

AFRO-OPTIMISM UNLEASHED

SCALING AFRICAN EXCELLENCE TO THE GLOBAL STAGE

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R^ethink

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For Mommy, Grace Ibilola Adewumi nee Sangodeyi.

My journey of resilience began with you.

Contents

Foreword	1
Introduction	7
PART ONE Becoming an Afro-Optimist	13
1 Discovering Afro-Optimism	15
How I became an Afro-optimist	16
Why West is <i>not</i> (always) best	18
Identifying your inner Afro-optimist	21
Overcoming impostor syndrome	26
Embracing your awesomeness	31
Final thoughts	34
2 Building A Global Mindset	35
Principle 1: Embrace the digital revolution	36
Principle 2: Build a pan-African powerhouse	37
Principle 3: Leave a legacy that lasts	39
Developing a global vision and strategy	40
Leveraging global insights for local impact	44
Building a strong online presence and brand	49

Embracing lifelong learning	54
Final thoughts	57
PART TWO Building African Excellence	59
3 Defining African Excellence	61
Turning your ONE Thing into a business	63
Attracting the dream client for your ONE Thing	68
Leveraging the excellence of the diaspora	70
Building strategic and sustainable excellence	75
Final thoughts	79
4 S – Strategize Your Vision	81
Crafting your strategic blueprint	81
Executing your strategic plan	88
Adapting and thriving	94
Final thoughts	97
5 C – Champion Excellence	99
People as the cornerstone of African excellence	99
The African talent tightrope	101
Finding your tribe	102
Building a successful team	105
Investing in the future	112
Final thoughts	117
6 A – Accelerate Exceptional Leadership	119
Driving leadership from the top	120

Building trust in your organization	125
Leading across borders	131
Final thoughts	137
7 L – Leverage Governance For Sustainable Growth	139
Navigating your regulatory landscape	140
Regulations as allies, not obstacles	145
Building governance for growth	148
Final thoughts	153
8 E – Expand Your Impact Via Growth Capital	155
Introducing Westwood Investment Consultancy Services	156
Structuring your business for growth	157
Fueling your expansion	165
Expanding your reach	173
Final thoughts	175
PART THREE Collaborating for Global Impact	179
9 Thriving In Uncertain Times	181
Leadership lessons from the trenches	185
Plan B: The unexpected savior	191
Final thoughts	197
10 Partnering for a Thriving Africa	199
Shared value: A strategic approach to scaling growth in Africa	200
The perfect fit for Africa	202

Collaborating to elevate	206
Harnessing technology for global collaboration	211
Final thoughts	213
Conclusion: You've Got This!	215
Paying it forward	218
Leaving our mark	220
References	225
Further Reading	231
Acknowledgments	237
The Author	241

Foreword

Afro-optimism is alive and well in Africa, and it's the driving force behind the continent's potential for greatness. During the eight years that I worked across all regions of Africa, including seven years as regional CEO for Allianz and serving on nine African boards, I witnessed firsthand the incredible talent and opportunities that abound in this region.

Adeolu Adewumi-Zer embodies the spirit of Afro-optimism in a very personal way in her book. I first met Adeolu near the end of 2015, while she was leading strategy for a multinational in Turkey. Despite being heavily pregnant with her second child, she had both an unwavering belief in Africa and an infectious enthusiasm that were incredibly inspiring. Obviously, I asked her to join our team, and we worked together for half a decade across a dozen African markets. Adeolu's

AFRO-OPTIMISM UNLEASHED

unique and stylish (dress reference fully intended!) blend of global experience, multicultural exposure, and deeply African roots make her distinctively qualified to share her insights on building successful businesses on the continent.

Afro-Optimism Unleashed is a unique and invaluable guide for African business leaders aspiring to achieve global excellence. Drawing on her extensive experience building successful businesses across the continent, Adeolu offers practical insights and actionable strategies that can help you navigate the challenges and opportunities of the African business landscape. There are very few, if any, such books that are for Africans by an African and that are additionally based on such genuine personal experience – real and practical, not just theory.

Africa is a continent of immense potential, with a diverse range of markets and opportunities. While each of its fifty-four countries has its own unique story, the majority offer favorable conditions for business growth, including reasonable governance and institutions. As Adeolu and I together have observed, reliable and fair judicial systems are essential for creating a stable and predictable business environment.

African talent is abundant, but it often lacks international exposure and adequate funding. *Afro-Optimism Unleashed* offers practical guidance on overcoming these challenges, including strategies for gaining global

FOREWORD

experience and accessing capital. Adeolu provides an amusing anecdote that reveals African talent's lack of exposure, in which everybody thinks the fish from their country is the best. However, as Adeolu points out, African professionals who have had the opportunity to work in international settings often thrive, demonstrating their ability to operate at the highest standards while maintaining their strong cultural identity.

I've had the privilege of working with many talented African professionals who have gone on to achieve great success in global organizations. Adeolu's ability to identify and nurture such talent is a testament to her expertise on and commitment to African excellence. In fact, one of the elements that makes Adeolu a strong thought leader is the fact that many young Kenyans, Senegalese, Ivorians, Nigerians, Ghanaians, and others who have worked with and for her have gone on to become CEOs, CFOs, and COOs for large multinationals.

The pace of change in Africa is truly remarkable. On every trip I take to cities like Dakar, Casablanca, Abidjan, Accra, Lagos, Kigali, or Nairobi, I witness new factories, roads, restaurants, and other developments springing up. Despite the challenges, Africa is undeniably on the move. The continent's growing middle class is creating a vibrant market for goods and services, fueling further growth and development. Sometimes there are setbacks, and inevitably it's one step back for every three steps forward, but Africa keeps moving.

AFRO-OPTIMISM UNLEASHED

This perception mismatch is also a secret success lever, as it allows local entrepreneurs and business leaders to build thriving local businesses, then pan-African businesses with very few global competitors, a great basis from which to go global thereafter.

Adeolu skillfully weaves her decades of experience into a straightforward SCALE framework, providing a practical guide for African entrepreneurs. *Strategizing Your Vision* involves defining a clear and compelling purpose for your business that aligns with African realities and can be scaled. *Championing Excellence* emphasizes the importance of finding and developing top African talent to drive innovation and performance. *Accelerating Leadership* concerns tools and strategies for ensuring that you and your leadership team are equipped to navigate the challenges and opportunities of the African business landscape. *Leveraging Governance* highlights the critical role of trust and accountability in building a successful and sustainable business. Finally, *Expanding with Capital* involves accessing the funding needed to scale your business and achieve your goals. By following this framework, African entrepreneurs can unlock the continent's vast potential and create lasting value.

Capturing Adeolu's wisdom and passion and drawing on her extensive experience and insights, this book provides a roadmap for aspiring African leaders to achieve global impact. Its message is not just for African business leaders, however; anyone interested in global

FOREWORD

development or entrepreneurship will find valuable lessons and inspiration in these pages.

More than just a book, *Afro-Optimism Unleashed* is a call to action. Adeolu challenges African leaders to take pride in their heritage, strive for global relevance, and harness the continent's unique strengths to create lasting change. By following the practical strategies outlined in this book, you can unlock your potential, build a thriving business, and contribute to Africa's bright future.

Coenraad Vrolijk

Chief Executive Officer and Co-founder,
CarbonPool (Switzerland)

Introduction

I have always been ambitious. Growing up as the eldest child in an educated Nigerian family, just a stone's throw away from the campus of one of the largest research universities in the USA, if not the globe, and with one of its top professors as a father, I was never troubled by the silly notion that girls aren't supposed to be ambitious. In fact, it was likely this trait that connected me even further with my father. As a Nigerian, particularly as the firstborn, I was meant to be the best. Long before I ever heard the expression *Naija no dey carry last* (Nigerians never give up), I knew what was expected of me: good grades above sports (and perhaps even church). And good grades meant nothing less than an A. How many times had I heard my dad's story about the time he came home with a mark of 99%, and his own farmer father (who had never even made it to secondary school) asked him, "But where is that 1%?"

AFRO-OPTIMISM UNLEASHED

So believe me when I say that I know what it means to be ambitious, to be primed from birth to be number one, to have a relentless pursuit of excellence become the cornerstone of your life. It doesn't only come from ego, although you can be allowed a glow of pride at your success; rather, it comes from not knowing any other way and not wanting to let down parents who have sacrificed so much. It also comes from knowing that it is up to you to pay this sacrifice forward and to dream big, not just for yourself, but for the next generation – for whom you must push Africa and Africans to finally realize our potential.

If you're an ambitious African like me, then this book is for you. If you have always pushed yourself to be number one, perhaps even going so far as to achieve that seeming pinnacle of business success – the title of CEO – then welcome. However, while we Africans are known for our ambition, we're also renowned for our resilience. To truly excel on this continent, we must fully leverage both qualities.

Because with all my ambition, as a global Nigerian – a child of the African diaspora, if you will – I've also had to be resilient. Born in the homeland but shifted elsewhere at the age of three, I had to learn to navigate diverse cultures and economies from a very young age, until I found myself eight years and multiple moves later surrounded by cows... and books. But I knew that one day I would return home, and so I proceeded to make building the new Africa my life's mission.

INTRODUCTION

The journey home took me much longer than I could have anticipated, from the skyscrapers of the windy city of Chicago, to the “*Altbau*” (historic buildings) of Munich. A hop, skip, and jump took me to Istanbul (the historic city of Constantinople), before I found myself, a mere seventeen years into my career, on my first business flight to Nairobi. So today, with a quarter-century of experience under my heels – as an international consultant, a global executive, a strategic investor who has poured both passion and capital (a mere half-billion euros’ worth!) into the heart of Africa, a CEO who has been tasked with managing one of those investments in one of the most challenging business environments in the world in the midst of one of the most tumultuous times in modern history – my story has been one of bridging worlds and fostering growth. One of connection, rather than of competition. One showcasing the collaborative excellence and spirit of African innovation that I continue to bring to the global stage. I’ve witnessed firsthand the potential of African markets. I’ve invested in promising ventures, led successful teams, and survived countless hurdles. My story is one of ambition, perseverance, and resilience, plus a deep-rooted belief in Africa’s ability to thrive on the global stage.

