

## LEADERSHIP CASE NEXT

"Perhaps the biggest obstacle to progress in Nigeria is the abiding cynicism of the people," says Dele Olojede. "They've been disappointed for so long that they no longer believe. So they turn to the churches and the mosques and to prophets of doom and bearers of unfounded good tidings—and their condition worsens, because they are not facing up to the hard and necessary facts of life, which they have to engage with in order to improve."

Dele has made it his life's work to face up to facts, and to encourage everyone else to do the same.

He became a journalist, inspired by the environment in which he came of age. Back then, Nigeria was an optimistic, post-independence garden of creativity. He grew up in a university town where thought leaders like Wole Soyinka and Chinua Achebe congregated. His father subscribed to three daily newspapers, and the young Dele was dazzled by columnists' picture bylines. He never had interest in being anything else.

**“ YOU CAN'T GUARANTEE THAT YOU WILL SUCCEED, BUT YOU MUST GUARANTEE THAT YOU WILL GIVE IT YOUR ALL. ”**

But by the time Dele was getting his own bylines, Nigeria had changed. It had been overtaken by what economists call the 'resource curse'—the paradox that developing countries with an abundance of natural reserves see worse economic growth than countries without natural resources. Graft among the politically connected was out of control, the circumstances of ordinary people's lives were increasingly straitened, and there was no apparent limit to what those in power would do to protect their position.

"They sent a letter bomb to my editor and he was killed. He was a close friend. That triggered a series of events," says Dele. "I issued a statement accusing the military dictatorship of being behind the killing, and it became prudent to leave." A timely Ford Foundation Scholars grant for Columbia University's School of Journalism meant Dele was able to do just that. "So I left Nigeria as a 26-year-young hotshot journalist, crusading against evil."

One thing led to another, and Dele ended up forging his career in the US, rather than in Nigeria. It was a stellar career which included, amongst other awards, a Pulitzer Prize. In time, it became clear that Dele was on a trajectory leading swiftly to the editor's desk.

Though the years had passed, that 26-year-old crusading journalist was still alive, and Dele couldn't warm to the idea of a desk job. His heart was still longing to make a difference in Nigeria. "I have

## ABOUT DELE

On staff at **New York Newsday** for over 16 years, including as foreign editor.

In 2008, founded Timbuktu Media, publisher of NEXT and a forthcoming pan-African platform.

Left Lagos on a Ford Foundation scholarship for Columbia University's School of Journalism in 1987.

**First African to win the Pulitzer Prize** in 2005 for his coverage of Rwanda in the wake of the genocide.

**Fellow of the Africa Leadership Initiative-South Africa of the Aspen Global Leadership Network and 2011 Winner of the John P. McNulty Prize.**

deep familial and community relationships in Nigeria; I was always conscious that people I really care about were being held hostage by the corruption that was ruining the country. I love this place, I love these people, and my heart was bleeding at the suffering.

“In the end, it’s love that keeps the dream alive.”

It was time to step away, to go back, says Dele, “to try and do the only thing I could reasonably competently do. To create an avenue for public conversation through a new organization immune to the pressures of corruption, that would make the conditions under which Nigerians live very clear to them, so that no one would be able to claim that they didn’t know what was going on.” He wanted, in other words, to reintroduce the independent press to Nigeria, and to change the environment through changing the discourse.

“ WE SHOWED PEOPLE THERE ARE WAYS OF BEING OTHER THAN THE SWAMP ATMOSPHERE. THE YOUNG REPORTERS ARE CARRYING THE TORCH. ”

At the time he joined the Africa Leadership Initiative (ALI), a part of the Aspen Global Leadership Network (AGLN), however, Dele was still “slightly lacking” in courage and determination. “I enjoy the good life, and Nigeria is not cushy.” It was the ALI experience that gave Dele the final push. “The way the AGLN Fellowship program is structured allows one to develop deep and meaningful relationships. When you make undertakings, you make them to the Fellows as well as to yourself. The idea of not following through becomes abhorrent because you value their respect.”

Secondly, Dele says, through the AGLN “you’re dealing with a network of extraordinary people, bright, inventive, creative people, and just talking to them fires you up with new perspectives on what you’re doing, and makes you want to do it.”

