

THE CONTENT OF OUR CHARACTER: HOW A GOOD CHARACTER CAN ENHANCE OUR SKILLS FOR AFRICA'S DEVELOPMENT

Keynote Speech Delivered by Prof. David N. Abdulai at the First International
Conference on "Character and Skills Development in Africa."

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Hon. Dr. Ego C. Uzoezie, Provost of the Nwafor Orizu College of Education, Associate Prof. Byron Maduewesi, convenor of this international conference, lead paper presenters, distinguished participants and distinguished guests, ladies and gentlemen, all protocols duly and respectfully observed.

It is indeed a great pleasure and honour to be invited to this beautiful, vast and rich country of yours, Nigeria, to give this keynote speech. The theme of this conference is: CHARACTER AND SKILLS DEVELOPMENT IN AFRICA. The organisers of the conference chose an apt theme for indeed without a good character you cannot develop any meaningful skills for your personal development or that of your country and indeed Africa. Albert Einstein the famous scientist once said that "most people say that it is the intellect which makes a great scientist. They are wrong, it is character." From this observation, it is therefore without a doubt that character is important for skills development, which in turn is important for Africa's development. The title of my keynote speech is therefore: **THE CONTENT OF OUR CHARACTER: HOW A GOOD CHARCATER CAN ENHANCE OUR SKILLS FOR AFRICA'S DEVELOPMENT.**

Mr Chairman and Distinguish Participants:

So what is Character? According to the Oxford Advance Dictionary character is, **“the mental and moral qualities distinctive to an individual.”** I will maintain that character is basically what you have left, when you’ve lost everything you can lose. Character is Greek; it is spelt *Kharakter*, meaning a stamping tool, used to give something a distinctive mark. Ladies and gentlemen, what is your distinctive mark? Emm! Your character.

Suppose all of us here were each to look into a mirror and could not see our faces but our individual characters, I can assure you that most of us will be horrified when we see the contents of our character. So check the content of your character, if you are to develop and succeed in this world, you need to change the content of your character if it is a defective character. According to Ralph Waldo Emerson, “No change of circumstances can repair a defect of character.” This is because our individual characters according to Abraham Lincoln are like a tree and our individual reputations like a shadow. The shadow is what we think of it, and the tree is the real thing—your character.

Mr Chairman and Distinguish Participants:

But Character according to Helen Keller, “cannot be developed in ease and quiet. Only through experience of trial and suffering can the soul be strengthen, ambition inspired and success achieved.” A good example in Anambra is the person for which this college is named—Nwafor Orizu. There is a lot most of you already know about this great Nigerian which does not need my repeating here. However as it

pertains to this topic, I will like to share with you a bit about this great man. He was sentenced to jail for seven years by the British Colonial authorities for standing up for what is right. This is after he made a fiery speech when he went to console striking mine workers in Enugu after the shooting of 21 of these mine workers in November 18, 1949. This sentencing was based on trump up charges by the British Colonial authorities that he allegedly misappropriated funds from the American Council on African Education (ACAE), an organisation that he founded.

Because of his impeccable character, the late Roy Wilkins a renowned civil rights leader in America and chairman of the ACAE, wrote a letter to Nnamdi Azikiwe for his release, exonerating him of any financial impropriety. He was later to become the Chief Whip of the Eastern House of Assembly and later Minister for Local Government. When Nigeria became independent in 1960, Nwafor Orizu became President of the Nigerian Senate. Briefly, he also became acting President of Nigeria when Azikiwe left Nigeria for a trip to Europe in 1965. His exemplary character and skills have brought development to his people in Ibo land and to his country. Commenting on character, Abraham Lincoln once said that all men can stand adversity, but if you want to test a man's character, give him power."

Nwafor Orizu through his actions and character has demonstrated that as Africans if we develop good characters, we will be able to develop the requisite complimentary skills for the development of our continent. Ladies and gentlemen, but are we listening?

Mr Chairman and Distinguish Participants:

Still on character, please indulge me for a minute to recount to you part of a speech one of my mentors gave on this subject that has to do with his personal experience which is worth sharing here. He said that, when he graduated from business school, he looked around at his classmates and divided them into two categories—those that he would like to work for, or that he would like to work for him and those that he would not like to work for him. The latter group he called snakes.

He continued, “when you think about it, I was dividing them up according to my assessment of their character. I wanted to work with people of integrity, loyalty and honesty—because I value those qualities more than intelligence. And I decide that I would watch my classmates over the years to see how they turned out. Frankly, the early years were pretty bad. The snakes were winning hands down. I worried that maybe I’d gotten life figured out wrong. Maybe this integrity and caring stuff was for the birds. But, over time, the tide began to turn. Now more than 40 years later, the good folks are winning by a huge margin. And most of the snakes have been run over.

You see, it’s a real advantage to be a snake if people don’t know you are one. But sooner or later, they will figure it out. And, once they have, it’s over. You can never change their minds. Also, I’ve noticed that it isn’t much fun being a snake. There’s a reason why caring people with integrity, loyalty and honesty succeed. To succeed, any organisation, whether business or any other kind, must have teamwork. And real

teamwork takes people who trust one another and care about one another.