But being a CEO sucks. Let’s just put that out there. Oh, there’s the glamour, the privilege, sometimes the money, and all that’s great. But whether you head up a large conglomerate or lead a promising young entity, you’re faced with sleepless nights spent pondering why

AFRO-OPTIMISM UNLEASHED

you can't get your business to grow. There's the weight of responsibility for all those families and all those livelihoods that are relying on you for security and sustainability. There's the daunting task of executing a strategy that aligns with your purpose and your vision, while dealing with shareholders who are quickly losing patience and just want to see the promised return on their money. There's the intricate dance of navigating proper corporate governance in a market where that can be seen as a hindrance rather than a strength. So, if that's your experience, I see you. I see you, tirelessly searching for that perfect team member who can share the load. I see you, chasing the ever-elusive capital that seems just out of reach. I see you, trying to transform an organization while avoiding a pivot that may just jeopardize everything that you've built. And I see you, dealing with international investors who think they understand the local context better than you, who live in it every day. I understand these challenges firsthand, and this book is my commitment to you, to accompany you into the uncertainty, into the loneliness, and into the hopelessness of the CEO life, and to steer you along a path of excellence and growth.

I will walk with you to ensure that you not just survive but thrive in the competitive landscape of business in Africa. I will provide you with my insights and experiences, so that you can also learn how to infuse global best practices within your own local insights, creating a sustainable business that stands out to investors. I will guide you through the process of building a team

INTRODUCTION

that shares your vision and has the skills to propel your company forward. I will walk you through the very strategies that help my clients attract talent that doesn't just fill a role but propels their company forward. Clients who have worked with me, from CEOs of startups to leaders of legacy institutions, have achieved sustainable business practices, secured funding, and positioned themselves for global competitiveness. Together, we will chart a course toward a future where your African organization is not just a local success story, but a global phenomenon.

Through this book, we will embark on a transformative journey together, one that will take your business from its current state to become a shining testament to African excellence. Leveraging over two decades of firsthand experience advising businesses across Africa, Asia, Europe, and North America, I have developed a clear, actionable roadmap for scaling your African business. My SCALE framework is the culmination of these experiences and insights, breaking down the complex process into manageable steps and ensuring you have the tools and knowledge to achieve your goals. As a global citizen with deep roots in Africa, I bring a unique perspective on the challenges and opportunities facing African entrepreneurs. A cornerstone of my approach is my ability to bridge the gap between Western business practices and African realities to create solutions that can be leveraged globally. We'll start by *Strategizing*, crafting a vision that's not just grand but sustainable. Then, we'll move into *Championing* a team that's not just

AFRO-OPTIMISM UNLEASHED

competent but delivers excellence in its every endeavor. As we *Accelerate*, you'll learn to lead with impact, making decisions that resonate with your team and your market. *Leveraging* governance will be our next step, ensuring that your growth is not just rapid but also sustainable. Finally, we'll tackle *Expansion*, securing the growth capital that will take your business beyond borders and into the annals of African success.

I'm here to support you every step of the way. Let's work together to overcome hurdles and achieve extraordinary results. Together, we'll build a thriving business that leaves a lasting impact. This, indeed, is how we will SCALE your African excellence to the global stage.

Are you ready to embark on this transformative journey together?

PART ONE
BECOMING AN
AFRO-OPTIMIST

ONE

Discovering Afro-Optimism

I don't remember when I first stumbled across the term *Afro-optimism*. I just know that when I did, it immediately resonated. I had longed for my continent of birth for as long as I could remember and jumped at every chance to learn and understand more about it. At first my focus was only on my birth country, as I promised my parents and anyone who would listen that I was going back to Nigeria. Even while I dated during college, practically the first thing I told the hapless guys once we started to get to know each other was about this dream I had about going back home. But what did I know? I was taken from my homeland at the tender age of three and had been back only twice.

How I became an Afro-optimist

I grew up in my mini-Africa in the middle of nowhere, USA. Although there were corn fields all around and my friends talked about hunting season just as easily as they talked about which college they would attend, thankfully, I grew up in a college town with a college professor for a dad. That meant that there was a constant parade of students – more specifically, international students – running through my home. They all seemed quite old at the time, but now, having met some of those same students again in adulthood, I realize that they weren't that much older than teenagers. And, although many of them were, of course, Nigerian, some even Yoruba like us, many more of them were not. That was my introduction to the beautiful multiculturalism of our world, backdropped against the sameness of "white America."

Then I got into college myself, where, in a happy happenstance, I was awarded a minority scholarship in addition to the honors scholarship that was expected of me as the ambitious, straight-A child of educated immigrant parents (remember, *Naija no dey carry last!*). This minority scholarship drew me into another world, filled with other kids, most of whom, like me, were also the children of immigrants, many from the Caribbean. They were Black like me, with skin like mine and hair like my own, but from an entirely different culture, upbringing, and way of thinking. And so my worldview evolved, expanding to include my new Black

DISCOVERING AFRO-OPTIMISM

American and Caribbean friends with their parties, the Asian kids from the one Asian fraternity on campus, and the Japanese kids I met while studying abroad in Japan, before I finally found my way back to the infamous African Students Club, where we Africans all gathered. Here I met my very first Eritrean; discovered how tall the Sudanese are; observed how much the boys fawned over the Ethiopian women. We were our very own melting pot, and I loved it.

I had to leave this multicultural bubble at some point, but by then it was too late – I had been bitten even harder by the Africa bug. So, when I told the senior executive at the final interview for my first consulting job that I would be opening a subsidiary in Nigeria, I meant it with every fiber of my being. Then came the challenge: I was convinced that the only way to make that happen was to get out of the USA. It's tough to open a Nigerian office stuck in another country, and as we didn't yet have any locations in Africa at all, where could I go from here? I started raising my hand for any and every international opportunity, only to have my application rejected first in Mexico and then in Brazil. Turning my eyes to Europe, I then tried for roles in both London and Zurich and failed to win either of them. However, a project with European colleagues finally had them knocking on my door for a spot in Paris, which I was considering, until Munich popped up with an unexpected offer. So, after a couple of chats on the phone, a quick look-see trip to the office, some painless negotiations, and one seamless immigration process, I

AFRO-OPTIMISM UNLEASHED

was on a business-class flight to Germany, kicking off the first step of my nine-year journey – perhaps, more accurately, my thirty-seven-year journey – back to Africa. And a new Afro-optimist was born.

Why West is not (always) best

You may be wondering, *Why Africa?* I'd somehow "escaped," had the privilege of Western schooling, and even managed to get a nice gig in nice, safe, lovely Munich, where expats go to die. Why would I leave all that to come back to a continent filled with hardship and poverty?

I still clearly recall the face of my German head of human resources (HR) when I told him that I would be taking only twelve weeks of parental leave after the birth of my first child. He was too polite, or perhaps liked me too much, to put into words the thoughts running through his head. However, seven-and-a-half years of life in Germany, numerous books about German culture, and endless questions posed to my German colleagues meant I was well aware of the attitudes many Germans still had about the role of women, spectacularly encapsulated by the concept of *Kinder, Küche, Kirche*, or *kids, kitchen, church*. For a country with such a powerful female role model at the top, Angela Merkel (this was back in 2013), it was sometimes depressing for me to see how backward the German ideas of a woman's role in the workplace

DISCOVERING AFRO-OPTIMISM

could be, and how many limitations were placed on women in German society. I never understood how such well-educated and traveled people – it seemed like almost everyone I worked with had a doctorate, including the aforementioned Angela Merkel – couldn't understand how a system that allowed, and actually encouraged, women to remain home for three years after each birth may not be amenable to supporting a woman's ascent up the career ladder if she so choose.

However, having grown up in the USA, which unfortunately went too far in the other direction, with no mandatory parental leave and most new mothers being expected to take off only three months, I was quite certain that I could make this work. Thankfully, I had the fortune of working with a great boss who not only pushed me to be the best I could be, but who, although childless himself, understood the importance of family. It was our strong communication and my laying out a plan to continue to push his grand plans for the organization that gave me the leeway and flexibility to focus on my baby for those first twelve weeks, then find the best hybrid working solution for us – and this all long before the days of a global pandemic that would make hybrid and even remote working the norm. However, I was a former consultant and a disciplined and ambitious Nigerian, and I knew that I could make it work.

So I would jump up early in the morning, nurse the baby before heading out for my morning run, carefully shower and dress downstairs in our duplex apartment,

AFRO-OPTIMISM UNLEASHED

so that I wouldn't wake the baby, who was sound asleep again upstairs, and rush out the door to make it into the office by 7am. Around 10am, I would check, double-check, and sometimes triple-check that I had locked both doors to my office, pull out my breast pump, and spend about thirty minutes emptying both breasts into those precious milk bags. Then I would rush home around midday, so that my husband, then partner, could rush out the door to his own business selling up-market window dressings. I would put the baby down for a nap around 3pm, and our weekly cleaner, who had graduated to daily cleaner and nanny with the advent of the baby, would arrive around 4pm after her full-time job, to give me a couple of hours of peace to take a few meetings without baby in tow. Bath and bedtime by 7pm allowed me another couple of hours, and then I was up the next morning at 5am to do the same.

It was exhausting for both of us, and there were moments when my partner would hurl his phone at the wall in exasperation, declaring that he couldn't take this pace another day. Thankfully, fourteen months into this nerve-racking schedule, we moved to Turkey, where we could easily afford a full-time, live-in nanny, giving us the luxury of even managing a second child. And then finally – finally – we moved back to Africa, to Kenya, to be specific, where we could hire an entire support system to help us manage work and family, with a housekeeper, a nanny, a driver, and even a gardener to take care of the grounds surrounding our

DISCOVERING AFRO-OPTIMISM

two-floor, 400-square-meter, modern country home. And, for the first time since I had become a parent, I could exhale and really start climbing even further up that corporate ladder.