What Dele wanted to do required him to build a media group from

## ABOUT NEXT

- NEXT’s mission was to **arm Nigerians with facts**, encourage better decisions and prompt leaders into accountable and ethical behavior.
- To staff NEXT, **Dele selected 90 out of 13,000 applicants**. While it is common for Nigerian reporters to accept “brown envelopes” in exchange for positive coverage, **NEXT reporters were trained to maintain independence and the highest ethical standards**.
- NEXT, financed by Nigerian backers, began as an online platform. Within three months, it reached over 2 million unique monthly visitors, making it **Nigeria’s most visited online news source**. NEXT ran a 24-hour newsroom with a robust circulation.
- The political system began to fight aggressively as NEXT exposed the corruption of the Nigerian elite. NEXT eventually had to close down for financial reasons.

the ground up. A printing works needed to be built, and journalists needed to be trained. From an application pool of more than 13,000, Dele selected 90 candidates. None of them had ever known a graft-free world. Establishing a set of values consistent with independent reporting was critical. “In order to ‘convert’ our staff, I had to make it clear that I was going to sacrifice personally. Neither my wife nor I took a pay check for five years.

“But in less time than I thought, we started getting reports back that always, when the brown envelopes started getting handed out, the NEXT reporter would stand up and leave.

“I felt we had already succeeded.”

Apparently fearless, NEXT went to places that other news outlets simply would not. The team exposed the fact that Nigerian legislators are the world’s most highly paid and least effective, contextualizing the information in terms of salaries of ordinary civil servants like police and teachers. It exposed Nigeria’s richest tycoon for “forgetting” to pay tax for five years: he himself estimated he was \$600 million in arrears. The authorities were embarrassed into reacting, the first time the apparent immunity of the rich and powerful was so publicly breached. NEXT precipitated a change in government by exposing that then-President Umaru Yar’Adua was brain dead, while the nation was being assured he would be returning to office. The team also broke the Halliburton scandal, which revealed that the oil company had bribed almost the entire Nigerian political elite.

It did not take long before the establishment began to fight back.

One powerful weapon was isolation. Important stories NEXT broke were ignored by other media, even though NEXT—unusually for

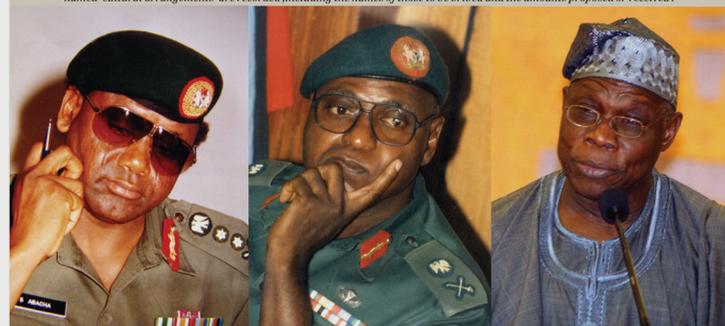
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## The Halliburton bribe takers

NEXT obtained a copy of one US indictment while a second, from a Houston district court was unsealed for NEXT’s exclusive viewing.

The full list of Nigerians who are culpable can be found at the EFCC, Abuja. Now known as the Chodan papers, the document was originally domiciled with the Templars Law firm in Victoria Island, Lagos. The various schemes worked out by TSKJ for the purpose of bribery, code-named ‘cultural arrangements’ are recorded, including the names of those to be bribed and the amounts proposed or received.



news organizations, which default to protecting exclusivity—offered to share source documents. Others simply lacked the courage to report the facts that angered powerful people. It was also common for top newspaper editors to be on the payrolls of the powerful.

As NEXT continued to expose government graft, pressure escalated. “Our fatal strategic mistake was to launch a print product, instead of keeping it to online,” Dele reflects now. Any newspaper business model relies mostly on advertising revenue to pay costs, supported by sales of the product—and circulation figures, in turn, determine how much a newspaper can charge for advertising space. There are multiple points of sabotage, and the Nigerian establishment took advantage of all of them.

