

- SPEECH -

Personal Integrity is A Start

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If you know me, you know me to be a no nonsense person when it comes to personal integrity. No matter how peers in business might want to dress it up, black is black to me and white is white. I remember the first time someone approached me with a “business proposition”, it was in late 2007, I had just started business. He told me that there was opportunity for me to do very well. He said that we could win a tender to train personnel at a certain government ministry, it was worth Tsh. 270m (about US\$270,000 at the time) if only we paid our counterpart at the ministry US\$30,000. He said it would be easy to qualify for the consultancy because we could call Human Resource managers from respected multinationals and pay them Tsh. 50,000 (US\$50) to write references for us saying we had conducted similar trainings at their institutions and they highly recommended us.

I told him that I couldn't do such a thing because I had not done those consultancies and would not bribe officials to be awarded contracts. He said, “Fine, you don't have to do it, I will.” I said “Still, I would know you did.” Seeing that I wouldn't budge, he swung with a proverbial right and said “*Modesta, acha ujinga, ndio kwanza umeanza biashara, usipotazama, utakufa masikini, mjini hapa.*” Loosely translated, Modesta, stop being stupid, you've only just started business, if not careful, you're going to die poor - remember this is the city.” I told him I'll take my chances and we parted ways, never again to meet for business discussions.

A year later, I had been meeting a client at a hotel in the city when a middle aged, well, no, a 60-something year old gentleman approached me to know what it is I do for a living. I told him that I was a management consultant and he requested for an appointment to consolidate and organise his many businesses. We met that day and for several other days thereafter. I got to meet his business partners, and he in turn, came to our offices to meet colleagues who would work on this project. Almost 2 months and 5 kgs later from all the lunches we kept meeting over, I realised that this “gentleman” wasn't as interested in growing his businesses as he was in a romantic relationship with me. I directly and firmly addressed the matter and severed all professional and not so professional ties, letting my team know that the potentially tens of thousands of US dollars contract was off. That was not the first, nor the last of such qui pro quo propositions for sex in exchange for business. I have handled all more or less the same with more or less the same repercussions.

The last incident of note took place in 2012 when my mother got appointed to a government position. As we were waiting for security clearance to attend the ceremony, a man who introduced himself as a member of parliament asked me what I do and who I was there for and I told him, he then said “Wow! Deputy Minister of Finance! Lucky you! You better take advantage of the billions she has access to and make sure your business benefits from her position.” I was quick to tell him that I saw no connection between my mother’s appointment and my business and he too said “Don’t be stupid, do you know how many would want to be in your shoes?!” Being who I am I didn’t lose a second in giving him a lecture about ethics and standing for equality and fairness. I then got up to go join my family in clearance and that was the last I saw of him.

As difficult as it has been these 7 ½ years, I have stood my ground and not succumbed to the pressure to cave in and join the crowd. It has meant that opportunities have had to be forgone and many a times, bills paid late. I have worn these wounds with pride because I have stood for and not against responsible business for competitiveness and I vowed to be the standard against which others would measure themselves. My colleagues would sometimes call me Nyerere, saying I will die poor in pursuit of a cause because I will not be moved from the rock of personal integrity and this to me was the greatest honour.

Until three years ago. Three years ago I came to realise, as I’m sure Nyerere also did, that the strength of a leader is as good as that of the institution he or she leads.

I serve on several boards of national NGOs that build the capacity of small civil society organisations. These CSOs and the organisations they in turn support are only a few of the many bright spots, men and women, boys and girls who provide solutions to their communities’ challenges - success stories that could prove replicable and scaleable the world over if only they lasted long enough to tell their tale. What is disheartening is that they retain an umbilical dependency on the grants we offer. Remove the grants and the organisation dies. Switch over to the private sector and the scenario is just as daunting; we know that 80% of small businesses in East Africa fail in the first year. Yet in assessing the owners we see many a visionary and sometimes ethical leaders.

So why do good leaders do business badly? Because good leaders are not defined by their vision and people leadership alone, the “good” of their leadership is only complete when they can also lead and manage their organisations well. I know of people with less grandiose of visions and some, with none at all whose businesses are doing great - not on the strength of their people leadership but, under the security of their business management.

It is not enough to be ethical, have vision, appoint competent people and task them with driving results without making sure that you have also built the machinery that will secure institutional integrity whether you are present or not.

Bringing this message home, I was in conversation with a friend at the beginning of last year and she scolded me for having invested as much as I have in my businesses. She said “Modesta,

I have been in business for almost 10 years now and the most I have ever invested in my consulting firm is \$1600. The business generated the rest.” I had to face what I have been dancing around all this time:

1. A leader’s personal integrity is not complete without the integrity of the institution they lead
2. No matter how technically competent your team is, without sound governance, their performance will be compromised
3. Without closely monitoring and evaluating processes, we would always wonder why good people and expensive systems aren’t yielding expected results
4. Whilst you may be revered as an individual, it is of far greater value as a transformational leader to leave a legacy that can be replicated through the systems you built

Speaking of the Government and upcoming elections, I have been saying that without good governance and the integrity of institutions, good leaders get snuffed out and bad leaders cause havoc. Like civil society activists, I have been pointing fingers for a very long time but, recently, much like the civil society organisations I just spoke about and very like other social enterprises, I have had to take a step back to take an honest look at the state of my house - to see what has been wrong with a vision so right. And when I realised that it was me, that I had only gotten half the job done, thinking my personal integrity as a leader would be enough, I took a deep breath, straightened my dress, held my chin up high and got on the phone. I may have made costly mistakes that got me here but, I still had personal integrity and that’s the best place to start in my pursuit to complete the equation where Personal Integrity + Institutional Integrity = Successful Outcomes + A Lasting Legacy.

This is where you now find me, on the road to excellence, moving from good to great.

Thank you for listening to me.

Mbarikiwe.

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