So when, during a recent one-month visit to the USA, people simply assumed that I would be coming back, the idea screamed to me, *No. No*, I would not fall into the trap of the standard dual-income family setup in the West, where you need both salaries to even afford some semblance of sanity as a working parent, but then are driven to insanity by the constant daily treadmill of “work-life balance.” *No*, I would not go back to a society that would not value my two half-Nigerian, half-Turkish boys with four passports between them as much as they valued their own children. *No*, I would not go back to a society where I couldn’t claim my heritage quite as loudly as I could on my own continent. With my bright colors, my colorful prints, my Afro-hair. *No*, the West is *not* always best, and every additional day I remain on my continent helps me to see that even more clearly.

Identifying your inner Afro-optimist

OK, so escaping to the West is perhaps not the best, but living here isn’t easy either. How do we go about finding optimism amid difficult situations? If you’re of a certain age and grew up in the USA, you couldn’t have gone without seeing *Coming to America* at least

AFRO-OPTIMISM UNLEASHED

once. This movie perhaps transformed Eddie Murphy from a lowly comedian to a movie star, similar to how *Bad Boys* catapulted Will Smith and *Bridesmaids* transformed Melissa McCarthy. A quite popular movie in the 1990s, *Coming to America* always made my eyes roll, as it chronicled the tale of some made-up prince from a made-up country in Africa with an even more ridiculous made-up accent! It seemed really the epitome of what Black Americans thought or hoped Africa was like. However, as much as I winced every time I watched the movie, one thing I had to admit was that all the fake opulence and privilege that the prince and his entourage showcased was much better than the commercials that continually rolled during that same time, showing “starving Ethiopian kids” who just needed \$1 from America to save them. Welcome to my life as an African in the USA in the 1990s. Yet, throughout all the misconceptions I saw on television about the continent of my birth, all the jokes my “friends” made about Africans living in trees, despite the way I knew Blacks were treated in the USA, I never lost my pride as an African, and more specifically, as a Nigerian. While I stumbled across the term “Afro-optimism” much, much later, I knew from the very first day my family “came to America” that there would also be a “day of return” for me, when I would finally find myself back on the soil where I belonged.

So, what exactly is Afro-optimism? The concept emerged in the late 2010s to emphasize the positivity, progress, and celebration of our African identity and

DISCOVERING AFRO-OPTIMISM

our achievements. It stands in contrast to the usual cynicism and negative bias that often leads individuals of African descent to have a pessimistic outlook on our future. Afro-optimism focuses on highlighting Africa's modernity, inspiring action, and showcasing our continent's potential for leadership and innovation. It aims to counter negative stereotypes and perceptions about Africa by promoting a more positive and empowering narrative that recognizes our continent's rich history, resources, and contributions to global development.

Afro-optimism isn't just a buzzword; it's a mindset, a movement, a mandate. It's about flipping the script on Africa's story, swapping tales of despair for dreams of dominance. We're not just shaking off the shackles of the past; we're forging a future where Africa leads, not follows. We're highlighting Africa's modernity, progress, and unique culture, showcasing the continent's advancements in various sectors like science, technology, the arts, and peacebuilding. Afro-optimism means celebrating our uniqueness, our resilience, our innovation. It's about showcasing our tech hubs, our booming creative industries, and our groundbreaking research. It's about telling the world that Africa is not a monolith of poverty, but a diverse continent brimming with potential.

But it's more than just talk. Afro-optimism is about action. It's about backing and investing in our own people and supporting our own businesses. It's about demanding excellence, holding leaders accountable,

AFRO-OPTIMISM UNLEASHED

and fostering a culture of innovation by celebrating outstanding achievements and leadership in Africa, encouraging others to act by serving humanity and making a positive impact on society. Most importantly, Afro-optimism is about believing in ourselves. It's about knowing that we have what it takes to compete on the global stage and win. It's about refusing to be defined by stereotypes and limitations. It's about daring to dream big and working tirelessly to make those dreams a reality, celebrating "Africanness," or African solutions, uniqueness, and progress.

Afro-optimism isn't just a feel-good slogan, though; it's the rocket fuel igniting Africa's entrepreneurial spirit. By celebrating our successes, we inspire a new generation of go-getters. By believing in our potential, we create a magnetic force that draws investment and talent. By showcasing our innovation, we challenge stereotypes and build a platform for our entrepreneurs to shine. Afro-optimism is even more than a mindset; it's a movement that's connecting the continent and its diaspora, creating a powerful ecosystem for growth.

Now, while Afro-optimism emphasizes positivity, progress, and the celebration of African identity and achievements, it also acknowledges our continent's challenges and complexities. Afro-optimism does not ignore the negative aspects of Africa's reality. It simply aims to provide a more balanced and empowering narrative that recognizes both the challenges and

DISCOVERING AFRO-OPTIMISM

the potential for progress while inspiring action and celebrating achievements. In short, Afro-optimism embraces the complexities of the African experience.

While I'm not a psychologist, it's obvious to me how my own brand of Afro-optimism has informed my outlook in life. I consider myself a realistic optimist, and the African twist has resulted in maintaining a consistently positive outlook on Africa's future and our own massive potential for success. It focuses my outlook on our continent's progress, our innovation, and our achievements, and really sets the frame for my sense of hope and optimism even with, and despite, much evidence to the contrary. My Afro-optimism, combined with my knowledge of the West, pushes me to confront negative stereotypes, tackle challenges head-on, and continue working toward building a better future, if not for myself, then for the two little global Africans following in my footsteps. When people wonder where my self-assurance comes from, I know that it's more than the result of the experiences I had before I reached my forties, or even as I now approach my fifties; it's also a complete belief in my capabilities and potential for growth and development, especially as an African.

So how do you go about finding optimism amid your own situation? You tap into your own inner Afro-optimist and leverage it as a force for change. Afro-optimists are the fuel that will propel Africa forward, and it's up to each of us to contribute to this movement.

Overcoming impostor syndrome

While optimism and resilience are key to our success, it's essential to acknowledge the challenges that come with this journey. Despite the remarkable achievements of African leaders and entrepreneurs, many of us still grapple with feelings of inadequacy. This phenomenon, often referred to as *impostor syndrome*, is particularly prevalent in a context marked by unique pressures and expectations. Impostor syndrome is a condition broadly summarized as a fear you will be found out to not be as good as others think you are.

The relief is that you're not alone. A recent study (Nicols, 2021) found the following:

- 65% of professionals surveyed recognized the symptoms of impostor syndrome, but did not know the term.
- 53% of professional women between twenty-five and thirty-four reported that they currently experienced impostor syndrome, and 75% of executive women reported having experienced it in the past.
- However, less than 5% of employers are doing anything to address this issue with their staff.

The term *impostor phenomenon* was coined after a 1978 study that looked at the experiences of high-achieving women (Clance and Imes, 1978). Today, experts

DISCOVERING AFRO-OPTIMISM

estimate that approximately three in five individuals have experienced feelings of impostor syndrome. So, you can see that impostor syndrome is rather common, impacts both men and women, and many (including employers themselves) still feel it is taboo to discuss it.

Sometimes people ask me whether I have ever encountered impostor syndrome myself. Hmm...have I ever felt that maybe I'm not good enough? That I don't belong? That soon, somebody, somewhere, will catch me out? I must think long and hard when I encounter that question, because decades of building up my expertise and collecting achievements have told me what I need to know. And, as a mathematician who tends more to the analytical side, I simply allow the facts to speak for themselves.

But the reality is that I have often been the only one in the room. Whether it was the only woman, the only person of color, the only African, the only person with an American accent, the youngest, now the oldest... I'm used to being different – too many times, obviously different. So how do I manage? I can't change who I am; all I can do is to lean into that difference and make sure that my difference makes me memorable. My difference often allows me to transform “the only” into “the expert.”

Here are five ways you can channel your inner Afro-optimist and leverage your unique background and experiences as strengths, rather than sources of insecurity:

AFRO-OPTIMISM UNLEASHED

1. **Identify and appreciate your unique talents:**

Do you know that feeling when you're in your zone, completely absorbed in what you're doing? That's your inner Afro-optimist shining through. It's helpful to recognize the magic within you, the stuff that sets you apart. Maybe it's how you can whip up a killer presentation at the last minute, or the way you effortlessly connect with people from all walks of life. Trust me, we all have these superpowers; it's just about discovering them.

2. **Develop your talents further:** You've got the spark; now it's time to fan the flames. Don't just sit on your talent; nurture it, feed it, watch it grow. Whether it's attending coding bootcamps or design workshops or mastering the art of storytelling, it's important to level up your game. Some think of me as a queen who slays dragons. However, I didn't just wake up breathing fire. I practiced. A lot.

3. **Craft your personal brand:** Your personal brand is your crown jewel. It's how the world sees you, and it's time to make it sparkle. Don't be afraid to shout about your awesomeness. Let the world know what you're bringing to the table. Are you a problem-solving wizard, a creative genius, or a people person? Own it. Remember, your brand isn't just about looking good; it's about making a statement about your impact.

DISCOVERING AFRO-OPTIMISM

4. **Communicate your achievements:** Don't be shy about tooting your own horn. Your achievements are your battle scars, your proof of greatness. Numbers don't lie, but stories ignite. Share your wins, big or small. Talk about that time you turned a challenge into a triumph, or how your unique perspective rocked the boat (in a good way). Let your light shine!
5. **Embrace a growth mindset:** Adopt an attitude that encourages continuous learning and improvement. Stay curious, embrace challenges, and view setbacks as opportunities for growth. Keep your eyes peeled for what's next, and don't be shy about asking for feedback. Remember, every "no" is one step closer to a "yes." By recognizing, developing, and effectively communicating your strengths, you can turn potential insecurities into powerful assets that propel your career forward. Your story is still being written, so make it a bestseller.

When you're the only African in the room, remember that can also make you the smartest person in the room...when it comes to Africa. So feel free to pepper your narrative highlighting other successful African professionals and showcasing your own successes. Embrace and show off how our unique experiences and insights can lead to fresh and innovative business solutions that cater to the specific needs of the African market. And don't forget to collaborate. Black

AFRO-OPTIMISM UNLEASHED

Americans tend to understand the power of acknowledging and lifting up their brothers and sisters in the room; we, as Africans, need to do the same when it comes to collaborating with other professionals, clients, and stakeholders in the African business community. By implementing these strategies, you can effectively recognize and acknowledge your own achievements and expertise in the African business context, positioning yourself as a valuable and respected professional within the region.

