, new opportunities.

- **Talk with people**

It helps to talk with someone when you are feeling down. Feeling stuck in a job is tantamount to 'being stuck in the rut' in terms of your career. This is not a time to be isolated, or to keep things bottled up inside. Talk to family and friends, talk to a mentor or someone you respect, you could even talk to a professional counsellor. Letting things out really help from an emotional perspective. In addition, the person you choose to talk to, may be in a position to influence an opportunity for you.

You however need to be sensitive and careful with your talks. Try not to overburden the other party with negative talk. Yes, a sounding board is useful, especially when you are down; but take care not to keep whining as listening to such can be stressful to the other person. You really don't want them avoiding your calls because you always have something to whine about. It's even worse when the person is either in your position or possible in a worse-off situation than you. So, like everything in life, do the talking in moderation.

- **Try to maintain a positive mindset**

The thing about life sometimes is serendipity happens when you are in the middle of something. Some may call it luck, others call it divine favour, whatever it is, the stars begin to align, and then positive things begin to happen to you. Opportunities appear from places you would never expect, and this happens sometimes when you are being positive. This positivity extends to people around you, and in some cases unknown to you, someone might be watching your attitude during times of difficulty, and because of your positive attitude they decide to step in and help. I have personally experienced this, and I have heard quite a number of interesting stories aligned to this.

In such a scenario when you feel like you are stuck in a rut, you need people to recommend you for opportunities in new roles within the company, in another company or totally different area of life. If you go around with a negative attitude, there is a very high probability that a friend who is aware of an opportunity that might benefit you may hesitate to tell you about this opportunity, or they might not be keen to recommend you for the opportunity because of your prevalent attitude. The reason for this is the fear that, you may take your negative attitude or other negative behaviour to the new company, and because your friend recommended you for the job, by association, your friend is linked to your negative behaviour in that new environment or job. So, try to maintain a positive attitude no matter your situation.

## **CHAPTER 11**

### **LIGHTNING STRIKES TWICE – LOSING MY JOB...AGAIN**

Fast forward towards the end of 2015, by this time I had spent almost a year as the Regional Head of WeChat for West Africa. At the time, this was my dream job, being at the head of an international organisation, working to establish the brand in the region. I spent a lot of my time shuttling between Nigeria and Ghana, our focus countries for the introduction of the WeChat App in West Africa; and also, South Africa and China where I had meetings with my Bosses. The job was exciting, but also challenging, as we were going against well-established apps like WhatsApp and Facebook who basically had a near monopoly of the messaging and social media markets respectively. We however had our strategy defined and I set out to implement; plus we had a decent war-chest to make things happen, and they were slowly beginning to take shape.

To support me on this mission, I had spent quality time and effort recruiting a small team to focus on marketing, product and technology. It took a lot of investigation and sweet talking to identify and convince the candidates to leave their jobs to join WeChat. At the end, they all joined me; and in retrospect, we truly had a really cool, young and energised team. With my team in place, we spent most of 2015 aggressively working to get users on the app as well as improve the WeChat user experience for our market. In addition to our activities online, we ran major Above-the-Line campaigns on Radio and TV to create awareness for the app, we organised themed events, we had activations in some universities and the list goes on. All these bore fruit as we began to see more downloads. Even more interesting for me, was that people began to actually use the app, as our key indicators showed significant growth in usage. I can attribute this to the product related work my team did to improve the user experience for the West African market, and also some of the B2B (Business-To-Business) partnerships we had gone into. I saw the latter as a real opportunity, where businesses could use WeChat as a platform for Customer Service amongst other uses. Today, platforms like WhatsApp, Instagram and twitter are used by companies big and small to engage with customers, but back then this was not the case. My plan was for WeChat to leverage on that opportunity to grow market share with less focus on peer-to-peer messaging, but more focus on other differentiating features of the app. While I had done a decent job in the business development area, I knew we needed a core sales person to enhance our business development capabilities, and by November we started actively interviewing for the sales candidate.