In short, you have to be trustworthy. If everybody's just in it for personal fame or fortune, I guarantee you that the organisation will be the loser. Over the course of history, mercenaries have never won a war. You've got to believe. And what is true of organisational behaviour and success is equally true of societies as a whole. Moral decline precedes economic and social decline.

A society of snakes can't function over the long haul, because people are not meant to be selfish, solitary units. To survive and flourish, people need and must rely on each other. Snakes can't do that. And we know that a society of snakes certainly is no fun."

Thus if you are a snake as aptly put by my mentor or you have a bad character, then listen to Thiruvalluvar and Indian sage who observed that, "it is foolish to think that the clothes (we wear) can hide your indecency if you have a bigger flaw—bad character."

Mr Chairman and Distinguish Participants:

I am not supposing for a minute that having a good character comes easy. Not at all. Henry David Thoreau once said that, "you cannot dream yourself into a character, you must hammer and forge yourself one." Indeed as Helen Keller said, character cannot be developed in ease and quiet. Building a good character is hardwork, if it was that easy, everyone of us will have a good character. It is about standing up for what is right, it is about the testing of your integrity. One of the great sons of this land, the late great Chinua Achebe once

said that, “one of the truest tests of integrity is its blunt refusal to be compromised.” It speaks to the kind of character a person has. Ladies and Gentlemen, can you be easily compromised? Ladies and gentlemen, at the end of the day, according to Bruce Lee, “Knowledge will give you power but character respect.”

Mr Chairman and Distinguish Participants:

What are the traits of a good character? I will contend that to build a good character, you must first have integrity, as Chinua Achebe has observed about integrity, it is the ability of been truthful and can be trusted. It is about a person whose stand on issues do not change with the weather or time of the day. The second is loyalty. A loyal person is a person who will stand by you through thick and thin. Not the fair-weather kind. A loyal person is one who will not gossip behind your back or in your absence. The other trait is honesty. Ladies and gentlemen, what will most of us do when the lights go out, so to speak? We say in the good old days, “my word is my bond.” The Yorubas call such an honest person, *Omoluwabi*—a person of character, a person of honour. How many of us can say we are *Omoluwabis*? Another trait is humility, of being humble, understanding and empathetic. Another trait I will like to mention here is a person who stands for justice that is, respecting the rights of others. Such a person has the courage to stand up against any moral indignation in the face of injustice. Finally, a person of good character must have fortitude. It is the ability to do what is right in the face of danger and difficulty. It is choosing the harder right than the easy wrong.

So how does character feature in skills development? Skills development is about each and everyone of us developing ourselves or acquiring skills sets to add value to ourselves or the organisation we are working for. First a caveat, “skills development is hard work.” It requires discipline and dedication to the acquisition of the said skill; this requires a determined character. Second skills development requires Life-Long-Learning. You must discipline yourself that you will keep on learning until the last days of your life. Third, skills development requires the following of the 70-20-10 rule. The rule states that, 70% of your skills development should be on the job or based on, on the job activities (action learning), 20% is based on your interaction with people, and 10% based on training. Finally, skills development requires a person who is committed to self-improvement. This requires a disciplined character.

Mr Chairman and Distinguish Participants:

Unfortunately, that is the challenge we face in Africa. We all know that enhancing our skills will help us contribute to national development and competitiveness; but few of us are willing to do so. We are more concerned with “paper qualifications” even if we learn nothing in the process of acquiring such a paper qualification. We could care less. We want good jobs and the titles and trappings that come with those positions but few amongst us are willing to work hard to achieve this. It speaks to the content of our character.

As Africans, many of us refuse to develop our skills but when someone speaks to us disparagingly, or look down on us, we become angry or offended. We like on the job promotions but when we are sent to undertake some courses to develop

our skill-sets before we are promoted, most of us do not take it serious. Is there any wonder that we are still underdeveloped? On some of the projects undertaken in Africa, we do not have the skills-set to insist Africans should be employed to worked on those projects instead, foreigners are employed. We have engineers who only know the theoretical aspect of that. We cannot develop Africa with this kind of character and mentality.

Going forward, if we really want our continent to develop, we need to rededicate ourselves to enhancing our skills to help us add value to our respective organisations and subsequently our respective countries. Our organisations on the continent in both the private and public sectors should provide the necessary resources to enable our people develop and enhance their skills to contribute to the country's development. Government policy must give employers subsidies for training their employees. This is nothing knew, many countries in Asia are doing so. Until we as a people change our character and attitude as it pertains to acquiring new skills, then the development of our continent will be long delayed. Waiting for some other people to develop our continent for us will be like “**waiting for Godot**”—he will not come.

Mr Chairman and Distinguish Participants:

When you break into your sessions to look at this issue in detail through your paper presentations, let's make sure that we leave here by learning something new from each other and take this new skill back to “brighten the corner where we come from.” Let your character determine your attitude and your attitude will determine your altitude in life and in all

that you do. When the conference is over and we are leaving to go back to our respective stations, I will like to leave you with an Irish Blessing, even though I am not an Irish, I think its speaks to the African tradition:

“May the roads rise to meet you,

May the winds always be at your back,

May the sun shine warm upon your face,

The rains fall softly upon your fields,

And until we meet again,

May God hold you in the hollow of his hand.

Thank you very much.