Now, a side note for women leaders: African women leaders navigate a unique labyrinth of challenges, with impostor syndrome being a particularly formidable foe. The pressure to fit into molds that often don't exist for us is a constant balancing act – don't be too soft, don't be too tough. Add to that the scarcity of female role models, and it's like climbing a mountain blindfolded. Our cultures, while rich in tradition, can also be restrictive, making it even harder to own our power. But let's be clear: we're not victims. We're warriors. By breaking down barriers, supporting each other, and demanding a seat at the table, we can not only overcome these obstacles but also redefine leadership on the African continent.

Finally, while individual empowerment is crucial, the power of collective action cannot be overstated. By fostering a sense of collaboration among African professionals, we can create a more supportive and empowering environment. This means building strong

DISCOVERING AFRO-OPTIMISM

networks, mentoring and sponsoring the next generation, and advocating for policies that support African talent. Imagine a world where African professionals are not just individuals overcoming challenges, but a united force driving positive change. By sharing knowledge, resources, and experiences, we can amplify our impact and create a more equitable future. Let's harness the power of collective action to build a stronger, more resilient African professional community.

Are you ready to unleash the Afro-optimist within? It's time to rewrite your story, own your power, and create a legacy that inspires generations. You can transform potential into reality, doubt into determination, and challenges into triumphs. Join the movement of African excellence. The world is waiting. Are you ready to make your mark?

Embracing your awesomeness

When I decided to make the move from consulting to corporate, it shouldn't have been a huge surprise that I ended up in the global HR department of one of my clients – my largest one in fact, the one I, myself, had landed – given that these were people who had worked with me already. Perhaps a year after I joined this rather international group, led by a Swiss man, we got a new head of compensation and benefits, an American. Given my connection with the USA, I tend to get along quite easily with Americans, and it was no different

AFRO-OPTIMISM UNLEASHED

in this case. One day as we were chatting, he shook his head in disbelief at something I'd just said and exclaimed, "Adeolu, you're such a dichotomy. You've managed to get a mix of everything...an American accent, a German mind, and a Nigerian heart." That summed it up so well that I never forgot that phrase.

While I've leaned into and maintained who I am as a person, through my status as a "third-culture kid" and the various moves I've made over my still-short life, I've also been very open to absorbing the best of each culture while remaining very much me. A colleague looked at my company website one day and asked it if I had built it myself. Given this colleague's light, but constant, teasing over my lack of creativity when it came to graphics, I braced for his response but proudly said yes. He went on to say that he did love the website and was quite impressed, but that he could tell as he was going through it that it had my voice – and this was someone who had known me less than three months!

And that is how I embrace my own awesomeness. I know who I am, what I represent, how I present myself, the way I speak...these are all building blocks for my personal brand as "Adeolu the Afro-optimist." Much of this was not intentional; it just stemmed from my own purpose for my life, my lifelong pride as a global Nigerian, and my confidence, cemented now in my late forties, of who I am as a person. As I told an interviewer during my very first podcast appearance, "Take me as I am."

DISCOVERING AFRO-OPTIMISM

That's what we all need to do: remember that there's only one of each of us. So what's your unique life story, and how can you leverage that as a child or friend of Africa? Many times, I've regretted that my dad didn't send me back to Nigeria for high school as he had planned, or that I can't speak my own mother tongue as fluently as a native, or even that we didn't move to France, rather than an anglophone country, so that I could at least speak French (rather than German, Spanish, etc.). But then I shrug my shoulders and remember that it's my own life experiences that have made me who I am today. I certainly can't change them; I can only use them.

The wonderful thing is, when you know who you are, and, more critically, are comfortable with it, you find your own unique brand of inspiration and leadership that will draw the right people – your people – to you. My Afro-optimism can be seen not just in my pride in my dark skin and kinky hair, but in the way that I dress myself. This has shifted as I've moved from country to country. What presented itself in bright and vibrant colors when I lived in the West quickly transformed into my own brand of "Afro-corporate" dress when we moved to Nairobi. Whether it's my Ankara jacket top, my Kente pencil dress, my crafted Kenyan jewelry, or my Maasai slippers on more casual days, I almost always have something African on me. Given that we were on the continent, I didn't realize that people actually took note of my style choices during my travels until I became CEO in my home country for one of the

AFRO-OPTIMISM UNLEASHED

companies that I had helped acquire, and colleagues routinely mentioned how they'd always admired my boldness when they encountered me during my acquisition trips, with one Afro-print style or another.

I'm quite sure there are enough folks to whom my Afro-pride doesn't appeal. Not professional. Too in-your-face. Trying too hard. Not conservative enough. Too simple. Too informal. I can imagine some or all this running through some people's heads. But once I understood that I didn't need to be liked by everyone, I also realized that I just didn't care. Take me as I am.

Final thoughts

Your journey is unique, your potential limitless. It's time to embrace your authentic self, celebrate your African heritage, and redefine success on your own terms. Together, we can build an awesome movement of confident, empowered individuals who are reimagining what it means to be African in the global arena. Let's create a future where our voices are heard, our contributions celebrated, and our dreams realized. Are you ready to become an Afro-optimist?

TWO

Building A Global Mindset

As I said earlier, becoming an Afro-optimist doesn't make you blind to the rest of the world. In fact, our Afro-optimism must and should be couched in the context of what is going on globally, particularly if we don't want to be left behind or, worse, miss the next big thing. Even in the imaginary nation of the Black Panther's Wakanda, which many see as a potential fulfillment of our African aspirations, residents are keenly aware of the outside world, even as they close themselves off from it. For generations, Wakanda cloaks itself in secrecy, its advanced society fueled by the mythical Vibranium. Yet, beneath the surface of self-sufficiency hums a hidden reliance on the global market. Vibranium's unmatched properties may have propelled Wakanda forward, but its true value hinges on the world's insatiable hunger for technological leaps.

AFRO-OPTIMISM UNLEASHED

Without that external pressure, Wakanda's innovations might have remained stagnant, curiosities within a closed system.

This paradox, this dance between isolation and integration, lies at the heart of Afro-optimism. Africa, a continent brimming with potential, must harness its own resources and cultivate self-reliance. But to truly thrive, we need to understand the ever-shifting currents of the global economy. Wakanda's story serves as a potent reminder: even the most self-sufficient nation dances to a global tune. So let's break down the global playbook from an African perspective.

Principle 1: Embrace the digital revolution

The digital revolution is sweeping across the globe, and Africa is no exception. From bustling markets going digital to classrooms without walls, our continent is rewriting the rules of business. This isn't just a trend; it's a revolution. So how do you ride this wave?

- **Become an e-commerce powerhouse:** Forget the stuffy old stores. The future of shopping is in your hands (or rather, your smartphone). Build a brand that people crave and deliver it right to their doorstep. Africa may be a big place, but with e-commerce, your market can be even bigger.
- **Develop mobile magic:** Mobile is king in Africa. People live on their phones. Create

apps that connect, educate and solve problems. Whether you're empowering farmers with smart agricultural tools or bringing education to remote villages, the possibilities are endless.

- **Unlock the power of data:** Data is your secret weapon. It's the crystal ball that reveals your customers' desires. Use data to create products people love, target your marketing like a pro, and stay ahead of the curve.

This is no longer our grandfather's economy. Move fast, break things (gently), and partner up. Collaborate with tech wizards, learn from failures, and most importantly, have fun. By becoming a key player in Africa's digital transformation, you'll not only propel your business forward but also contribute to shaping a more technologically advanced future for the continent.

Principle 2: Build a pan-African powerhouse

Africa is a continent of fifty-four nations, each with its own unique culture and resources. But imagine a united front of African businesses, a force to be reckoned with on the global stage. This is the vision behind the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA). Officially launched on January 1, 2021, following its signing in March 2018, AfCFTA aims to create a single market for goods and services across these same

AFRO-OPTIMISM UNLEASHED

fifty-four countries, connecting approximately 1.3 billion people with a combined GDP of about \$3.4 trillion, and potentially lifting 50 million people out of extreme poverty (World Bank Group, 2022).

So how do you make this vision a reality?

- **Forge powerful partnerships:** Networking isn't just about shaking hands; it's about building bridges. Connect with fellow entrepreneurs across the continent. Share knowledge, resources, and customers. After all, we're stronger together.
- **Create products for the continent:** Africa is diverse, but our challenges and aspirations often unite us. Develop solutions that resonate with people from Cape Town to Cairo. From agriculture to tech, there's a massive market waiting to be conquered.
- **Be a changemaker:** Talk is cheap, but action speaks volumes. Get involved in shaping the policies that will make AfCFTA a success by lobbying to ensure that any agreements are as generous as possible and supporting your government in building broad public support. Your voice matters. Let's create an environment where African businesses can thrive.

By embracing AfCFTA, we can contribute to a more integrated African market, driving collaboration and unlocking immense economic potential. Remember,

a rising tide lifts all boats – when African businesses thrive together, the entire continent benefits.

Principle 3: Leave a legacy that lasts

Money isn't everything. Sure, it's nice, but leaving a positive mark on the world is priceless. Likewise, success in Africa isn't just about financial gain; it's about building a sustainable legacy for future generations. Imagine a future where businesses operate with environmental responsibility, empower their communities, and prioritize ethical practices. This is the essence of a sustainable business model, and it's becoming increasingly important for African entrepreneurs. So how can you integrate sustainability into your business?

- **Do the right thing:** Transparency, ethics, and fairness are the cornerstones of a lasting business. Play fair, treat your employees right, and build trust. Your reputation is everything.
- **Empower your community:** Success is sweeter when shared. Invest in the people surrounding you. Create jobs, support education, and give back. Your community is your biggest asset.
- **Be a planet protector:** Our continent is blessed with natural beauty. Let's keep it that way. From solar panels to recycled packaging, make your business eco-friendly. It's good for the planet, and it's good for business.