“I misunderstood the sheer difficulty of running a clean business in the Nigerian environment,” says Dele. “If you don’t come from a position of real strength, the temptation to succumb is exceedingly high. You’re seen as an unreasonable person if you don’t hand out or accept bribes.

## “ IN THE END, IT’S LOVE THAT KEEPS THE DREAM ALIVE. ”

“For instance, when our newsprint arrived at the port, the customs team expected their usual bribes to release it—which of course we refused to pay. So they delayed releasing it. There is a penalty of \$1,000 for every day you leave goods at port. It took us about 90 days to get our paper released.”

As the pressure mounted, Dele began to rue his decision to raise his start-up capital in Nigeria: “My investors were in jeopardy. The government squeezed them, and many bailed out.” Advertising income, similarly, was pulled as advertisers feared the consequences of aligning themselves with NEXT’s position on government and other corruption.

With NEXT foundering, and Nigeria apparently turning its back on him, Dele was in deep distress. Ultimately, Dele had no choice but to close down NEXT.

“Failure will be different for everyone, but for me it was profoundly destabilizing,” he says. “There was intense frustration and anger that I had sacrificed everything, including my family’s finances, exposed myself to danger, strained family relationships—and after all that I still had to shut down. It took me a while to internalize that even incremental change, small changes, count.

“Some of those who worked for NEXT understood, but others became angry and personal. They felt betrayed by the fact that I had not made NEXT work. I dealt with it by becoming generous: I knew the anger came from a place of deep disappointment—I had led them to believe that we could change the country. I absorbed the abuse.

“But that takes its toll. It’s traumatic.

“I lost interest in everything. For more than three years, I was just not up for anything else, no matter how attractive it was.”

In late 2015, emerging from his state of listlessness and “dabbling,” Dele began to ask himself the what-next question. “If I live as long as my father, who died in his 90s, that means I will live for another 35 years,” he says. “How would I want to spend that time?”

Dele is circling back to his first love. Instead of the intense focus on Nigeria, he is actively working on a platform for long-form writing on the broader African world, for which some of the world’s best writers will be corralled into service. The platform, tentatively called ‘Afar,’ signals a sense of perspective, as if from a distance, and is a nod to the Afar Depression in the Ethiopian highlands, where the earliest hominid remains known have been found.

It has been more than five years since NEXT folded. With hindsight, we asked Dele, was it worth it?

“I now realize what we unleashed on the country,” he says. “We trained an army of young people who are now seeded across the system, and dominate the public conversation in Nigeria today. Everywhere you turn they are there, raising their voices and making a difference. Just this year, members of NEXT’s core investigative team were part of the consortium of journalists that broke the Panama Papers story, and were awarded the Pulitzer Prize.

“So yes, it was worth it—we showed people there are ways of being other than the swamp atmosphere. The young reporters are carrying the torch.”

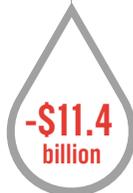


# THE NIGERIAN CONTEXT

Nigeria was ranked most corrupt country in a 2016 US News & World report.



Despite its natural wealth as Africa's #1 oil exporter, Nigeria's financial situation is dire: debt reached an all-time high of \$11.4 billion in 2016.



Nigeria is estimated to have lost over \$400 billion to corruption since its independence.

Corruption fuels inequality.

70% of Nigerians live below the poverty line.



The minimum wage in Nigeria is less than \$60 a month.



Yet, Nigerian legislators are the world's highest paid legislators. Their salaries are more than 240x the minimum wage, and with "allowances," legislator pay rises to over \$1 million for some.



## IN HIS OWN WORDS: WHAT DELE HAS LEARNED

### Play to your strengths.

"Doing something aligned with your passion and expertise dramatically improves your chances of success, as well as the potential scale of what you're trying to take on."

### Realism equals resilience.

"Things don't necessarily change at your pace. Prepare for the worst: it will mitigate the impact of nasty surprises."

### Just get on with it.

"If you feel the full weight of the obstacles you're going to face in advance, you're never going to do it. In a way, a certain level of ignorance is necessary to get started."

### There's a big picture.

"You don't have to change the world right this minute. The important thing is to engage. It's in the trying."