**Zero to Hero: the Extraordinary Factors that make the impossible possible & Key characteristics of those that achieve significant breakthroughs**

*Text of Keynote Address given by Chude Jideonwo, Managing Partner of Red Media Africa (RED) and Founding Executive Director of The Future Project Africa, at the Women of West Africa Entrepreneurship Festival on 25 June, 2015 | Lagos Nigeria*

Can we try some honesty?  Many of us see Nigeria as a vision killer. We say it to our husbands, our boyfriends and girlfriends. We say it in the salons and we tell it to God in early morning prayers. We believe that this nation kills dreams and kills spirits.

We see a country that rewards mediocrity; that rewards laziness and style over substance. Many women work hard and work fast, but they see those who don't get to the front seat, sit in business class, get invites to government functions and find spaces on corporate boards. We do great work and it seems that no one cares.

And we think to hell with it: this country doesn't deserve me. This country makes the possible impossible. You can hustle, you can strive, but to break through, it will fight you every step of the way.

And so with that I say thank you to Women of West Africa for inviting me to give this Keynote Address today. As an avowed feminist, one whose top 5 role models are almost all women, in business and life, and one whose company management is composed more than 50 percent of women, it is a pleasure and an honour to speak to this and the next generation of business and African leaders.

This year, the project, which has consumed fully one-third of my life, turns 10 years old. It so happens on the same year that I, finally, turned 30 and also celebrated 15 years in the media.

You know, ever since we concluded our national assignment running the media campaign for President Muhammadu Buhari, everyone talks about us in these hush tones. *Those Red Media guys!* Almost as if our story began this year.

Of course, we welcome the attention, we love the praise and we are inspired by the goodwill. For a team that's run almost exclusively by under 30s, we are honoured to have made history in a county where young people generally stopped making true national history in the 70s.

But our story didn't start today, obviously.

My story, like that of many of you here, started from the scratch, gaining momentum in 2005 when my cofounders, now Adebola and I, began the journey for Red Media Africa, with nothing but dreams and prayers. Without a kobo in savings, in capital, in equity, or even a bank account.

In a country where we were told you needed to have a Godfather, connections, old Ibadan or Onitsha money, or probably a degree that smells of *Amrika* or (we can manage) London.

But we believed, first in ourselves of course, but more importantly, in the possibilities that always exist wherever the human will, and the human spirit can be harnessed. In October, we will celebrate 10 years. 10 years of running The Future Awards Africa, or working for some of the biggest brands across the continent and the world.

More importantly, we have built a sustainable business, which is in the process of expansion across its four offices in Lagos and London, employing dozens of our peers to build a media company that is front and center of Nigeria’s Generation Y, and has become the go-to company when trying to reach them.

All of these without short cuts, without selling our values, without all those things they said we had to do. All of this from Nigeria, by Nigerians, in spite of Nigeria.

Along the way, my partner and I have been privileged to be part or in front of some of the most consequential moments of this emerging generation of Nigeria’s youth, a population that first had to find its voice, raised it, and is refining that voice to demand better from its corporate and political leaders.

I have been asked to share some of the lessons that this journey has taught me, and so I have picked three of the most important.

The first is people.

People: A key characteristic of those who achieve breakthroughs in business and politics is that they have a laser-like focus on people. These days, we hear a lot about how people are a nation’s greatest resource. It is not an exaggeration, even if many of us don't follow those words with action.

One of the biggest problems companies have is hiring the right people and holding on to them. Especially in a relentless knowledge economy.  In Nigeria particularly because of our poor education, the concerns center around even basic employability of potential staff. Then, when you find staff that are employable, the challenge then becomes motivating and retaining them.

This is where most employers in the public and private sector fail in flying colours. One of the dominant stories in national discourse right now is how a majority of states owe the salaries and pensions of their workers for periods ranging up to several months. In the private sector, and especially in the media industry where I work, owing of salaries is a treasured business model.

But if this is the atmosphere in which we work – where Nigerians feel they are least important to employers, how can we expect people to be inspired to give their best? How do you expect good people to continue to work for you and continue to do so when you cannot ensure they are paid at the end of every month, or that they paid enough money to take them home and then open the gate when they gate home?

But it's not just money about money. It’s about people.