AFRO-OPTIMISM UNLEASHED

Be more than just a business owner; be a change leader. By fusing innovation, impact, and integrity, you're not just building a company; you're shaping Africa's future. Let's redefine success as being about more than the bottom line. It's about creating a legacy that uplifts communities and preserves our planet. Join the movement of African entrepreneurs who are proving that "Made in Africa" equals business for good. Are you ready to make your mark?

The sun dips below the Vibranium-rich mountains of mythical Wakanda, casting a golden glow across a nation unlike any other. Here, amid fields of unyielding optimism and technological marvels, a powerful truth emerges: isolation may breed progress, but true prosperity flourishes when we understand the world beyond our borders.

Developing a global vision and strategy

My purpose statement is to build the new Africa, and that's the legacy I want to leave so that my two boys (as of this writing, ages eleven and nine) grow up as proud global Africans. That's it. Nice and simple. But translating that purpose into my global vision, and then into strategies for my business, is not so simple. What does it mean to be a "global African"? What is the "new Africa" that will facilitate that? Is the timeframe for what I call "Vision 2033" – about a decade, since we launched in 2023 – long enough? What does being

a global African say about how and where I bring up the boys themselves? What kind of leader do I need to be, and what kind of people do I need to work with to accomplish all this? I certainly can't do it alone.

These questions and more are what run through my mind as I think about the future and consider my past. As I consider my upbringing in a large college town in the USA, contemplate what I learned from the precise Germans during my almost decade in Munich, and even incorporate tidbits of Asia, via Japan and Turkey, into my pan-African view of the continent, I know this experience informs my view of what it is to be a "global Nigerian," a label I wear with pride. I remember the first time I heard Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's 2009 speech about the danger of a single story, when she said, "Stories matter. Many stories matter... when we reject the single story, when we realize that there is never a single story about any place, we regain a kind of paradise."

So I must tap into my own story and leverage the stories of the many others I encounter in considering what this "new Africa" can look like. I tap into my story as a Nigerian diasporan. I tap into my colleague's story as a Nigerian schooled in the East. I tap into my business partner's story as a white South African woman. I tap into my client's story as a Ugandan living in Nairobi. I tap into another business partner's story as an Egyptian who worked for an international company all his career. I even tap into the story of yet

AFRO-OPTIMISM UNLEASHED

another business partner who is a white Brit living in the UK, yet has focused his entire career on the African continent. Continuously tapping into all these stories, into all these various experiences, causes me to adjust and shift my view of what this “new Africa” will look like, because the newness must build on the old. And I leverage the trust given to me by people telling me their stories into a vision of trusted partners building the new Africa together.

And how do we build the “new Africa”? Might it take less time doing it together vs. running on our own? Best practice. Collaboration. Networking. These are the approaches that jump out at me as I ponder my global vision. The best thing about such approaches is their accessibility across cultures. As combative as we humans are, as prone to violence and automatic “othering” of people we deem outsiders, our glorious benefit is that we strive for connection. And business strategies that tap into that need for connection can be transcendent. My willingness to share with you opens you up to sharing with me and to collaborating, opening your network, being willing to incorporate best practices that may come from “outsiders.”

While living in Nairobi, I was surrounded by several young colleagues in their twenties, none of whom had experienced life outside the borders of Kenya. They rightfully took immense pride in their culture, loudly proclaiming why such and such a thing was the best in the world, including the ubiquitous tilapia

fish which seemed to be ever-present at any restaurant. Finally, one day, I asked these colleagues – again, none of whom had crossed the Kenyan border – how they knew that tilapia was the best fish in the world? Had they tried any others? I listened in bemusement as they tried to convince me that there was no need to try any other fish, given that they had already had the best. “Fine,” I told them. “How about this. Let me take you to a seafood restaurant, my treat.” They were initially reluctant, but finally accepted the challenge. So, one night, we all ended up at Seven Seafood & Grill, one of the best seafood restaurants in Nairobi. I dragged along my Turkish husband because, truth be told, I don’t even like fish, but I couldn’t allow this distaste to stop me from providing my colleagues a life lesson. So my husband rose to the challenge of being a teacher and ordered various dishes from the menu, including several types of fish, shellfish, even octopus, while my colleagues sat and shook their heads in disgust. The plates arrived at our table, and each colleague, not willing to be outdone by the other, nervously tried the proffered delicacies. One of the youngest at first refused to try the octopus, but, egged on by his colleagues, he finally took a leap of faith and popped one portion into his mouth. I still recall his expression as he chewed. And popped in another portion. Then – victory – he turned to my husband and asked him if we could possibly order more octopus!

I carry this experience around with me as a reminder of what can happen when we extend from our own area

AFRO-OPTIMISM UNLEASHED

of expertise (not seafood!) to tap into our network (in this case, I didn't have to look that far) and collaborate on building capacity (for seafood), leveraging the best practice we could find (a top seafood restaurant). That's the power we achieve when we transcend borders to redefine our Africanness.

Leveraging global insights for local impact

So, understanding the power of border-crossing for collaboration, I love having a squad of super-smart business besties scattered across the globe, and I love to tell the story of my early days, back when IBM's Lotus Sametime was still a thing. Perhaps the reason I love WhatsApp so much is that it reminds me of those days, when I, based in Chicago, could chat with a colleague in New York, Paris, or Tokyo as easily as I could walk around the corner to knock on the door of my work bestie. I was working then as a founding member of my company's global consulting team, and Sametime became a necessary tool for our success. It also became the start of my global squad-building. I had the European Investment Bank (EIB), the European Union's investment bank and the largest multilateral financial institution in the world, as a client. One of my team members was based in Paris. As we worked daily on that client, as tends to happen, personal details and life happenings started to get sprinkled into the work conversation. Over the months and years, I read his chats about meeting the girl of his dreams and all the

BUILDING A GLOBAL MINDSET

adventures and misfortunes that befell the relationship. Then one day, it happened: he asked the woman to marry him. I rejoiced with him just as mightily as the “real” colleagues in his own office. But what I hadn’t expected, never having actually met this colleague in person, or even seen what he looked like (these were the days before selfies and video chats ever crossed people’s minds) was that he would actually invite me to his wedding. This invite, even as I think on it now, serves as an unforgettable testament to the bonds we can build with others across the world, made even easier today with tools such as Instagram, LinkedIn, and, of course, WhatsApp.

In our interconnected world, the businesses that thrive are those that can seamlessly navigate global markets while maintaining a deep understanding of local nuances. Leveraging global insights is no longer a luxury; it’s a necessity. Let’s explore how to turn these far-flung friends into a winning formula.

Cultivating a global mindset

Remember when physically traveling for business meetings seemed like the only option? Thanks to COVID, the world has shrunk (virtually, at least) and opened a treasure chest of opportunities for your business. To effectively leverage global insights, it’s essential to cultivate a global mindset, which you can now maintain without even leaving your office. This

AFRO-OPTIMISM UNLEASHED

involves developing a broad perspective, embracing diversity, and being open to new ideas and experiences. By immersing yourself in unfamiliar cultures and business environments, you'll gain a deeper appreciation for the complexities of the global marketplace.

A strong network is the cornerstone of global success. Invest time in building relationships with professionals from different countries and industries. Attend industry conferences, participate in online forums, and leverage social media platforms to connect with potential partners and collaborators. Focus on building authentic relationships based on mutual respect and shared goals. Spark conversations on video calls – a tool we've all become experts in, thanks to COVID – and pick people's brains. They'll spill the 'chai' on best practices in their regions, from what customers are digging to what the competition's up to.

Harnessing technology for collaboration

Technology has revolutionized the way we connect and collaborate with people around the world. Online collaboration tools have become second nature to many of us post-COVID. These tools let us connect with our networks in real time, no matter where they are in the world. From video conferencing and project management software to social media and virtual collaboration spaces, technology can be a powerful enabler of global

BUILDING A GLOBAL MINDSET

partnerships – instant innovation, delivered straight to our screens.

Technology is also your secret weapon for glocal market research. To make informed business decisions, it's essential to have a deep understanding of global market trends and consumer behavior. Invest in comprehensive market research to identify opportunities and challenges in different regions. By analyzing data and insights from various sources, you can develop effective strategies to penetrate new markets.

Adapting to local contexts

Glocalization isn't about copying the coolest trends from across the globe. It's about understanding your local market like the back of your hand. While global trends provide valuable insights, it's crucial to adapt your approach to meet the specific needs of local markets. Conduct thorough market research to understand cultural nuances, consumer preferences, and competitive landscapes. By combining global best practices with local knowledge, you can create tailored glocal solutions that resonate with your target audience. Are you revamping your marketing for a new market? Don't just translate your existing campaign; adapt it to local tastes! Think about language localization, cultural references, and communication channels that your new audience frequents.

AFRO-OPTIMISM UNLEASHED

Here's where the fun part begins: building a glocal team. You'll need a diverse crew with a mix of backgrounds and cultural understanding. Why? Because when it comes to adapting global best practices to your local market, a broader perspective is your best friend. Plus, that team member sitting in Nairobi can be the cultural compass guiding you through regulations and keeping your brand sensitive to the local vibe.

Measuring impact locally

Remember, success is local too. To assess the effectiveness of your global strategy, don't just track global metrics. Develop key performance indicators (KPIs) specific to your local market. These could include customer satisfaction in your region, market share growth within your city, or brand awareness among your local audience. By monitoring local KPIs, you can identify areas for improvement, optimize resource allocation, and measure the overall impact of your global initiatives.

Glocalization isn't a fad; it's the future. It's about building a business that thrives on a global scale, while remaining deeply rooted in its local community. It's about collaborating with awesome people across the world to create a sustainable future. So, get out there (virtually, of course), start building your glocal network, and watch your business blossom on the world stage!

Building a strong online presence and brand

People tend to do business with people they know, like and trust, so if you want to collaborate with awesome people across the world, they need to think of you as an awesome person as well. Therefore, in today's interconnected world, having a strong personal brand is essential for standing out. It's more than just a name or logo; it's a promise to your audience. What unites prominent business personalities like Mo Ibrahim of Celtel, Richard Branson of the Virgin Group, Sheryl Sandberg formerly of Facebook, the late Steve Jobs of Apple, Tony Elumelu of Heirs Holdings, and Oprah Winfrey? In each case, the founder's personal brand and entrepreneurial story are closely intertwined with the success of the company they created.