By the end of November, we had begun to finalize the offer for the sales candidate, when from the blue, during my weekly call with my South African boss, I was instructed to find a way to reduce my head count. Basically my boss asked me to terminate two out of my five colleagues. I was shocked by this sudden directive and asked the reason for this instruction, and all I got was that "there were major cuts happening all around". You could imagine how I felt about this, I had spent a lot of time and effort head hunting and building the team, and just as we were getting into our stride, I am asked to cut the team. At this point I was thinking, how I would go about delivering this horrible news to not just the guys that would be affected, but to the entire team. I began to think of the impact this would have on the team's morale and our performance; but most importantly, I was struggling with the idea of my guys losing their jobs, and what I could do to get them new jobs, considering that I had pulled them from other positions to join me at WeChat. By the following week, armed with a generous severance package proposal I had put together with the help of the Group Head of Finance and Human Resources for west Africa; I went into the weekly call with my boss with the intention to get him to approve the package, when I got a second 'figurative' slap to the face. On that call, my boss informed me that a decision had been taken to terminate my entire team leaving me alone to run things in West Africa. On that call, it felt like dejavu. I had the exact feeling I experienced a few years earlier in 2012, when I was let go at Internet Solutions. At this point, it was not directed at me but the team I had spent the past year building up, and I knew deep down that this was just a tactic to or a ploy to steady things at that point in time. In my heart, I knew I was next.

On that faithful December morning, I went on that call with the intention to push for a decent severance package for two of my colleagues who would be terminated. This was very important to me considering my personal experience being terminated several years earlier. I was determined to get the severance package approved, because I knew again from personal experience the impact in the form of a buffer, that a good severance package can be in the life of someone who has lost their job. I left that meeting with mixed feelings; first, I successfully justified and got approval for the severance package, however instead of it being applied to two individuals, it was applied to my entire team. I was really hurt by this turn of events, and now I had to prepare for the inevitable. During the call, we agreed that, because we were in early December, we would not announce the terminations till January, so the team would have a good Christmas holiday. I on the other hand had a miserable holiday, because I was burdened with the knowledge that I would have to fire my entire team in the new year; and even though the company had not explicitly indicated it, I knew that in the near future, I would lose my job as well.

In the short term, my focus was to try to get new positions for not two but five colleagues who would start the new year with horrible news. I set out to reach out to friends and acquaintances who were managers or business owners looking to hire people. Within the next couple of months, I was able to tap into my network to organize interviews for my colleagues. I am happy and even a little proud to say that by the end of February, all five of my colleagues had successfully transitioned to new roles in different companies. Thinking back then, this was such a relief to me, as I was spared the guilt of indirectly or directly being responsible for each member of the team having no job. In the end, it all worked out, and I am forever grateful to those friends and acquaintances that took a chance on my recommendation, to hire members of my team.

Now the exodus of my entire team at WeChat West Africa did not come without some drama. Within a week of the departure of my team, I started getting calls and emails from Tech Bloggers who had already started speculating that WeChat was leaving Nigeria, and as people or organisations that thrive on gist, the requests for comment kept coming. Internally, our position was "No Comment", so as to be expected, the bloggers went ahead to publish story after story speculating that WeChat was in the process of leaving Nigeria. And there I was, in the middle of all the drama, with blogs speculating, people calling to check on me, some wanting inside gist, and my bosses not really saying anything, but loading me with a lot of work, possibly to distract from all that was going on. As an alumni of Airtel Nigeria who had lived through all the transitions of VMobile (best company ever), then Celtel to Zain and finally to Airtel. I could see the writing on the wall. While my bosses were mum about me and the future of the operation in West Africa, they kept going on as if nothing was wrong. Luckily, I was friends with some people within the organisation who knew exactly what was going on, and they were kind enough to fill me in on the truth, that the axe was coming my way; which to be honest I knew was inevitable. I got wind of the plan in January, and started planning my exit from the company. It was not until March that my boss finally notified me of my termination, giving me a month to close down the operation and a generous severance package. By April, I left WeChat.

## CHAPTER 12

### GETTING MY FEET WET - IN ENTREPRENEURSHIP

Within those months between January and April in 2016, when I got the information that WeChat would close the West Africa operation, I reconnected with an old secondary school mate, this chance meeting would lead to an interesting journey in entrepreneurship that would last the next four years. I first met Jenifer when I was 10 years old during the Lumen Christi and Presentation entrance examinations. Lumen Christi and Presentation were prestigious catholic secondary schools in Edo State, Nigeria that catered to boys and girls only respectively. While neither Jenifer nor myself went to these schools, we both eventually attended Air Force Comprehensive School, Ibadan. After secondary school, I had only seen her a few times at some of our set's get-together events. In January 2016, such a get-together was organised, where Jenifer and I reconnected. At the event, we talked about what we both were doing, I was marking time at WeChat, though I didn't say that to her at the time; she was a baker, focused on the sale of Donuts. Being a sweet-tooth myself, this intrigued me; over the next few months, we began to meet regularly to discuss her business, and the vision she had for it.