Beyond remuneration, to get and keep the people you want and need, you must continue to show them that they matter first and foremost: more than your new printing equipment, more than your new mobile app and more than the prized location of your next office.

In doing that, you have to make them the center of your universe. You want to build them so they go and grow faster and higher and bigger than you even expected.

We have seen this happen in leading companies - in the massive investment our client GTBank places in its entry level staff, in Multichoice, in Microsoft, in Apple, in Zaphairre, in LEAP Africa.

When people are at the centre of your organisation’s strategy - when they know you will invest in their growth, you will be there when it matters, and you will help them achieve their goals while they help you achieve yours, your organisation will thrive.

Too many Nigerian businesses refuse to take this serious, spending 10 minutes interviewing staff to fill crucial positions, getting in young people and not training them. And then they say, ‘but if I train them, they will go’. So, what if you don't train them and they stay?

Organizations, governments, civil society groups that want to excel know that it's important to have the people capacity first sorted out; to have people who believe in your vision to help you build its foundations.

At RED, we are keenly aware about the central nature of finding, hiring, and keeping, and maximising the potential of all our team members. We are constantly experimenting with ways to improve their capacity on the job and their well being in general, as well as constantly measuring the impact of these efforts on morale.

Because, people are your first clients, and even better these Generation Y kids coming out of school now, they have so many options! They know what they want, and they expect and demand companies that fulfill they desires. They are marrying later than at any time before so they don't have families to worry about yet. People (alongside Speed and Brand Persona) are increasingly the competitive advantage of companies. The talent wars are here. If you want to succeed, make them stay, help them grow, keep them optimal.

It’s not a just an urgency for today. Think of it: No one who has succeeded in this country, or in the world, has done so without a core group of people, of soldiers who believe in them like no man's business, who will go to war for them. You see people who have been with Tony O. Elumelu for decades, from Standard Chartered, through the United Bank for Africa to Heirs Holdings. You see people who have been with Ngozi Okonjo-Iweala for almost 10 years since when she was first Finance Minister. Whenever she returns, they go back to her.

These icons have created movements, with true believers. And you need true believers, now more than ever.

*The second lesson is to focus on the outcome.*

When we began work on Buhari account in December, I told my team at StateCraft, no one cares if Buhari has all the integrity in the world, if he lives a humble, Spartan life and he has never stoken a kobo - they don't share. They care about - how is he going to change my life? How is he going to make my business thrive in this economy, how is he going to stop Boko Haram from stealing my family and my life? And that's the story we focused on telling. But I find in this market that many of us try to do things without understanding or regarding what exactly the audience wants. Does the audience really want to watch a movie about bankers having an affair or do they want to watch a simple story about staff at a run down hotel who are struggling to survive? Does our audience really the Nigerian eBay, or is it still dealing with the realities of finding good water and getting ‘light’ to iron their clothes for work? When we build campaigns for our clients, from Guinness to the British Council, EbonyLife TV to Access Bank - the first question we ask ourselves is, what does the audience need?

And it sounds so simple, but I cannot count on both hands the number of peers, mentees and mentors whom I have had to gently ask this question: I know you're passionate this, I know you can get it done. But have you checked with your audience and with your customer, is that what they want? If it isn't, it doesn't matter how good you are. It doesn't matter how good your product is. People want you to focus on them, to care about them, to give them only what they need, or to tell them why they need what you say they need.

*My third and most important lesson? Joy, Joy, Joy.*

There are too many, too many people around us who are depressed. Too many. Have you noticed? They ae depressed about ‘how will I actually earn a livable income from the entertainment industry in Nigeria’, ‘how will I be able to scale my business so I stop hustling and start thriving’, how do I find a husband who will *allow* be what I want to be’, ‘what am I going to do when I leave school’, ‘how will I find some purpose in my work as a banker, doing this soulless grind everyday’? Joy has taken flight. Now we have fear. We have doubt. We have mistrust. We have the lies we tell ourselves on Instagram about the fabulous, fabulous lives we live. Where has the joy gone?

I run my business based on Christian principles, and one of my new favorite scriptures is Nehemiah 8.10: *He said to them, “Go your way, eat the fat, drink the sweet, and send portions to those for whom nothing is prepared; for this day is holy to our Lord. Do not sorrow, for the joy of the LORD is your strength.*

This scripture directly to one of our six company values in RED: Joy.

