

RAISING A NEW GENERATION OF LEADERS IN A DIGITAL AGE: THE ROLE OF THE IVORY TOWERS

A lecture delivered by
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on the 5th Matriculation Ceremony of Trinity University, Lagos Nigeria.
6th April 2023

1.0 SALUTATION

The Chairman and members of the University Council,
The Pro- and Vice-Chancellors,
The Registrar,
Other Principal Officers of Trinity University,
Members of the Senate of the University,
Academic and Non-Academic Staff,
Current Students & our incoming students aka JJC's
Proud Parents and Guardians who have come to Buga,
Distinguished Invited Guests,
Ladies and Gentlemen:

2.0 INTRODUCTION

Let me start by thanking the University Council, Principal Officers, Staff and particularly my friend Pastor Femi Olatunji and Prof. Ayo for this wonderful opportunity to present this lecture. Thank you all.

When I got your invitation, it reminded me of a colleague of mine, who after our first degree said he wanted to be in academics. He immediately

proceeded to obtain two masters degrees in quick succession but surprisingly just stopped.

When next I saw him on Broad street Lagos, I asked, Sunday “o Kawe mo ni?” His profound answer has remained with me ever since. He said, “mii o kawe mo. Owo ni mo fe ka”. Literally meaning I don't want to count books again, it is money I now want to count. In short, one would get the impression that they are two different lanes: The Gown Lane for book people and the Town Lane for money people.

I am therefore not sure why you invited me as I am not a member of the ivory tower and therefore don't qualify to wear your Glowing Gowns. The closest I have with the academic world was when I had my first degree about 44 years ago, and my MBA shortly after. Since then, I ran very far from you academicians. The oyinbo repete is way way above my pay grade.

I have however by God's grace, been able to run into the Town to put into practice, some of the things I learnt before I was given a Gown at ABU Zaria and at the University of Lagos.

In my search for an answer to why you invited me, I eventually came to console myself that perhaps Trinity University has invited me for a reconciliation meeting. A meeting between the Gown and the Town as it is said. Trinity University is perhaps seeking to encourage a “Gown meet Town” atmosphere where those of us wey no know book get to sit with you acadas for the benefit of developing better rounded students and to chart a way forward for our country and society. It is on this premise that I plead that you accept me and my non-acada paper just as we dey.

Our topic today is “**Raising a New Generation of Leaders in a Digital Age: The Role of the Ivory Towers**”.

We indeed live in a new generation and a new generation of leaders are required.

A lot has changed and even more is changing today at an incredible pace.

For instance, if I had been invited to make this presentation a little over 30 years ago when I founded SystemSpecs, my method of preparation would have been different.

To prepare a paper such as this, I would have had to juggle my limited memory or gone to a physical library with limited books for ideas on the topic. I would then have scribbled a few thots on paper and handed over to my secretary to clean up for the first draft for me.

This time last year, what I would have done was probably go to Google to give me ideas on the topic. Google would've given me several related articles for me to go through to come up with something presentable.

However, from about November last year, when artificial intelligence moved to a different level with the release of ChatGPT, power has changed hands. Today, all I have to do is to bring out my phone, begin to dictate my thoughts while anybody passing by would probably think I'm mad talking to myself whereas I was simply dictating for my phone to transcribe my words into text. Bye-bye secretary.

I could ask ChatGPT to write a draft presentation that looks incredibly like a human write up for me. Within a much shorter time, my paper would be ready. I then just do a little clean up here and there and come and stand in front of you today pretending to be a hero while reading the expo. That in a simple summary, is a type of transition that has happened in the last few years.

No wonder some institutions are seeking to ban ChatGPT which has scored excellent grades in exams, even in medicine and law.

In addition to the secretary job I mentioned earlier, many other jobs are on the line. These include Customer Service Executives, Accountants, Content Writing, Driving and even Software Development and Testing jobs are on the line.

This is the new world we live in!

The age has changed. The people to be managed have changed. How then can we expect leadership styles to remain the same?

It is only God that has remained and remains the same yesterday today and forever.

Every other thing must change. Every other thing must evolve. The age has changed.

Our leadership style must change. Our teaching style must change, Our administrative style must change.

