

TAAKA AWORI

# Chapter One

## THE ROAD TO LEADERSHIP

*Not everyone realises that by not choosing, life chooses for you, and that is never the ideal outcome. Those who become great are deliberately creating their life paths as opposed to allowing life to happen to them.*

—Rapelang Rabana, Founder, Rekindle Learning

## LEADERSHIP IN AFRICA

I AM OBSESSED with leadership. Leadership pops up in my mind numerous times throughout the day. It is the lens through which I look at anything, whether that be a nation, an organisation, a business, a community, or a family. I find myself constantly asking, “What type of leadership does this group of people have, and how does this form of leadership determine their success or failure?”

I am beginning this book of untold stories with my story because it explains my particular ethos and stance toward leadership. Who I am, the choices I have made, the experiences I have had, and my family have all influenced my particular approach to leadership. I have a specific message to share with the world about leadership in Africa, and who I am as a person is part of that message. Hence, I begin with my story — my road to leadership.

In high school in the United States, my passion was human rights. I read about Steve Biko, and I became enraged by the constructive engagement response of the U.S. at that time. There and then, I knew immediately that I wanted to be a human rights lawyer. When I got into Harvard College, I was ecstatic. However, when the time to choose my major came, I was disappointed to learn that law was only something you studied post-grad. I don't

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know how I missed that when applying to colleges. In place of law, I majored in government — Harvard's unique way of saying political science. I loved this because it gave me insight into the context of human rights abuse. I went to law school at Columbia and joined the Human Rights Law Review.

You would have thought that, after law school, I would have finally done what I wanted to do and become a human rights lawyer, but no. Let's just say that became a "dream deferred" that "festered like a sore," as Langston Hughes stated in his poem. The truth is, I had school loans to repay. I knew there was no way I could pay off dollar loans with Ugandan shillings, doing human rights work back home, so, I girded my loins and took a job at a corporate law firm.

If you were to ask me how three years at the law firm went, I would say, "It was the best of times, and it was the worst of times," as stated by Charles Dickens.

Let me start with the worst: long hours, soulless work, endless pressure to prove oneself while the dream deferred kept festering like a sore. I yearned to be back in Uganda to make a difference. As for the best of times: brilliant senior partners who taught me how to think critically, advocate effectively, and write concisely; fellow associates who evolved into life-long friends, and one of the most amazing women, Harriet Jones, who was the

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legal secretary assigned to support me, but fortunately, knew that her real role in my life was to be my spiritual mentor. She firmly guided me back to my dream deferred and was the first person to introduce me to the concept of “your thoughts determine your reality.” With her support, I was able to focus on paying back my loans, and buying a one-way ticket home to Uganda, where I began work for a human rights NGO. I had finally realised my dream.

My passion for human rights eventually evolved into one for women’s rights and then social development. Fortunately, while in Uganda, I found different jobs that enabled me to express this passion. But looking back, the common thread in all these passions was a love for this continent and a strong desire to have a positive impact. I see now that the day I left the law firm, I gave up on having a career. Instead, I chose a vocation. I chose to follow my calling, and that calling was about making a difference.

Those who knew my parents would not be surprised to hear that. Both of them dedicated their lives to making Africa a better place. My late father was an outspoken member of the Parliament who served in the Cabinet and vied for the Presidency in Uganda. My mother rose to very senior levels of the United Nations, eventually serving as the Under-Secretary-General and Director for the Africa Bureau for UNDP before retiring.

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When we were children and wanted to sleep in during the holidays, my mother would scold us, saying, “How will Africa progress if you are still sleeping at eleven o’clock?” At that time, I thought, “What does Africa’s progress have to do with me? I am only nine years old.” But what became ingrained in my siblings and I was that we had a duty to make Africa a better place.

Now, you may be wondering, after my long meandering story, when did my passion for leadership kick in?

It started on a hot and balmy Accra morning; one of those mornings where it felt like 86 degrees Fahrenheit with 100% humidity. It was also the morning when I realised I was above my head. I had just been appointed as the Country Director of ActionAid, Ghana. I was thinking about my day ahead, when it dawned on me that I had been hired for skills not needed in that line of work. I had been hired because I was good at fundraising and policy analysis, and could advise a government on inclusive social policies. However, what was needed at that moment were leadership skills.

When I joined the organisation, some staff were not sure I was the right person for the job. They thought I was too young and not sufficiently experienced. I knew I had to win them over, but how? I looked at the organisational culture and knew it was oppressive and domineering for

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a junior staff, and it needed to change, but how? I also noticed that the structure was too hierarchical and needed to change, but again, how? So, in other words, I needed to gain their trust and drive change while simultaneously delivering results.

In those early days, the other thing that struck me in country programmes across the organisation was what made them thrive (defined as having impactful programmes, happy staff, and sufficient resources). This was one thing: strong leadership. It was then that I started realising just how much everything rests on good leadership.

I knew then that the key to turning ActionAid Ghana around was to become a better leader. And to become a better leader, I had to become a better person. I had to change myself to change my organisation. I had to get better for my organisation to get better.

With the help of an amazing coach, Gavin Andersson, who I credit for inspiring me to become a coach, I eventually learned that becoming a better leader was not just about reading a couple of books. Instead, being a great leader meant working on my inner self so I could become the change I wanted to see.

From that moment, I started to work on my leadership skills. I realised that the period of strengthening my

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leadership skills was not just about focusing on the organisation and people I was leading, but it was also about focusing on what was going on inside me. Yes, there were some skills that I had to strengthen, such as financial management, but the real leadership competencies I had to develop were strengthening who I was as a person.

For example, I had to make peace with making decisions that could cause others to dislike me. This meant that I had to get over the constant desire to be liked. This was a huge thing because I had grown into a people pleaser, doing everything to avoid people disliking me.

It meant taking a hard look at myself. After years of running away from myself, I finally had to meet Taaka. I had to finally stop fighting Taaka. This is where my leadership journey began.

I learned then that the source of my influence could not be limited to formal authority, i.e., the power to make people do things. The source of my influence had to be who I was as a person. I had to lead by example so that people would follow, not because they had to, but because they wanted to.

As I grew in this new understanding of leadership, I realised that if I needed this knowledge, there was a very good chance that other leaders also needed it. And it was then that the idea of Busara Africa – a firm that would later

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become dedicated to nurturing and building strong leadership in Africa – was born.

Ultimately, my leadership journey has been shaped by two key factors: my willingness to do the inner work to become a better person and my desire to serve and positively impact Africa.