Let's take Richard Branson as an example; he is a masterclass in building a successful business image. Branson's personal brand isn't just about Virgin companies. He's cultivated an image as a disruptive entrepreneur, an adventurer, and a guy who challenges the status quo. This resonates with people who value innovation, fun, and a bit of daring. The Virgin brand itself might not necessarily scream innovation compared to competitors. But Branson's association with it adds a layer of excitement and a human touch. People are more likely to trust Virgin because they feel they know the kind of person behind it. And Branson isn't afraid to put himself out there. His adventures, like his hot air balloon

AFRO-OPTIMISM UNLEASHED

trips or his attempts to break speed records, get media attention and keep Virgin top of mind. Additionally, Branson comes across as approachable and enthusiastic, even when he talks about his failures, and he seems to genuinely enjoy what he does. This makes people trust him – and Virgin by association. Branson has authored books and actively uses social media to share his stories and ideas. This allows him to shape how people perceive him and Virgin, emphasizing the aspects he wants them to focus on. By creating an emotional connection with his audience, Branson's personal brand makes Virgin more than just a company; it makes it a brand with a personality that people can connect with. This is the power of a well-crafted personal brand.

Oprah Winfrey's journey is another textbook case of how a powerful personal brand can propel someone to extraordinary heights. Oprah didn't try to be another generic talk show host. She brought her own unique perspective, focusing on in-depth conversations, emotional connection, and empowering guests to share their stories. This authenticity and warmth set her apart in a crowded media landscape. She also wasn't shy about putting herself out there. Her engaging interviews with celebrities and everyday people, coupled with her willingness to tackle tough topics, turned her into a household name. Her brand transcended *The Oprah Winfrey Show*, becoming synonymous with empowerment and self-improvement. Additionally, Oprah's vulnerability in sharing her own struggles with poverty, abuse, and weight loss resonated deeply

with viewers. She wasn't afraid to show her humanity, which fostered genuine trust and connection with her audience. People believed she understood their problems because she had faced her own. Oprah wasn't just the host of her show; she was the curator of her brand. She carefully chose the topics and guests for her show, ensuring they aligned with her message of empowerment and personal growth. This allowed her to shape the conversation and reinforce the core values of her brand. At the heart of Oprah's brand is connection. She created a space where people felt heard, understood, and uplifted. Her empathy and genuine interest in her guests, along with her willingness to open up about her own life, fostered a powerful emotional bond with her viewers. This connection made her brand so much more than just a media empire; it made it a trusted guide for millions.

Tony Elumelu exemplifies the power of African entrepreneurship. His unwavering commitment to African entrepreneurs, coupled with his philanthropic initiatives, has solidified his reputation as a visionary leader. By aligning his personal brand with his business ventures, Elumelu has created a powerful and influential image. His story of rising from the bottom ranks of the banking industry to acquiring those same banks, including United Bank for Africa in 2005, inspires and empowers an entire generation of African entrepreneurs. His pan-African focus, which demonstrates his deep commitment to the continent's development, is a key element of his success. Additionally, he

AFRO-OPTIMISM UNLEASHED

intentionally puts himself out there as a role model for aspiring business owners while simultaneously giving back to the community and fostering social impact. Finally, his reach on social media builds trust through genuine engagement with his audience.

How do you become as well-known, at least in your own space, as Richard Branson, Oprah Winfrey, and Tony Elumelu? First, forget about mimicking any of them. You are your brand's secret weapon. Embrace the aphorism "Be yourself; everyone else is already taken." Find your brand's voice. Are you the innovator? The trusted adviser? The friendly face? Let your core values shine through every social media post and online channel.

Authenticity is key. Share your brand story, showcase the humans behind the magic, and engage with your audience in real conversations. Spark discussions, answer questions, and build a community around your brand. Testimonials and case studies are gold, showcasing the positive impact you have on real people.

Become a thought leader. Share valuable insights, educate your audience, and empower them with insightful blog posts, videos, and webinars. Raise your hand; representation matters. Speak at panels, join discussions, and position yourself as the trusted resource you are. Go beyond likes and shares. Offer valuable free resources like e-books, white papers, or webinars. Demonstrate your expertise and build trust by providing value without expecting anything in return.

BUILDING A GLOBAL MINDSET

Stories are your superpower. Weave captivating narratives into your social media. Show real people using your product or service or share your brand's origin story. Make your audience laugh, cry, or feel inspired; emotions are the glue that makes your message memorable. Embrace the power of your audience. Run contests and use hashtags to encourage them to share their stories. Their perspectives enrich your brand narrative and showcase its local impact. This means celebrating together. Share your company's successes and milestones but also celebrate your audience's wins. Acknowledge their achievements related to your brand and show appreciation for their support.

Visuals are your global language. Use high-quality images and videos that grab attention and reflect your brand's unique identity. Incorporate local flavor for the African market while maintaining an internationally appealing aesthetic. Collaborate with local photographers, videographers, and designers to capture the essence of your brand and connect with your audience on a deeper level. Additionally, partner with established figures in your industry for interviews, co-authored articles, or joint webinars. Leverage their reach while boosting your own credibility. By combining compelling visuals with strategic collaborations, you can create a powerful brand experience that resonates with people across cultures.

Your personal brand is the foundation of your business success. However, building a strong brand takes

AFRO-OPTIMISM UNLEASHED

consistent effort. By investing time and effort into building a strong personal brand, you'll not only differentiate yourself from the competition but also inspire others to join your journey. Implementing these tactics and staying true to your brand identity will help you craft a powerful social media presence that resonates with audiences in Africa and around the world. You'll not only connect but also establish yourself as a thought leader in your industry. The world is waiting to hear your voice.

Embracing lifelong learning

As I mentioned previously, I'm a professor's daughter. On top of that, I'm a *Nigerian* professor's daughter, which means my drive to learn everything, know everything, be everything, has been cultivated from a very young age. Thankfully, I not only love to read, but I've also always been a very fast reader. I see the same now in my younger son, who also – as a delightful surprise to me, especially after his initial grumbling – became a voracious reader at the tender age of seven. Unlike his older brother, who struggled at the same age to get through the thirty-minute mandatory reading allotment each day, my younger son will beg me for another hour, perhaps even two, to read long into the night. I am hopeful that this will turn into the same thirst for knowledge that his mother has.

Constantly connecting with, teaching, and inspiring your audience requires you to increase your own knowledge.

Cultivating a culture of continuous learning – whether in yourself, your household, or your company – comes down to one thing: curiosity. What are you curious about? How eager are you to find out whether that new factoid is really true? Do you love languages? Numbers? Facts? Each of us are motivated by distinct types of knowledge, and, given the world we live in today, we thankfully have the flexibility to pursue that knowledge in a way that suits us. I go back to my love of reading – this means that, rather than listening to podcasts or watching documentaries, I am much more likely to buy a book on the subject, whether I read it myself or turn to the efficiency of audiobooks. There's a depth that can be achieved in those two to three hundred pages that just can't be reached within even an hour-long podcast. So, I read, I underline, I highlight, I read again.

Of course, as my free time continues to drop dramatically with the addition of two kids, then running a business, and now building my own business, I have turned to articles, blogs, and sometimes even targeted videos to fill that gap. The world is changing every day, and the only way to remain in place, talk less of getting ahead, is to keep learning. Whether it's about generative artificial intelligence (AI), the Kenyan tech scene, or even the latest Netflix show in Africa, I need to remain abreast of what's happening around me, focusing on global business trends and market dynamics.

However, I also avoid learning just for the sake of learning. I'm not a professor, after all, just the daughter

AFRO-OPTIMISM UNLEASHED

of one. If I don't implement my learning into my own business and supporting my own clients, the learning becomes less useful. My learning is the most productive when I can speak to an insurtech CEO in the USA about what another insurtech CEO is doing in South Africa; or describe to a cohort of emerging fund managers the best practice governance procedures I have seen in play across continents; or partner with a South Africa-based organization to bring a message drafted in the West but shaped on the African continent to Nigeria. This all comes from the power of leveraging global best practices. Yes, I've said that West is not always best – however, we all have something to learn from each other.

Here's how to pick up business hacks from all over the world without getting overwhelmed:

- **Watch the winners:** See what's working for businesses like yours in other countries. Research industry reports, attend online conferences (think: free webinars), or chat with international business folks.
- **Think local first:** Don't copy everything. Ask yourself if that fancy new marketing trick from Japan would fly with your local customers. Consider things like laws, what people like, and how your competitors play the game.
- **Make it your own:** For the good stuff that fits your local scene, bend it a bit. Maybe a product

BUILDING A GLOBAL MINDSET

needs a tweak or your customer service approach could use a global-inspired upgrade.

The thing is, there's no one-size-fits-all approach to global expansion. The key lies in finding the right balance between global standardization and local personalization. You can opt for a global strategy with consistent elements like top-notch quality control but tailor your approach market by market, adjusting marketing campaigns and product features to suit local preferences, tastes, and rules. A hybrid model that combines standardized core processes with personalized customer experiences can also be effective. Experimentation is crucial; try out a couple of global best practices on a small scale. See how they perform with your local audience. Learn from your experiments and adjust before going all-in. Remember, the business landscape is constantly evolving, so stay curious and adaptable, and keep an eye on global trends and best practices so your local business stays ahead of the game.

This is how we can borrow smart ideas from around the world and make them work like a charm for our local business, finding the winning formula for us here in Africa.

Final thoughts

By embracing a global mindset, leveraging technology, and adapting to local markets, you can position your

AFRO-OPTIMISM UNLEASHED

business for long-term success. It's time to step beyond borders and redefine what it means to be an African entrepreneur. Let's build a future where African businesses are not just competing globally but leading the way. Join me in Part Two, as we explore the defining elements of African excellence.