Our new set of leaders must know new technologies in order to get the most of these technologies.

Our new set of leaders must know about the strength and limitation of artificial intelligence, robots and data technologies.

They for instance must know how to positively use say ChatGPT in order to get the most out of it or it becomes ChatJIBITI when used in a negative manner.

We must prepare for a world in which we will live side by side with robots, even in the workplace.

We must prepare for a world, in which artificial intelligence will take over many jobs while replacing many humans in the workplace.

We must prepare for how to live with our new neighbours.

Even the government must prepare for these new set of employees who by our current rules do not pay PAYE tax.

We must prepare to live with these emotionless creatures, who however can work 24 hours seven days a week. They will not steal or cut corners in their jobs. They will be more reliable than many humans around.

Our new set of leaders must be prepared to manage and lead real human beings, created by God, and manage these creatures that man has created.

They in addition must learn how to manage the combo of Man and near human machines driven by Artificial Intelligence.

One thing is clear, Leadership styles must change.

Leadership as it was when I started SystemSpecs over 30 years ago, is certainly not the same thing as we have today. When I started out, leadership was more about “Oga at the Top” giving direction or instruction if not commandment (Oga so wipe....).

Today in this digital age, in this age of Gen Z's, and the upcoming Alpha generation, where tech savvy subordinates have open access to large data and information, leadership is now more about communication, conversation, consultation and persuasion.

The Traditional leadership that relied on the command-and-control style, was well-suited for creating large businesses in the industrial age. Leaders of this period were typically either planners, directors, or controllers. However, this approach has reached its limit in today's knowledge and tech-driven era and does not guarantee happy and devoted staff members.

3.0 LEADERSHIP IN A DIGITAL AGE

Leadership in a digital age is more complex than ever before and requires a new set of skills and qualities.

As the world is becoming more and more connected through technology, leaders must be able to adapt quickly to changing circumstances and demonstrate the capacity to lead teams through disruption, transitions, uncertainty, and ambiguity.

Some of the qualities and skills needed to be an effective leader in a digital age are:

3.1 FLEXIBILITY

Rapid technological advancements and multigenerational workplaces necessitate adaptability and responsiveness in leaders. For instance, I now lead a multigenerational organization and have had to adjust my expectations, particularly regarding non-core work disciplines such as working from home, having a set time to work, and so on.

Engineers at SystemSpecs work around the clock and expect to be exempted from commuting to work daily **as they say they now want to work from home**. Instead of engaging in a battle we cannot win, we have had to invest in tools to improve collaboration and communication while working from diverse ends. It was not always like this.

3.2 COMMUNICATION

As more teams become distributed and work remotely in the digital age, clear communication becomes increasingly important. Particularly as robots and artificial intelligence (AI) gradually take over tasks previously performed by humans. These machines will produce output based on the exact commands given to them.

Leaders must be skilled communicators who can set clear expectations, build trust and rapport with their human and machine teams, and effectively manage conflicts across board.

3.3 EMOTIONAL INTELLIGENCE

With the rise of remote working, Leaders need to be more attuned to their human team members' emotional states to better understand their

needs, motivations, and aspirations. After all, they are still human beings with emotional needs.

3.4 COLLABORATION

The use of digital has enabled leaders to connect team members from different geographies and time zones which have opened new opportunities for innovation and collaboration. Unfortunately, this also comes with a new set of challenges of such as disconnection and distrust. Leaders, therefore, need to find ways to mitigate these and foster a culture of trust and collaboration.

4.0 CASE STUDY

When smart phones came, many industry leaders underestimated the possible impact that this would have on their industries. Take manufacturers of the following products for instance,

1. Calculators
2. Diaries & Notepads
3. Wrist watches
4. Alarm clocks
5. Instant camera
6. Maps
7. Torchlights
8. Print newspapers
9. Cheque books
10. Portable music players
11. Typewriters
12. Radio receivers

Little did they know that their industries and businesses were under significant threats from a hand held device that did not initially appear to be a competitor or related to their fields. After all, it was just a phone. Take a

company like Kodak one of the largest companies of that time. Today, we don't hear of them again. Reason? they miss-read the times.