At this point, I had two major things at the back of my mind which acted as a catalyst to push me towards entrepreneurship. First, was the impending closure of WeChat which would lead to me losing my job; the second was the fact that Nigeria was just coming out of the 2015 recession, and my thoughts following that difficult period, was that as a country, we needed to produce more products for export. Regrettably, Nigeria is an import dependent country, where we rely on other nations for most of our consumption. This and other factors have led to the continuous decline of the Naira (the Nigerian currency), which further has an impact on inflation and the economy at large. So, my position then, was to act in my own small way to produce something, instead of just being a consumer.

In my quest to understand Jenifer's business, there were five major areas I focused on. These were her *vision* for the business, and if she had a *team or partners*. I was also interested in understanding her *numbers*, as well as the *issues* the business faced at that point in time. Finally, I was curious to understand the *processes* she had defined in the business. Like many small business owners, Jenifer had little or no structure in place in the business. There were no defined processes for production, marketing & sales, customer experience, procurement etc, there were a myriad of issues I identified and there was zero accounting, so it was difficult to state how the business was truly doing, and like many small businesses she was running the business alone. The one

thing that we were aligned-on in those early discussions was the vision. With all this information gathered about Jenifer's business, I spent some time thinking and praying about it. Towards the end of April 2016, I went into a formal partnership with Jenifer.

## **PUTTING STRUCTURE IN THE BUSINESS**

Those early months running the business were quite intense, it was just the two of us trying to get the business on its feet. I recall how Jenifer would wake up around 3am to start production for the first batch of Donuts for the day, and by 4am I would be on my way to meet up with her to pick up the batch for deliveries. All aspects of the business were handled by us both. According to Gino Wickman, author of the book, *Traction*, the fundamental functions in any business are: *Sales & Marketing, Operations, and Finance & Administration*. Depending on the type or size of the business, these three fundamental functions can be further divided into sub functions. In the case of Sales & Marketing function, large companies typically have a distinct Sales department, as well as a Marketing function. Depending on the type of business, operations could be Production, Delivery, Project Management, Installation or even Customer Service. Finally Finance & Administration can be sub divided into Finance, Treasury, Procurement, Information Technology and Human Resources departments.

In our own business, I identified the following roles or functions: Sales & Marketing, Production, Procurement, Deliveries, Customer Service, Human Resources and Finance. Jenifer was primarily responsible for Production and Procurement, while I primarily took care of Sales & Marketing, Deliveries and Finance. We both had roles in Customer Service and Human Resources. Jenifer and I continued to operate the business alone for several months, and we were beginning to see some traction, however I knew it was not sustainable as our orders were growing significantly due to our marketing and sales activities. We obviously needed to ramp up our production capacity to be able to cater to increasing demand in the market. I also thought about business continuity; what would happen if for some reason, maybe due to ill health or something else my partner was not able to physically handle production? I thought about the same thing regarding my distribution and delivery activities. We needed to actively 'prepare for my partner and I to 'lose our jobs', so we could effectively grow the business. This would entail us hiring people initially for production, procurement and possibly customer service. It would also require that we engage the services of small last mile logistics company to manage our deliveries, as well as develop systems and processes to enable us effectively manage our team and the business at large. It would also require us to train and keep training the people we hired to ensure to aligned to the systems and processes we had setup.

These changes were quite successful, and we were able to implement some structure to the business. These systems and processes eventually enabled us to run the business seamlessly even when my partner had to go away for a number of months, and when I was hired by another company, and had to return to the professional workplace.

## **IMPLEMENTING SYSTEMS AND PROCESSES IN A BUSINESS**

When I speak about developing systems and processes to new entrepreneurs, and in some cases even experienced people in business; their minds go straight to technology. Having worked many years in the technology and telecommunications sectors, I am very much aware of the concept of GIGO (garbage in, garbage out), some people also call this RIRO (rubbish in, rubbish out). This concept basically refers to the “concept that flawed input data produces nonsense output or garbage”. This concept also applies to business or entrepreneurship, as in many other aspects of life. If your business is not structured, or the processes are flawed, the customer experience would be bad.