We focus on ensuring that whatever we are facing, whatever point our team is at, they know how to focus on joy, on building long-term value and happiness, on remaining inspired.

Our internal operations and everything we do from our #WorkFromHomeFridays to our #HalfDayWednesdays, extended maternity leave for young mothers, and using Joy Audits monthly to measure the effect of our policies on our team is focused on: how can we find joy in our daily lives.

And we take that to our clients, to our suppliers, to our contractors: we inspire them because we are joyful. We get passionate about what they passionate about, we drive agenda for them, we tell stories, we build movements, we reach for the stars - because for us it's not just about making another couple millions, it's about inspiring both ourselves, our clients and their customers.

It's about the people we build through the inter connectivity of our work.

Because to survive in Nigeria, you need joy. You need joy to take these challenges head on and to keep your sanity, you need joy to maintain perspective and focus on the big picture.

This is not just a soft concept; in a market like ours, it is a business imperative.

You know, one of my most striking achievements is not our Profit and Loss Account, or our Balance Sheer, or the fact that we have never owed a salary even for one day, in 10 years, incredibly proud as I am of that.

It's stories like Bayo Omoboriowo.

The Future Awards Africa has been identifying and celebrating young people across sectors, first in Nigeria, and now in Africa for a decade now.

In 2010, he was trained by our programme, The Future Enterprise Support Scheme (TF-ESS). In 2012, he won the award for Creative Artist of the Year, for a vision that wanted to use photography to change lives, instead of the fast and easier route of, for instance, fashion photography. He became our a poster boy for the kind of young leader we were spotlighting, across our events over a period of two years.

And so last year we brought him on as official photographer for the presidential campaign, profiling the candidate everywhere from Osogbo to Owerri. The quality of his talent delivered those stunning photos that redefined a 73-year-old man's image.

Then the candidate became president and took Bayo away from us. And then his like has changed completely. Not just with a diplomatic passport that I hate him every day for, but on journeys across the world, documenting history, documenting change.

Bayo's life has completely changed, inspiring thousands, and that gives us joy, and that makes us think that our work means something, that our business is changing lives and nations, that our challenges are worth it, that everything good will come.

Does your business inspire you? Even if you're a dry learner, or a security company does it tap into a place deep in the human spirit that wants to contribute to something greater than one’s self? Does it answer your questions about life and why you are here, does it make you and those around you jump out of bed in the morning and say: Yes we must?!

If it doesn't, you might soon close it down. And with it your spirit. Your beautiful, necessary, crucial spirit required to reshape the world into that better place we all want it to be.

And I believe that's my message truly today, in a 20-minute nutshell. That whether you are in politics, or in business or sitting in a cubicle at an insurance firm, that you can make the impossible possible, that you cannot just survive but thrive.

And it will be hard. But who promised you it will be easy? Who told you it should be easy? It is supposed to be hard. To be excruciating, and demanding, and frustrating. Sometimes - many times - you will want to give up. But then you don’t. Which is how you win. Because when it gets much too hard, THAT is the exact moment when you have to make the decision to keep going. And, no, it is not unfair. That is exactly as it ought to be. That’s exactly the way the world is wired to run. That’s how you know it’s real.

This young man here stands as an ongoing testimony to tell you it is not easy, but it is... possible. It is possible to move from a young boy in a 2-bedroom apartment in Ijeshatedo who was chased out of primary school for 2 years because his incredibly hardworking father lost his job and could not pay his fees to being one of the 20 invited last month to be the face of the 50th anniversary calendar of that same school.

To move from a young man born, bred and buttered in Nigeria, who didn’t leave this country until 2008, and even then on a free ticket, to one who has worked on the campaigns of two presidents and sits on the boards of global companies.

Who was told it wasn't possible many, many years ago. But who chose to believe, because what other choice did he have, because hope is the one thing that is inexhaustible, and who hasn't lost his spirit, his joy, and his appreciation for the beauty of the world - despite the people who have cheated me, abused me, undermined me, betrayed me, and disappointed me.

Because it doesn't matter. Because what matters is where you are going, where you can go.

Because after all is said and done, here and across West Africa, this I know for sure. Much is possible, in Nigeria, by Nigerians, in spite of Nigeria.

Thank you, ladies and gentlemen, and God bless you.

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