According to ChatGPT, "The story of how Kodak went down is a cautionary tale about the importance of innovation and adapting to changing technologies. Kodak was once an iconic American company that dominated the photographic film industry for decades. However, as the digital age came along, Kodak failed to adapt and innovate in the same way as their competitors, leading to their eventual decline.

In the 1970s, Kodak pioneered the development of digital camera technology, but the company hesitated to embrace this new market fully. It continued to focus on its core film-based products, and by the 1990s, Kodak was facing stiff competition from digital camera manufacturers like Sony, Canon, and Nikon. Kodak was slow to realize the potential of digital photography and was reluctant to shift its focus from film.

By the early 2000s, the market for photographic film had significantly declined as people began using digital photography more widely. Kodak was losing money and was forced to file for bankruptcy in 2012. The company failed to adapt quickly to new technologies, and its competitors jumped ahead of Kodak in the digital market.

Some analysts argue that Kodak's failure to adopt digital technology was not just a question of innovation but also a matter of corporate culture. The company's leadership was accused of being complacent and unable to move away from their traditional business model. Additionally, Kodak invested heavily in research and development for its film products, to the

detriment of its digital offerings. By the time Kodak started investing in digital photography, it was too late, and they had lost the first-mover advantage.

The story of Kodak demonstrates the importance of innovation, adaptability, and anticipating market trends. As digital technology continues to evolve, companies must be willing to pivot and adapt to shift their focus towards new technologies or risk losing out to competitors who embrace change."

5.0 ROLE OF IVORY TOWERS

Japan is one country I admire a lot.

Can you remember how they cleaned up after everybody at the just concluded World Cup in Qatar?

They are a country of very strong values even though they are not Christians or as many of us claim to be.

Japan has very limited mineral resources, what they have in abundance are strong work ethics Impressed upon their children from an early age, highly skilled and educated human resources with an eye for details and innovation as we have in Sony, Toyota, Honda and Nintendo.

I would love Nigeria to be the next Japan.

It would however appear that in trying to become like Japan we forgot the "N" at the end and have now settled for "Japa".

A good number of our young people have either gone or are on their way out of the country. I want to believe that the lecturers of Trinity University I see here today, are among the determined few who want to remain and train

the next generation, many of whom will also remain to build and add value to Nigeria.

The 21st century has seen huge technological advancements and societal changes. We now exist in a world where technology is everywhere, digital literacy is growing rapidly, and access to resources has never been simpler. This fast-paced growth presents us with many new challenges that need leaders who can guide teams through unknown waters.

Trinity University and her peers, therefore, have an important responsibility to ensure that Nigerian students are well-equipped to lead in this age of artificial intelligence, virtual and augmented reality, robotics, etc. You are to help these young people to develop invaluable skills that will aid them as future leaders.

As a tower of research and excellence that I believe that you are, I charge you to educate the next generation of global citizens and raise them as responsible stewards—the very essence of leadership—in an increasingly digitalised landscape.

My suggestions to you towards achieving this are as follows:

5.1 REVIEW AND REVAMP YOUR CURRICULUM

To ensure students are well prepared for the changing landscape of leadership in the digital era, Trinity University must develop a curriculum that reflect the digital skills and soft skills required. This includes AI, data analysis, cybersecurity, blockchain, and digital marketing as well as remote collaboration, communication, project management and adaptability.

If you don't have one, consider setting up Artificial Intelligence and Machine Learning departments or incorporate these principles into existing programs like computer sciences or engineering with an emphasis on practical experience rather than just theoretical understanding.

5.2 STRENGTHEN YOUR RESEARCH CAPABILITIES

Technology driven research should be the core of your research.

Today's pressing social and economic issues are being solved leveraging technology. I would be delighted to see Trinity University leading groundbreaking research efforts that leverage digital technology. I will be more that happy to provide opportunities for research initiatives especially because we have identified various areas at SystemSpecs needing proper thesis and research for application.

Imagine conducting AI research that examines the use of AI to solve local problems such as human capital, agriculture, financial management, and healthcare or crime prevention and detection. This may be the clincher that separates and establishes Trinity University as the leading institution for technology advancements.

