

“A Journey Defined – Empathy, Courage, Industry (Discipline)”

Dr. Adesola Adeduntan, Chief Executive Officer, First Bank of Nigeria Ltd & Subsidiaries

Commencement Speech, University of Ibadan, November 13, 2019

A few years ago, 1992 to be precise, I was at this exact point in your life – graduating from this prestigious university with a degree in Veterinary medicine, and it was indeed a joyful day for me. Looking back now, that was the start of my journey into the financial services industry as the undergraduate program equipped me with the foundational tools to explore and surmount the challenges of the real world. It is my expectation that your education both within the halls of residence and lecture halls of this great institution has equipped you with some of the required foundational tools - the requisite knowledge in your chosen field of study, a sense of community and purpose, the courage to grow up and become who you truly are, and the overall discipline to stay focused and committed to your defined goals in life. My commencement lecture is anchored on these foundational tools that are required to pursue a purposeful life journey.

But first Amala! As a true Ibadan man, I sometimes enjoy a nice meal of Amala, Gbegiri and Ewedu. Yes, even executives enjoy the Amala delicacy. I have thought through the process of making Amala and how this staple food gets to the tables of thousands of Ibadan indigenes and Nigerians daily. From a little research you will find out that from a small yam seedling, a new yam is planted, fourteen weeks later, it is harvested, the skin is stripped off, sliced, cleaned, dried and processed to form Amala flour. Remember also that yam can be consumed boiled, fried or as pounded yam. What a versatile produce from mother earth! Why are we then discussing yam flour? The difference between the boiled yam or fried and Amala flour is time and process. Nonetheless, both end up as meals for families. That is how your lives’ journey will be. You have studied various courses with different durations - four or five or even six years. For each one of you, your defined journey started on your admission into this great university. It doesn’t matter how long your process will take, your final mandate, like the Amala story, is to deliver value in as many ways as possible to your society.

As the university unleashes you to the world of great possibilities and uncertainties, I would like to entrust you with some *“life hacks”* that will enable you to navigate the world both in your personal and professional lives. I have adopted these *“life hacks”* as well in my personal and professional endeavors, and in all modesty, I can say that I am a comfortable man.

- Be intentional but ready to explore opportunities (Courage)

- Define your principles and core values – begin with the end in mind (Hard work and Industry)
- Hold yourself to a personal gold standard – (Discipline)
- Be purposeful and live a life of impact – (Empathy)

Class of 2019, creating value for yourselves and others requires that you to be intentional with life decisions - from choosing your career to building networks and nurturing relationships. Take conscious decisions around your career goals and be intentional about employment or entrepreneurial offers. However, you should also be open to the adventures that life brings and explore opportunities. It is very important as you undertake your life's journey to always remember that *those who create the future do not surrender to luck or circumstance; planning the future is the first step in defining it*. Achieving your ambitious goal for the future requires that you have a strategic foresight and act intentionally. To be successful, you must define and plan your journey! This principle applies to individuals, organizations as well as economies/nations. Hitherto small/underdeveloped economies in the world have emerged to become prosperous and attractive because of intentional long-term planning (United Arab Emirate and China are classical cases).

Drawing from my personal experience; when I graduated as a veterinary doctor from this great institution, the natural move then was to either take up a position in a related government establishment or set up a veterinary enterprise. However, informed by my intentional decision, I started my professional career in 1994 as a graduate trainee in a Bank, which at the time was a steep departure point from what I had studied. During my early professional career in banking and management consulting, I deliberately pursued certifications that would allow me to thrive in my chosen field. ***The opportunities that life throws your way cannot be defined sometimes but you can define the outcomes by being intentional.*** Any decision you take going forward will require you to be courageous. It is true that life shrinks or expands in proportion to your courage, so you must do it afraid. I challenge and encourage you to actively seek opportunities and learn new things from different perspectives, and do not let complexities intimidate you.

2019 Graduates, at your points of introspection, you will find that you need to be guided by principles, those of which you will be known for. These principles are essential because they will help you grow and create the future you desire. Every individual and organization is continuously involved in decision making, and these decisions are reflective of their values and belief. Mahatma Ghandi was known for truth and non-violence; Mother Theresa for good works, life and community. Take responsibility for your life by defining your core values which, at this point in your lives, should be hard work, integrity, discipline and living an impactful life. Even in the smallest of tasks assigned to you, exhibiting these values will get you recognized and fast tracked to leadership positions.

To climb the ladder of success and widen your horizons for personal and professional growth, you will need to demonstrate high level of discipline. The very foundation of every civilized and prosperous society is discipline. At some point in my career as an experienced management consultant, I left the consulting profession to pursue an MBA at Cranfield Business school as a Chevening scholar. It was an easy decision for me because I was disciplined enough to know that it was a required step at that point in my career. The key insights for you in this example are: a) never stop learning; b) invest in yourself; and c) hold yourself up to the gold standard. Today, forward looking and successful organizations focus on delivering quality customer experience. As such, they look for and recruit employees that can deliver high quality services. Your personal discipline will show in your output. This is a critical lesson you must strive to inculcate in your personal and professional lives.

Another life lesson that will be beneficial to you, class of 2019, is to live a life of impact and purpose within your communities and business environment. Some of you will proceed into paid employment, others will become entrepreneurs, academics, and industry specialists. Impactful living will require that you are empathic. Empathy is an important skill for being a successful leader. Why? Empathy puts us more in tune with our own emotions, how to process and understand them, so we can then relate to others' emotional reality more readily and effectively. Enhancing empathetic qualities in yourself will give you the ability to navigate complexities and to build and sustain a more peaceful work environment. Being empathic in your professional capacity, you will be in a better position to effectively lead and inspire others, as well as be a more caring, compassionate companion in relationships.

Building empathy in yourself is then crucial if you wish to have a global career of learning and interacting with new cultures. Learning how to retain control over internal, emotional realities, while still being able to consider controversial or alternate viewpoints, will help you to create more collaborative work spaces, learning environments, and societies. I would like to note that these qualities are increasingly important to organizations, as they search for employees who can demonstrate critical thinking, the ability to adapt to new learning or situations quickly, and capacities in collaboration and innovation.

Chancellor, ladies and gentlemen of the academia, in pursuit of building the next generation of leaders and entrepreneurs, it is our noble responsibility to increase the value of our youths, not only through the quality of their formal education but also by infusing critical thinking, problem solving and qualitative skills that will boost their personal and professional growth. While we continue to pursue a strong case for improving the environment within which education and employment happens, we have a critical responsibility to equip graduates with the competencies required to succeed in the world of innovation and technological disruptions. This could be achieved by: leveraging massive online open courses as an institutional response to the new ways of learning; revamping the school curriculum to

include programming and coding skills, as well as the provision of broad band access across all higher institutions of learning. I am hopeful that all stakeholders will collaborate in the quest to enriching the learning experience across all higher institutions of study in Nigeria.

Class of 2019, as you prepare for the journey ahead, and as you plan to celebrate today with your family and friends over a meal of Jollof rice or Amala, I want to reiterate the following: **be intentional, have the "can do mindset", do it afraid, have core values that align with your vision, be excellent, be healthy and follow your purpose with precision and discipline, and if you fail, rise and charge forward.**

On a final note, I leave you with this quote from Martin Luther King Jr. *" if you can't fly, then run, if you can't run, then walk, if you can't walk, then crawl, but by all means keep moving"*. You will all go through different processes in your life journeys, but the society expects each one of you to deliver tangible and impactful value.

I thank you for your attention.

Dr. Sola Adeduntan
Chief Executive Officer
FirstBank of Nigeria Ltd & Subsidiaries