The following are important areas to consider when creating systems and processes for the business:

- **Business Brand**

When we started the partnership, Jenifer and I were inspired by a number of brands, most notable was Dunkin Donuts. At that point, our vision was to be the top Nigerian Donuts and Baked goods Brand. With this, we focused on creating a brand identity, starting by giving the business a name and developing a logo that would be appealing and recognizable, thus we came up with Donuts N Crumbs. The name represented our aspiration to not only be known for Donuts, but also other products that would be part of our future roadmap.

I have observed that some entrepreneurs believe that their business brand begins and ends with their business logo. So, they spend a lot of time and effort developing their business logo, but don't put enough effort in other aspects of their business. The reality is that the brand is eventually what your customers and the wider market say it is. The brand is what your logo is, the colours your business uses, the experience with your product or service, the way your office is setup, and the way your business communicates, amongst other things. So business owners must pay attention to all relevant aspects of their business.



- **Focus Markets**

When we started the Donuts N Crumbs, our assumption was that our core target customers would be children, this can be observed in our logo colours which has bright cool colours that children and indeed everyone may be attracted to. In line with our assumption, we began to target a lot of children focused events as part of our marketing activities. What we noticed after a while, is that children are very unpredictable, and at the end of the day, while they are major influencers in purchasing decisions, it was the mothers that were the true customers. The mothers mostly were the ones who planned the events, they brought the children to the events and paid for our products. Armed with this knowledge, we completely changed our strategy and began to target women.



*Donuts N Crumbs Logo*

This new direction bore immediate fruit, we began to experience serious increases in daily orders, women would order boxes of donuts for their children, they would order donuts for their nephews or nieces. They would also order boxes of donuts just because they wanted a snack, or for an office event. We also started to notice women ordering boxes for their friends, so our product became a gift item, and could accompany or sometimes substitute cakes on some occasions. In this vein, we began to experience men ordering boxes of donuts as gifts for their wives or girlfriends.

With our experience, I can say that sometimes during the business planning phase, when entrepreneurs are developing their business case, often our plans are simply assumptions. These assumptions need to be validated in the market, and the only way to confirm these assumptions is to test them in the market. The testing process involves providing the target customers with a sample of their product or service. In the technology space, this sample is referred to as a Minimum viable Product (MVP). These tests provide an opportunity to receive direct feedback from the target customers and help you to improve your overall product or service.

- **Systems**

With our increasing number of customers and orders, it was important to put in place systems and processes that would allow Jenifer and I to scale the business beyond us both. Part of this was leveraging on a number of technology tools to help in the business management.

### **Documentation**

A lot of business people have a problem with documentation. They are in the habit of winging it when it comes to their business. This unfortunately leads to mediocre or even worse, horrible service because there are no defined, clearly accessible documented ways or methods to performing tasks. In many cases, like with African history, your business processes are handed down to employees verbally. This simply does not work as a lot of important information is forgotten and cannot be referred to because it is not written down/drawn/printed somewhere for future reference.

Having worked in a number of multi-nationals myself, I had been exposed to quite a number of policy documents, some which could be up to or even more than 20 pages. Such documents would be an over-kill for a small growing business. In our case, we documented our processes for easy access and understanding. We created checklists of ingredients required for production, with relevant amounts they would need to be bought for procurement purposes. We also had our recipe and process clearly written down with measurements of ingredients and times for each process clearly defined. We even had pictures and diagrams of how each Donut box should look like, so every member of the production team, new or experienced could easily access it. In the areas of marketing and customer service, we created scripts which guided responses to phone calls and direct messages on Instagram or WhatsApp; so every member of the team

responsible for any of our customer touch points knew exactly how we expected them to respond to enquiries, or even complaints. These documents were invaluable to our business, as they were used to train new employees as well as used during our refresher training sessions.

## **Training**

The importance of training cannot be overemphasised for yourself and your team. It is important to keep learning. We trained our employees using different methods, these included:

- **Classroom:** This is the typical classroom session where they are taught the fundamentals of the business. Typically, this is where you can share the vision, mission and important information about the business and their relevant jobs.
- **Push to Start:** This is what most people call "On-the-Job Training" where employees get thrust into the work directly and basically are forced to wing it. It's a great way to discover the attitude, creativity and thought process of new team members. It could be an interesting way to drive innovation, because you never truly know if a new employee may have a better way of performing a particular task.
- **Mentorship:** This is the guidance provided by someone more experienced in your business.
- **Buddy System:** This is a cooperative system where individuals are paired up, and assume responsibility for each other.