PART TWO
BUILDING AFRICAN
EXCELLENCE

THREE

Defining African Excellence

I've already mentioned how much I love to read. I enjoy mostly fiction, specifically, detective stories, but in the spirit of continuous learning and personal development, I periodically and regularly force myself to read business books such as this one. There are a handful that I tend to recommend when people come to me, but just one that I read every year to renew its impact on my vision and life, and that's Gary Keller and Jay Papasan's *The ONE Thing: The Surprisingly Simple Truth About Extraordinary Results*. In *The ONE Thing*, Keller and Papasan argue that chasing after multiple goals is a recipe for mediocrity. Their premise is that true success hinges on identifying your single most important goal – your ONE Thing. This ONE Thing, they argue, should

AFRO-OPTIMISM UNLEASHED

be the core of your purpose and drive everything you do. Re-reading their book each January continues to dismantle my own misconceptions about productivity, for example, that multitasking is the key to getting things done. Instead, they advocate for a laser-sharp focus on ONE Thing at a time. I've introduced their so-called "focusing question" – "What is the ONE Thing I can do such that by doing it everything else will be easier or unnecessary?" (Keller and Papasan, 2013) – into my own planning to help me prioritize more ruthlessly and identify the actions that will have the biggest domino effect on my goals.

My ONE Thing is Africa. More specifically, it's building the new Africa so that my sons grow up as proud global Africans. With this as my ONE Thing, both my business *and* my life revolve around building a future where not only my sons but all African youth can thrive. Money, including profit, has never been much of a motivating factor for me. While I enjoy the periods when I don't have to think twice before buying the latest handbag from my favorite Ibadan-based leather handbag designer, uplifting my continent and creating opportunities for others have always been central to me. I understand the importance of leadership in this endeavor, which is why I tend to prioritize the importance of building strong teams and fostering leadership among our companies and people. Returning to my homeland was always the north star guiding my decisions, whether personal or professional. I have unwittingly left many guys behind once I understood

DEFINING AFRICAN EXCELLENCE

that their life path didn't coincide with my African pride and urge to return home. Now, every single day, I'm immensely delighted to be, through my sons, vicariously living the childhood that I never got – not in terms of material things, but through the opportunity to be surrounded by people who look like me, who know and are proud of their identity as Africans.

As we continue to talk about African excellence, I hope that I've been a true model of what that means through the perfectionism that pushes me to be the best, and, even more importantly, deliver the best. That same perfectionism drives me to re-read that email for the third time, to open each attachment before pressing the send button, to find every error in even the smallest PowerPoint, to make sure I turn up thirty minutes early to every meeting. As they say, actions speak louder than words, and I must embody my vision for the future Africa and the "real Nigerian" in every action that I take, and hope and pray for the butterfly effect that will perhaps inspire hundreds, and through them, millions. Essentially, my business and life have become intertwined, each step contributing to a stronger, more vibrant Africa for my sons and future generations.

Turning your ONE Thing into a business

I talk about delivering excellence and African excellence all the time. But what does this excellence look like? And how can we leverage the butterfly effect by

AFRO-OPTIMISM UNLEASHED

helping others to deliver it? Delivering excellence in the context of building a new Africa shares some core characteristics with delivering excellence anywhere, but we also need to incorporate a few unique African values:

- Ubuntu-inspired collaboration
- Resourceful innovation
- Sustainable impact

Ubuntu-inspired collaboration

This value combines customer service and collaboration, drawing inspiration from the African philosophy of Ubuntu (*oo-boon-too*). Ubuntu emphasizes the interconnectedness of humanity (i.e., the essence of being human) and the importance of community. Its core principle – “I am because we are” – emphasizes collective identity and mutual responsibility. The philosophy of Ubuntu originates from the Bantu languages of Southern Africa, particularly among the Nguni people of present-day South Africa, Zimbabwe, and Mozambique. While Ubuntu is rooted in Southern African cultures, similar communal philosophies exist across the African continent, such as Ujamaa in East Africa and Ma’at in ancient Egypt. It also exists in other parts of the world, as the core principles of human interdependence, community solidarity, and collective responsibility find resonance in various indigenous

DEFINING AFRICAN EXCELLENCE

philosophies globally. These shared values across cultures highlight the universal human yearning for social cohesion and mutual care.

Now, let's talk business. Imagine a company where everyone feels valued, where *teamwork* isn't just a buzzword, but a way of life. That's Ubuntu in action. It's about understanding that your success is intertwined with the success of your team, your customers, and your community. It's about putting people first, building trust, and working together toward a common goal. It's about recognizing that we're all in this together, and that by lifting each other up, we all rise.

Resourceful innovation

Resourceful innovation merges innovation with the quintessential African spirit of resourcefulness. Here, the focus is on solving challenges – both for your business and your customers – with creativity and a keen eye for what's available. We know that we often have limited resources, but these can become the springboard for ingenious solutions (i.e., thinking locally to create brilliantly).

Resourceful innovation thrives on understanding the unique context of Africa. Instead of copying existing models, it prioritizes designing products and services that are specifically affordable, accessible, and culturally relevant. By adapting existing technologies, or

AFRO-OPTIMISM UNLEASHED

even creating entirely new ones using what's readily available, resourceful innovation empowers Africans to solve African challenges.

Therefore, you need to get the most out of what you have, creating high-quality solutions that are affordable for your target market. This doesn't mean sacrificing quality; it means being smart. You might utilize open-source technologies, simplify product designs, or explore innovative distribution channels to keep costs down. Think like MacGyver and encourage your team to do the same. Ask yourself: Can everyday objects be used in new ways to solve problems? Are there alternative production methods that are more cost-effective? By embracing a resourceful mindset, you can stretch your resources further and deliver excellent value and become a leader in creating African solutions for African challenges. This approach not only benefits African businesses but also fosters a culture of self-reliance and ingenuity within the continent.

Sustainable impact

Sustainable impact isn't about short-term wins; it's about building a thriving future for Africa, and it goes beyond just the environment. It means ensuring your business practices are both environmentally and socially responsible and embrace good governance. Focus on creating a positive impact in the communities you serve. This could involve creating jobs through

DEFINING AFRICAN EXCELLENCE

local hiring and training programs, supporting local education initiatives to empower future generations, or promoting sustainable farming practices. Remember, success isn't just measured in profits. A key metric should be the positive change you create for future generations. By fostering economic development, social good, and environmental responsibility, you build a legacy that extends far beyond your bottom line.

Remember, though, that sustainable impact also requires embracing good governance practices. This means operating with transparency and accountability, ensuring ethical decision-making throughout your organization. Fair treatment of employees, fair wages, and a commitment to safety should be cornerstones of your business practices. Ultimately, good governance strengthens your reputation, attracts responsible investors, and paves the way for long-term sustainable growth that benefits all stakeholders. By operating with transparency, accountability, and a commitment to ethical practices, your business can become a role model for good governance in Africa, inspiring a future where businesses are not just profitable but also forces for positive change.

Prioritizing the values of Ubuntu-inspired collaboration, resourceful innovation, and sustainable impact allows us to build businesses that contribute to a thriving new Africa for not just our individual circles, but countless others. By weaving these characteristics

AFRO-OPTIMISM UNLEASHED

together, we can build businesses that embody African excellence.

Attracting the dream client for your ONE Thing

The most critical realization I've had since hitting my forties is finally accepting that I'm not for everyone – and that I don't have to be. My internal mantra has become "Take me as I am." In the same way, not every client (or customer) will be right for you when you are building African excellence. Clients who resonate with the values of African excellence will be ideal partners for your business. These dream clients will get you out of bed in the morning, excited to tackle new challenges. In fact, they aren't just clients; they're partners in building a better Africa. They're the ones who see the big picture. They get that success isn't just about profits; it's about impact. They're passionate about our continent, its people, and its potential. They're not afraid to roll up their sleeves and get their hands dirty. They understand that *Ubuntu* isn't just a word; it's a way of doing business.

Imagine working with someone who shares your vision for a thriving Africa. Someone who sees your business as a force for good. That's the kind of client who will inspire you to reach new heights. Collaborating with clients who are passionate about African excellence allows you to not only deliver excellent service but

DEFINING AFRICAN EXCELLENCE

also create a ripple effect of positive change across the continent. But how do you find these dream clients?

Attracting clients who embody the values of African excellence requires a strategic approach that goes beyond traditional marketing tactics. Here's how I connect with purpose-driven partners across diverse African markets:

- **I leverage impact networks:** I move beyond the large standard industry conferences to seek out smaller events and organizations specifically focused on social good and sustainable development in Africa. Speaking at these events demonstrates my alignment with their values and positions me as a trusted partner. Partnering with organizations like Shared Value Africa, based in South Africa, allows me to connect with a pre-qualified pool of clients who share my commitment to building a better future.
- **I act as a thought leader:** I've established myself as an expert in my field by continuously sharing my knowledge and expertise through thought leadership initiatives, contributing articles, and hosting webinars on challenges faced by African businesses, including my monthly newsletter, "Adeolu the Afro-optimist." Additionally, the digital landscape offers me a wealth of opportunities to build online communities of impact via, for example, WhatsApp.

AFRO-OPTIMISM UNLEASHED

- **I speak the language of shared values:** I tailor my messaging to resonate with my dream client's values. Rather than using generic marketing speak, I craft narratives that connect with these clients' aspirations for Africa's future. This may mean incorporating greater transparency in their promotion process, helping them to strengthen their leadership team, or expanding their influence within the healthcare ecosystem.

By implementing one, two, or all of these strategies, you can shift your focus from transactional sales to building genuine connections with purpose-driven clients. This approach will not only attract your dream clients but also foster a network of collaborators who share your vision for a thriving Africa. Remember, your dream client is looking for more than just a product or service; they're seeking a partner on their journey toward a brighter future for our continent.

