

Strathmore Business School's Inaugural Great Africans Getaway

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What Africa Needs - By Ali A. Mufuruki

Ladies and Gentlemen

A need is something whose absence in one's life poses an existential threat.

So, what does Africa need?

Everywhere you go today, stories abound of how well Africa is doing.

- Highest economic growth of any continent in the world in the past decade,
- emerging almost unscathed from the worst economic and financial crisis in world history
- the spread of chronic diseases being contained or even eradicated altogether

the world's most wirelessly connected continent

youngest continent

richest continent in natural resources and biodiversity,

From Hopeless Continent to Africa Rising in ten years -so what could Africa possibly need?

Against the background of all that excited and happy noise, one could easily come to the conclusion that Africa doesn't need much more than a steady management of the processes and policies that have gotten it this far. As they say, if it ain't broke, don't fix it.

So far so good, that is until we ask ourselves what exactly are these processes and policies that we need to maintain that we realize with astonishment that there isn't a single process or set of policies that we can attribute the so called Africa's rise to, that we discover with amazement that Africa is after all not one place but 55 at times radically different countries that have had vastly differing growth stories over the last decade, that we see to our surprise that in most of these African countries, it is almost impossible to connect economic outcomes to specific policy choices or decisions, that in some countries growth was accidental following unexpected discovery of precious minerals, oil or gas, that in other countries growth was compromised by a series of unplanned events such as outbreak of wars or pandemics. That there is no single African story.

It is not until we recognize that the famous 6 percent annual growth over the last decade is nothing more than a mere average of illogical numbers describing the economic performance of countries that have very little in common if at all when we realize how much trouble Africa is in.

Yesterday on my way from the airport, I got into a conversation with Mr. Wilson Kalunge, the director of MBA Programmes at Strathmore Business School. The conversation was about Africa and he shared an insight that will stay with me for a long time.

He said **"there is a stunning similarity between the Africa of today and the Africa of the late nineteenth century"**. I was curious to know why, so he went on to explain. **"The rest of the world is struggling while Africa has everything the rest of the world needs to survive in abundance. We need to prepare to make sure we are not left behind again"**

I jokingly asked him if he thought there was going to be another Berlin Conference sometime soon after which we laughed and moved on to another conversation about Strathmore Business School for which I think Mr. Kalunge is the best salesman I have ever seen, yet.

Later on in my hotel room, I wondered aloud what if the conference to split up and share Africa's resources has already taken place, this time not in Berlin but in our very own boardrooms, cabinet rooms and state houses across Africa and the

world? It is not inconceivable. What future would that spell for us and future generations of Africans?

So, Africa does have a lot of needs after all, urgent needs. Can we agree on the top 5 needs that Africa has today?

(Poll the audience)

- 1. Human capital***
- 2. Good governance***
- 3. Infrastructure***
- 4. Empathy between and amongst Africans***
- 5. Access to opportunity, freedom***

Before I tell you my list of Africa's top 5 needs, I will tell you a story.

I have been struggling to gather my thoughts for this talk since the day I was asked to speak two weeks ago. So, as I usually do in such circumstances, I procrastinated until yesterday afternoon when I watched a movie on the flight from Amsterdam to Nairobi.

The movie I watched is called "**Venus and Serena**" and it is a documentary about the fairy tale story of the Williams sisters who have dominated the women's tennis since they burst on the scene twenty years ago.

As I watched the movie, the recurring question in my mind was, "**Who could have thought that two black girls from Compton California - one of the roughest black neighborhoods in America-, could grow up to become the world's most dominant players in tennis history?**"

Theirs is a story of extraordinary courage against unimaginable odds, boundless ambition, determination, grit, discipline and perseverance; a story that in my view holds some very important lessons for Africans today.

Mr. Williams imagined the Impossible and set out to make it possible

Asked what he wanted his girls to achieve in tennis, their father and coach Mr. Richard Williams said without hesitation thus: "**I want both of them to become**

number one tennis players in the world" This was 21 years ago. Venus and Serena were 11 and 9 years old respectively.

Mr. Williams instilled self confidence in his girls

In 1995 at age 14, Venus was being interviewed by an ABC news reporter. Asked if she could beat a popular local star, a boy her age in a tennis match, Venus answered with supreme confidence that she knew she could beat him. The reporter was not convinced, so he asked her again. "You are very confident, you say it so easily, why?" Venus answered again very confidently: "**because I believe it**".

The reporter persisted "**what makes you so sure?**" and you could see doubt starting to show on Venus' face but before she could answer, her father emerged from the shadows and angrily told the reporter to stop breaking his daughter's spirit. He said and I quote: "**what she said, she said it with so much confidence the first time but you keep on asking. You've got to understand what you are doing to the spirit of a 14 year old child. This child is going to be playing when your old ass and me are in the grave. When she says something with confidence we don't ask her what happened. You are looking at a little back kid and you've got to let her be a kid. When you ask her something and she answers you with confidence, leave her alone!**"

Watching this, one may be tempted to think that Richard Williams was merely protecting his young daughter from unnecessary bullying by members of the media especially given that the reporter asking the questions was a white man. The truth however is that Mr. Williams was protecting something much larger than that. Having grown up in abject poverty in racially segregated Louisiana, he had seen far too many dreams cut short by a mere planting of a seed of doubt in a young person's mind, especially a young black person's mind.

