

African Economic Forum Adds Perspective to Thoughts of African Professionals

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On Saturday, April 1, the 14th Annual African Economic Forum was held at Columbia Law School in New York City. The best and brightest came together to gain more knowledge and perspective on success as a professional or entrepreneur with roots from Africa. With a great line-up of speakers that embodied this year's theme "Building Bridges, Breaking Barriers," from the morning until early evening there was something for everyone.

Here's some highlights and key points made in a couple panel discussions.

The Women in Business panel brought a diverse group of business women to discuss their experiences as working professionals. Their different backgrounds and experience made for an interesting panel discussion, but one thing they all agreed on was whether you're an entrepreneur, corporate, career changing, or an intrapreneur that doing good work is always a great way to get anywhere positive in your career.

"Doing really great work and building really great businesses are important because by nature of doing that you command respect. When you're in a room with an investor they may come in with their baggage and perceptions, but being amazing at what you do all that doesn't matter. You show that the opportunity is still great and they don't want to miss out." -Chi Achebe

"It's all about doing great work. We are black women and I don't look at that as a negative. You are who you are, but what someone is going to attach to you is what your work product is. When you do great work that's when they're going to have you in those meetings." – Temilola Sobowale

"Doing good work is not enough. There I said it, but a good point she made is she did good work and talked to her mentor. Mentors are very important for any woman in any corporation, sponsors as well. Doing good work is great to keep your job, but it's not going to help you elevate. You have to start planning your moves early, see who the players are, identify your sponsor whether they're inside the corporation or not." – Adeola Adejobi

Doing great work can lead to great mentors and sponsors, but the issue women sometimes face are social and societal expectations. Using our differences to our advantage can be more of an asset as women of color. Here's what some of the ladies had to say about these things.

"What I found to be the most empowering thing is just deciding 1) to be unbothered by it and 2) completely focused on what you're doing. I think the biggest challenge that as women we face, is not that we can't do it, but unlearning a lot of what we've been trained to do. Like focusing on being liked and caring about people's perceptions of us." -Chi Achebe

"The fact that you're visible makes them want to hear what you have to say. Then once they see you're articulate they're like okay. I encourage you to change the mindsets. That fact that you're visible is a huge advantage, and you are definitely not a minority. I'm a data driven person and that's just not a fact. We're working for companies that

have a global footprint.” – Yoli Chisholm

“I know what I know and I’m very confident in myself, no one can disarm me of my degree. I sit in a lot of meetings where I’m the only black person. I have to be comfortable with that. There are a lot of rooms that I walk in that I’m different. I’m not the only one that’s uncomfortable, but what I found is that a lot of the other people are uncomfortable too. I’m the only woman in a meeting under thirty and everyone else is a Jewish man over 50. They don’t know what to talk about. Unfortunately, you have to go above and beyond to try to connect with other people.” – Temi Adeniji

In the African Narratives panel the distinguished group of storytellers essentially made it clear that telling your unique story is something no one can take away from you. The continent is huge with 54 countries with different languages, traditions, cultures, and jollof. The more African people share and look to tell stories from different perspectives it will lead to the “de-ghettoizing” of the African narratives.

“You can talk about anything it’s just about how you structure the message” – Michael Rain

“I don’t think any one person can tell the African story. I think we all have very different perspectives and what needs to happen is we need to accept the fact that the story over hear of the Nigerian in New York or DC is as African as the Nigerian that’s living in Lagos working.” -Nana Ekua Brew-Hammond

“We need to focus on telling the truth. If we can tell the truth in all of its complexities and dirt and hilarity and all of those things, the balance comes out in the wash” -Nana Ekua Brew-Hammond

“You can be apart of the narrative if you’re from the diaspora. Being part of the diaspora is part of the African narrative. We need to understand we cannot continue to homogenize this idea of Africa, but instead understand the nuances and complexities are very much a part of that. We also need to do the deep digging, research, and have inter-generational conversations. I talk to my parents all the time that’s how I get a lot of my information.” -Amy Sall

As the popularity of Africa has begun to rise so has appropriation. Our panelists had plenty to say about the topic also.

“We have to be careful not to be the appropriation police because on the one hand we have a trauma that is very real because our stories have been mishandled and funneled through all these agendas and perspectives that is a historical and present day reality, but we also have to understand that the world is global. All of us are mixing.” -Nana Ekua Brew-Hammond

“The fact that in general a lot of the current structures have been built on the backs of African people and African American people there is a sensitivity to who’s taking ownership of the things that we’ve created or that come from the sweat of our people. It becomes problematic when its like ‘this is great I’m just going to apply it to my field and I’m not going to give credit or if I do give credit I’m not going to give them anything of whatever I make.’ – Nosarieme Garrick

"Its extremely problematic when we don't get to own our things." – Amy Salls

"We need to make a clear differentiation: Drake did not go and pull an Afrobeat and say this is a Drake beat. He had African people working with him on his album, and now Wizkid has a platform and is getting money. As opposed to if you're going on a Zara site and you're looking at a "tribal" dresses, that's a slap in the face." – Nosarieme Garrick

Our afternoon keynote speaker, Hakeem Belo-Osagie, had plenty of unexpected gems for the journey of success-four to be exact.

"Which kind of partner shouldn't I have for the rest of my life? Which kind of partner should I have for the rest of my life? You will find that those decisions on who is your partner in life, what is your relationship with your children, are far more important to determine your happiness far more than any success you will ever achieve in your life."

"There's very few figures you can trust, very little data, no institutions and everything that you've been taught about mitigating risk is no longer applicable. When you go into an emerging market often times it is like walking in the fog. You cannot always see to the very end, but continue walking you must because the light does come at the end of the tunnel, but if you wait for that light to come you can be certain 5 or 6 or 7 other people have gotten there far ahead of you. You will have lost an opportunity."

"On all the occasions I had failure or a setback it has always resulted in my learning lessons I could not have learned if I only had successes. It has emboldened me to correct those mistakes I made. It gave me the tenacity and determination to plunge ahead and when I look back 5 years and later I come to the conclusion that without that failure, without that setback, I would not have been able to make the progress that I have indeed made. Failure shouldn't crush you, paralyze you."

"Far more important than intelligence and natural ability, which you hear so much about, is commitment, tenacity, and stamina. The ability to keep on going and going and going. I find that a lot of the people you hear in sports, or in business professions you hear how naturally gifted they are. You will find in the words of Malcolm Gladwell that they do 10,000 hours of work. When you do 10,000 hours of work in something its amazing how naturally gifted that you look. Go for it, put everything you have into it. Attack it as if your entire life depended on it."

"You will find in your life that your ability to work with teams and set-up teams compliment you. To respect the other members of your team, to realize the contributions they make that you cannot do yourself and therefore rewarding them fairly and making them feel integral part of whatever you're making is going to be crucial."


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