## **Monitoring & Control**

Many businesses suffer from fraud, poor customer service, horrible service delivery and more, especially when the business owner is not available every day because they are active at their day jobs, or/and because the business owner or managers fail to put in place effective monitoring processes to ensure team members do the right thing at the right time. Interestingly, this is not limited to small businesses, several large companies struggle with this issue as well. Some of the ways to set up internal controls for a small business with few employees who probably have multiple roles in the day-to-day running of the business:

- Document all operational processes and re-evaluate these at least once every year.

- Ensure that more than one employee fully understands each process in case someone is unable to show up to work, due to illness or other reasons. This way, another person can stand in to do the work.
- Do Daily, weekly and monthly reconciliation of key accounts, such as: cash, receivables (amounts owed to the business), inventory, payables (amounts required to be paid by the business) and so on.
- Have the reconciliation independently reviewed (by the business owner or an independent bookkeeper or accountant).
- Create approval processes and limits on transactions.
- Monitor areas where an employee can manipulate something for the benefit of someone else. For example, commissions or bonus structure where employees could overstate financial information to look better.
- If you use an accounting software, restrict access to the General Ledger. Limit the number of people that can post entries and give read-only rights to most people.
- Install physical controls like security cameras to record activities in the facility to deter theft or fraud, and also to monitor general operations.

A combination of the above – creating systems and processes which included documentation, training, putting the right controls in place and hiring good people helped us to put structure to our business, and this enabled us to create a relatively known brand in the space, which grew over 100% year-on-year in the early years of the business.

## **DEALING WITH EMPLOYEE ITERATION**

Just like life itself, there is always a beginning and end for the time an employee spends with a company. In the case of many small and medium businesses (SMBs/SMEs), this is quite common in the service sector especially those in the Food, Hospitality and Entertainment industries, it is common to have a high turnover in terms of employees. Sadly, this is something every business must prepare for, even if you have invested valuable time and effort to train, as well as put-in relevant incentives to motivate and retain your people. I have however seen and been a part of businesses that are relatively successful in retaining their best employees. Some factors that could help business continuity include:

- **Instil a sense of Purpose**

In chapter 10, I mentioned how having a vision or a cause larger than ones-self can be an extremely motivating factor in the workforce. This is same in entrepreneurship. The leaders in the business need to be able to sell a compelling story to the people in the business in such a way that they (people in the business) key into the vision of the company and collectively work towards it. When the vision is right, and at the heart of all one does, sometimes, this is even a more powerful factor to retain employees, more so than cash in some cases.

- **Hope for the best, but plan for the worst**

Regardless of the number of incentives put in place and the effort put into developing and maintaining a great company culture where everyone is happy; you still need to plan for the unforeseeable future where one of your superstars may leave the company. One effective way to do this is to have a buddy system. In this version of the buddy system, you match two people in the company as buddies; these individuals may or may not be responsible for different activities in the company. The pitch is that they watch over each other and understudy the job the other person does. This means you have two different people doing different jobs, but are able to cover for the other person in the event that they are unable to do their work due to illness or any other reason, and especially if they decide to leave the company.

## **CONCLUSION**

It has been many years since my decision to change my tactics with my developer colleagues at Rancard Solutions, this decision eventually saved my job as I was able to effectively motivate my team to collectively work towards my targets. It is safe to say, I passed the probation period and survive what could have been a very short stint, if I was not willing and able to evaluate my position, and more importantly make the relevant changes to survive and thrive in my job. While I have worked in a number of roles since then, and I have also been involved in a number of businesses since then, I am also very much aware of the fact that one way or the other, we all must leave our jobs; it is the only path to growth, sometimes it may be you leaving for a new role, or a sad experience like mine where you are let go off, or even a situation where you last in a company until you have to retire. The one constant in all these situations, is that you will leave that job; it is thus crucial to prepare for this.

## **ENTREPRENEUR-ING WITH YOUR 9 - 5**

I have been in the presence of many professionals, young and old who are employed, some happily, while others feel stuck in a job they hate. Different people have different reasons for starting a business. For many, it's about survival, while for some, they somehow found themselves transitioning a hobby into a business; for others, it's to earn extra income in addition to their 9 to 5. No matter your reason, the most important thing to note is that you have decided to take the leap of faith to start a business.