5.3 ENCOURAGE CRITICAL THINKING, INNOVATION AND ENTREPRENEURSHIP

It's not enough to teach students how to use technology; Trinity University must also teach them how to use technology in creative and innovative ways.

I want to admonish you to encourage critical thinking and innovation among your students. The goal is to empower them to come up with new and better ways of solving problems by going beyond traditional methods. Gone are the days of memorize, regurgitate, and get a first

class. Google has already memorized everything and will do a better job of regurgitation. We now need leaders who can take -off from where google stops.

Trinity University should introduce entrepreneurship as a core part of the curriculum. This will help students to explore opportunities, take risks and create value which is critical for self-employment job creation and practical value-adding leadership for our country.

In addition, even on your campus, you can provide your students with opportunities to engage in experiential learning and co-curricular activities that enable them to apply their knowledge within and outside your school borders.

5.4 PARTNER WITH INDUSTRY STAKEHOLDERS

Building strong partnerships with industry stakeholders will ensure that students from this university are well-prepared to face the challenges of the digital age.

These partnerships should focus on providing internships, trainings, investments in modern technology, and research opportunities.

A clear outcome from this is that your students are equipped with practical experiences and the necessary tools to stay ahead of the curve.

As we move into a more digital world, I urge you to adapt and evolve to address the challenges ahead.

Be at the forefront of this technological revolution by continuously transforming your teaching strategies and offer limitless academic and extracurricular opportunities to your students.

6.0 CONCLUSION AND A WORD FOR OUR HEROES OF TODAY

To all the incoming students, this is a new and exciting phase, and I am happy you have taken this huge step of partnering with Trinity University. Congratulations!

Today, you now need to choose whether like Goya Meno would say “You want to *bamba*. You want to chill with the big boys? Na you dey run kitikiti, Na you dey run katakata, No fit drink water drop cup,”

Or you want to focus and equip yourself to become an effective leader tomorrow. Today, the power is in your hands.

Remember the popular saying “*Hustle now wey you still dey young. Head wey no carry book go carry load*”. Another popular saying is “Pain now, gain later or Gain now, pain later.” The power to choose is now in your hands. My job today is simply to remind you that your choices have consequences.

Preparation doesn’t start with what you do; it starts with what you believe. When you believe that tomorrow’s success depends on today’s preparation, you see today differently.

Education provides you with the requisite foundation, and social network as well as the skills and knowledge you need to think critically, compete effectively, make informed decisions, and leverage technology to your unique advantage. But education is much more than having certificates to your name. It is a lifelong journey of curiosity, learning, discovery, and growth.

Proper education prepares you for leadership. It equips you with the ability to tackle concepts easily, come up with solutions, inspire colleagues, and influence decisions.

And so, on this auspicious occasion, I urge you to never let go of your curiosity. Never let go of your yearnings to learn more, and very importantly, to know more about God, and the world which he created for our benefit.

Hold on tightly to excellence. Excellence does not come cheap and easy. Excellence is consistency. Excellence is studying even when you do not feel like it. Excellence is asking for help when you need it.

I hope that you shall pursue excellence even while upholding the faith. James, in the Bible, spoke to us about how dead faith is without works. You cannot claim to have faith in God or claim to believe in excellence when you do not put in the work by studying.

In addition, adopt a forward-looking approach to your learning. Learn outside Trinity University in your pursuit of knowledge. Dare to learn the ways of new technologies, seek out new mentors, and identify peers to take on this journey with.

Furthermore, I strongly recommend that you take advantage of chances to hone your skills in leading people with different ideas and perspectives. Stay organized, join existing student initiatives, or create one that would help your peers.

Instead of complaining about problems, choose to be different, Create a solution. That is what leaders are meant for.

Excel in your coursework and excel in your extracurriculars as well!

Never forget that you are the future of the country and world.

You were born to be a leader.

You were born to add value to Nigeria and the larger world.

Please determine to fulfil your calling.

In your time at this institution, remember your values, and use your knowledge to inspire others to seek the same.

Enjoy your stay at Trinity University; take advantage of every opportunity offered to develop yourself and prepare you for your future careers and lives.

I pray that the good Lord will crown all your efforts with success. I wish you well. Thank you and God bless you all.

John Tanimola Obaro

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