He deliberately worked to instill supreme self confidence in his children as an essential tool for survival in a brutal and unforgiving environment that did not give even the most talented young black person a chance in life. He was determined never to let anyone take away his daughter's self belief. He knew that self confidence was precious, but he also understood that it was a fragile good that could be broken or taken away very easily.

When asked who she would like to be in tennis, 11-year old Venus said without hesitation: "**John McEnroe**". She didn't pick the number 1-ranked woman player on tour but the best male tennis player at the time. It took lots of courage, lots of confidence to say that with such gusto.

She says in one scene: "**I grew up knowing I was going to be number 1 tennis player in the world. Our parents brainwashed us, they brainwashed us to win!**"

We all know that 21 years later, Venus has won more titles and made more money than her idol John McEnroe, but more importantly, she and her younger sister Serena have revolutionized the game of tennis and we are all better off as a result. How did she know that? How did Mr. Williams know that?

Mr. Williams had a Plan

Richard Williams was quoted in the movie saying that he had a 78-page plan that he wrote before his daughters were born. In that plan, according to Mr. Williams, Venus was going to become the number 1-ranked tennis player in the world!

Mr. Williams understood the importance of Discipline to Execute, keeping Eyes on the prize

Hitting 18 million balls by the time they joined the professional tour, coming back from setbacks, injuries and near-death experiences, defying age, winning more titles than any other woman in history, being number one for the longest time; that is the incredible story of the Williams sisters.

All this is not possible without discipline, perseverance and unrelenting push for flawless execution. Hard work is a virtue but discipline to execute according to a set plan is an even greater virtue. We Africans can learn a thing or two about the importance of discipline in execution from the Williams sisters.

Mr. Williams is a leader, a visionary leader who saw what others didn't

If the Williams household could be thought of as a republic, with Mr. Williams as its leader and the daughters as its citizens, then the Williams Republic of 21 years ago could easily be compared to an African country at independence which

like the Williams nation came into being after many centuries of abuse and exploitation under colonialism, afflicted with poverty, disease, illiteracy, facing incredible odds with no money, no human resource, no real friend and yet determined to succeed by all means necessary.

Mr. Williams' qualities as a leader combine all the essential pre-requisites for success I have detailed above namely:

- 1.
2. 1. Ability to imagine what appears impossible today as being possible tomorrow
3. 2. A bold plan
4. 3. Self confidence
5. 4. Discipline in execution.
5. Leadership that is capable of harnessing the first 4 qualities.

Mr. Williams grew up in poor and racially segregated Louisiana being told every day that his life would amount to nothing, that he was by nature incapable of becoming anything of value, that he should accept his fate as a second class citizen of his country. He rejected this notion not only in words, but in deeds. Far from being burdened by it, Mr. Williams used his painful life circumstances as a source of inspiration to succeed in the inner sanctuaries of the white man's world, he used them as a reason to prove his detractors wrong.

The challenges facing African countries today are essentially the same as those faced by Mr. Williams not so long ago.

We are being told repeatedly that we are incapable of managing our own resources, that we cannot govern ourselves properly without being assisted by others, that our economies require foreign aid, that we should limit our ambitions to what we can afford now and that what we can afford will be determined not by us but by others.

Africa can take a leaf from the Williams experience and reject the notion that it should always look to others for help to manage its affairs. Africa can take control of its own destiny.

More importantly however, Africa can claim its rightful place in the community of

mankind by demonstrating that it can be amongst the best in every human endeavor, that it can build strong modern economies, be home to Nobel Prize winners not only for peace and literature but also for Physics, Economics, Biology, Medicine, Chemistry and Mathematics; that Africa can send astronauts into space, that Africa can contribute its share to the betterment of the human condition globally by giving refuge and relief to distressed communities elsewhere in the world, yes, that Africa can give aid to others and repay them for their kindness!

I am left without doubt that vision/imagination, planning, self belief and execution discipline are essential instruments for success. They constitute what we will need to understand the essence of success itself, to believe in our abilities, to understand the world around us, to find direction, to stay the course in the face of challenges, to seek perfection in everything we do, to WIN.

What Africa needs now more than ever therefore are individuals who can master the use and application of these tools. These individuals are called LEADERS, but not ordinary leaders. These are enlightened, values-driven and effective, extraordinary leaders. Leaders of Mr. Williams' vision, courage, grit, determination and execution discipline.

Ladies and gentlemen, Africa wants a lot of things but it needs only ONE thing:

LEADERS.

Now look around you. Look out the window. Think. Where are these leaders?

The leaders Africa needs are right here in this room. Let's go and lead.

Thank you for listening to me.