Leveraging the excellence of the diaspora

It was the end of 2022, and I had recently left my CEO role at a global multinational with the intention of taking a career break like the one I had taken before joining the same company eleven years earlier. However, unlike before, when I spent the majority of my break on a beach in south Turkey with a Kindle in hand, I knew that this one was going to be much more active, particularly as, with two young children in tow, I no longer had the

luxury of completely shutting down from society. So I started looking around for ways to better inform my transition from a life as a corporate drone to one of purpose and fulfillment. And, lo and behold, I stumbled across a conference I'd never heard of all the way on the west side of the USA (I was based in Lagos, Nigeria) that seemed to speak to me. See, as someone whose parents had emigrated away from her birthland when she wasn't even three, I had from very early on been a part of the nebulous "diaspora." So when I stumbled across the African Diaspora Investment Summit (ADIS), I thought, "Perfect, I need to be there." I booked my ticket, packed my bags, and headed over to the USA to learn more about why and how the African diaspora was so great and necessary to our success as a continent.

But first, what is the African diaspora? The term refers to the global communities descended from the historic migrations of peoples from Africa, particularly since the fifteenth century. It encompasses both voluntary and involuntary movements, including the transatlantic slave trade, which was the largest forced migration of Africans to the Americas. The term *African diaspora* first appeared in the literature in the 1950s and broadly includes all global communities descended from historic migrations of Africans. The African diaspora continues to play a vital role in global socio-economic and cultural dynamics, and organizations like the African Diaspora Network (the conveners of ADIS) aim to activate capital and resources from the diaspora for the development of Africa and communities worldwide.

AFRO-OPTIMISM UNLEASHED

While precise numbers are difficult due to the diaspora's global spread, credible estimates put the total African diaspora population at around 350 million people dispersed across the Americas, Europe, the Middle East, and other regions (SOAD, n.d.). This makes it one of the largest diasporic populations in the world, stemming from both historic forced migration and more recent voluntary movements. Here are some key details on the size of the African diaspora (The Diaspora Collective, 2019):

- It is considered the third-largest population in the world after China and India, larger than the USA, Indonesia, and Brazil.
- In the Americas alone, there are approximately 113 million people of African descent living in Latin America, 39 million in North America, and 14 million in the Caribbean.
- In Europe, there are around 4 million people of African descent.
- The transatlantic slave trade forcibly moved between 12 and 14 million enslaved Africans to the Americas between the sixteenth and nineteenth centuries. Their descendants make up a sizable portion of the modern African diaspora.
- The African Union (n.d.) defines the African diaspora broadly as “people of native or partial African origin living outside the continent, irrespective of their citizenship and nationality.”

But back to ADIS...what did I learn? I learned that the diaspora represents a vast pool of talent with expertise across various industries and about ways to partner with diaspora organizations and online platforms to connect with skilled professionals eager to contribute to Africa's growth. These professionals can provide valuable knowledge transfer and mentorship opportunities, fostering innovation and propelling businesses forward. I also learned that the diaspora holds immense marketing potential and that I could partner with successful members of the diaspora who could become brand ambassadors for my company. Their stories about connecting with their African roots and contributing to the continent's progress resonates with potential clients who share those values, creating a powerful marketing narrative that showcases my commitment to African excellence. In this way, they could showcase the positive change my business brings to Africa, attracting the diaspora as investors, partners, or even returnees. Finally, I learned that many within the diaspora have a fervent desire to support African ventures, and that a number utilize diaspora crowdfunding platforms to raise capital for their businesses. As these platforms cater specifically to projects focused on African development, they allow us to tap into an enthusiastic investor base who believe in our mission. By effectively engaging the diaspora through these strategies, we gain access to skilled human capital, enthusiastic brand advocates, and potential investors – all critical ingredients for building a thriving business that contributes to a new Africa. Transparency and

AFRO-OPTIMISM UNLEASHED

good governance are essential to assure the diaspora and its members' contributions are used responsibly.

I also learned at ADIS that the Indian diaspora, which has similar population numbers globally, offers a blueprint for engaging the African diaspora in Africa's development. Skilled Indian professionals abroad, through brain circulation or remote work, strengthen India's human capital. Many diaspora members establish businesses in their host countries, and some invest back in India, bringing not just capital but valuable business experience. The Indian diaspora is a major source of foreign direct investment, fueling innovation and growth.

Closer to home, Ghana recognized the potential of the diaspora early on. In 2000, it enacted the Citizenship Act, allowing Ghanaians abroad to retain their citizenship and enjoy rights like property ownership. This move fostered a stronger connection between Ghanaians abroad and in their homeland. Building on this foundation, Ghana established the Diaspora Affairs Office (n.d.) within the Office of the President in 2017. This dedicated office focuses on initiatives to attract investment, bridge the skills gap, facilitate knowledge sharing, and, finally, promote "diaspora tourism." Ghana's Diaspora Engagement Policy, launched in 2023, further emphasizes the importance of collaboration (IOM, 2023). It aims to create a mutually beneficial relationship in which the diaspora contributes to Ghana's development, while Ghana fosters a welcoming environment for their return and engagement.

DEFINING AFRICAN EXCELLENCE

By leveraging the teachings from ADIS and emulating Ghana's and India's examples, African countries can unlock the immense potential of their diaspora communities, paving the way for African businesses to unlock the immense potential of the African diaspora to drive growth and build a new Africa.

Building strategic and sustainable excellence: The SCALE framework

As we discussed previously, the spirit of African excellence is a relentless pursuit of excellence. The recovering perfectionist in me takes immense pride in her work and aspires to deliver the absolute best. However, this dedication isn't just about personal achievement; it's about setting a powerful example, rewriting a false narrative, and hopefully inspiring not just hundreds, but millions to strive for a brighter future. And that's exactly what African excellence is all about. Your business can also be a shining example of African excellence, and to help you turn that vision into reality, I've developed a five-step roadmap to transformation. Let's turn your passion for African excellence into a tangible roadmap for success through the SCALE framework:

- Strategize your vision
- Champion excellence
- Accelerate exceptional leadership

AFRO-OPTIMISM UNLEASHED

- Leverage governance for sustainable growth
- Expand your impact via growth capital

We'll go over each part of the framework in detail in the following chapters, but first, let's look at the big picture.

S – Strategize your vision

Develop a comprehensive business strategy focused on scalability and sustainability. Create a clear roadmap outlining your business goals, target market, growth strategies, and financial projections. Utilize both quantitative and qualitative data to understand your target audience and their needs and preferences. Leverage technology to gather and analyze competitor and market trends. Clearly articulate the unique value your business offers to customers and how it addresses their pain points. Utilize storytelling to connect emotionally with your target audience. Implement your strategic roadmap with precision and operational efficiency. Design your business operations to accommodate growth. Consider factors such as technology, infrastructure, HR, and supply chain to ensure scalability. Establish measurable targets to track progress and evaluate the effectiveness of your strategies. Partner with consultants, mentors, or industry experts to gain valuable insights and support. Be prepared to pivot your strategy as market conditions change. Embrace a culture of experimentation and continuous improvement.

DEFINING AFRICAN EXCELLENCE

C – Champion excellence

Assemble and champion a team that reflects the diversity of your target market and brings a wide range of perspectives and experiences. Provide opportunities for employees to grow and develop their skills through training, mentorship, and coaching. Encourage experimentation, risk-taking and problem-solving, creating a space where innovative ideas and solutions can flourish. Delegate authority and responsibility, allowing employees to take ownership of their work and contribute to your company's success. Utilize employee engagement surveys to gather feedback and identify areas for improvement.

A – Accelerate exceptional leadership

Seek and provide leadership coaching to enhance decision-making skills and governance. Demonstrate the values of Ubuntu through your own actions and behaviors. Build trust and credibility by being transparent and authentic. Cultivate trust and open communication with employees, customers, partners, and stakeholders. Encourage continuous learning, adaptability, and resilience.

L – Leverage governance for sustainable growth

Regardless of your company's size, leverage a clear governance structure to protect and grow your business. Define roles and responsibilities, ensuring

AFRO-OPTIMISM UNLEASHED

accountability and transparency. Create a governance structure that supports your business strategy and values. Integrate environmental, social, and governance (ESG) factors into decision-making. Develop a sustainability strategy aligned with your business goals. Collaborate with governments, nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), and stakeholders to create shared value. Adhere to relevant regulations and industry standards to maintain a strong reputation. Conduct regular risk assessments and implement mitigation strategies.

E – Expand your impact via growth capital

Facilitate market expansion by driving networking and partnership opportunities, whether via organic (reinvested profit) or inorganic (external funding) sources. Build social capital by attending industry events, participating in trade missions, and building relationships with key stakeholders. Identify and secure appropriate funding channels to fuel growth. Develop a compelling investment pitch to attract potential investors. Create a clear roadmap for financial sustainability and growth. Utilize financial modeling to project future performance and make informed decisions. Track KPIs to monitor progress and make data-driven decisions. Use analytics to identify trends and opportunities for improvement.

Your dedication to excellence – that relentless drive to get things right – isn't just about you; it's about

the powerful ripple effect you can create. Imagine inspiring hundreds – even millions – to embrace the same principles of collaboration, innovation, and sustainability. That’s the true essence of African excellence, and it’s within your reach. Implementing the SCALE framework will equip you to be the change you want to see. It’s your blueprint to transform your venture into a shining example for Africa, a beacon that illuminates a path to a thriving future. But remember, this roadmap isn’t a rigid set of instructions. It’s a springboard to spark your creativity and strategic thinking. As you navigate the unique landscape of African markets, be ready to adapt and refine your approach.

Final thoughts

The beauty of African excellence lies in its focus on shared success. You won’t be building your business in a vacuum. By fostering a collaborative spirit within your team, partnering with local communities, and leveraging the expertise of the African diaspora, you’ll be building a powerful ecosystem where everyone benefits. Here’s the most exciting part: you have the potential to become a magnet, attracting dream clients who share your values. These are clients who understand that success isn’t just about profit; it’s about creating positive social and environmental change. Together, we can build a movement that transcends individual companies, inspiring a new generation of African entrepreneurs to embrace purpose alongside profit.

AFRO-OPTIMISM UNLEASHED

This journey won't be easy. There will be challenges, but with a commitment to continuous improvement and a relentless pursuit of excellence, you'll overcome them. Are you ready to answer the call? Though the SCALE framework is your guide, the real power lies in your hands.

Before we dig deeper into each step in the following chapters, complete the scorecard at <https://zerconsulting.com/scaleyourbusiness> to evaluate where you currently fall on the SCALE.