As a new entrepreneur just starting out in business, or a business owner who has been running the business for a little while, there is a lot of uncertainty ahead of you. Sadly, quite a number of small businesses fail within their first few years of running (a popular statistic puts it at 30% of small businesses fail in their 2nd year).

The leading causes of Small Business' failure are:

- Incompetence
- Unbalanced experience or lack of managerial experience.

The impact of these is a lack of fundamental structure in the business which leads it to fail over time. Here are a number of reasons to focus on creating structure in your fledgling business especially as you go on this journey while staying on your 9 – 5 job:

- **Your Business Should work for you, and not you for your Business**

A lack of structure often leads to you overworking yourself for the business. This happens to a lot of sole entrepreneurs who eventually burnout because they are handling everything by themselves, or have not been able to automate some simple operational activities.

- **Employees could bring down the house**

For a business with employees, putting in-place processes and systems for different activities is key; from the moment of onboarding a new team member, to the daily work and even the exit of an employee. The What, How and Why should be clearly stated and continuously re-enforced to ensure your team keep to the standards that you have defined for your business.

- **Growth is important**

Growth is essential if you are going to build up your business from a ‘small business’ to an impactful one. It is important to put in-place the right processes that will allow you to effectively manage your growing team and customers. As your business evolves from being managed solely by you, to having several employees and an ever-growing customer base, your processes will most likely be the difference between great user experience and a horrible one with your customers. Many Businesses have remained stagnant or have failed altogether because they could not handle growth.

## **RETIREMENT**

A colleague once told me of his dad’s experience with retirement. His dad got retired after about 30 years working in the civil service. He had a life savings of about 24 million Naira. This sum was completely exhausted within three years after retirement, and by the fourth year, my colleague’s dad passed on. This was such a sad story, but a warning for many of us who go through work and life not thinking of the future, from a financial perspective, or even from an emotional perspective. If the world’s top companies often have a plan for business continuity, why shouldn't we as individuals and families have a personal continuity plan?

Many senior executives go through their careers within a company that totally takes care of all their needs, this is actually a great situation if you are lucky to land such a gig. Beyond your basic pay, these sorts of companies sometimes take care of your accommodation, they may provide you with a car, they could pay for your children’s

schooling and whatnot. This is a very comfortable position to be in, until it is not. I remember a story about a director in one of the major fast moving consumer goods (FMCG) companies who suddenly got retired. This development was a major shock to this distinguished leader, who had spent a lifetime with the company. The real issue was that for the first time in decades, he would have to take care of himself and beyond the possible threat of exhausting his savings, there was also the small matter of what he would do with the rest of his life.

In Nigeria, the retirement age in the public sector is 60 years or 35 years of service, whichever is first. In the private sector, there is no fixed age for retirement; however, many companies put the retirement age for their employees as between 55 to 65 years.

Now, imagine this director being forced to retire at 58 years, and considering the fact that the life expectancy of people over the past few decades has improved because of the developments in healthcare and technology, there is a high probability that he has at least a decade or two to be around. What would he do with himself for the remainder of his life? He would need to find another cause to take his time and energy. Some people start a business, others face philanthropy, and again some people find themselves active in politics. In the case of the director in question, he decided to start a business. He is currently learning that managing an established multi-national conglomerate is totally different from starting a business from scratch.

The fundamental theme of this book is around Managing Change, and the fact that this phenomenon is the only constant in the world. We need to accept, and prepare for change in almost every aspect of our lives. It is my hope that this book has left you with a mindset that will keep you curious. In his 2005 Stanford University commencement address, Steve Job said “Your time is limited, so don’t waste it living someone else’s life. Don’t be trapped by dogma — which is living with the results of other people’s thinking. Don’t let the noise of others’ opinions drown out your own inner voice. And most important, have the courage to follow your heart and intuition. They somehow already know what you truly want to become. Everything else is secondary”.

We are history in motion, every decision we make, every path we take potentially has the ability to impact us and others significantly. Our inactions have equally important effects on the legacies we leave for those who come after us.

So, be courageous, Prepare and Act.



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I really hope that you gained some knowledge from this book; if you have any thoughts, comments or/and feedback about it, please reach out to me.

Here's to your future, and to preparing to lose your job.

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This is the author's first book.

