

MADAM PRESIDENT

I got down from the helicopter and watched as it made its return trip, knowing fully well that it will not return for another one week, a known feeling of fear engulfed me. I questioned my career choice. Did I have what it takes to be a humanitarian? I wondered if I would be another Boko Haram victim. Will I ever make it back from my first trip? I asked myself.

I had travelled to Ngala, the conflict capital of Borno state in Nigeria to serve the internally displaced persons (IDPs) in that town, those who had lost their children, parents, siblings, friends, homes and livelihood to Boko Haram attacks. As I approached the first IDP camp, I recalled all the many stories I heard about this place, the newspaper articles describing the people I was about to meet for the first time. I recalled all the medium posts I read the night preceding the day of my trip describing the people as uncivilized and heathen.

On the first day of distribution, I nervously counted the relief materials I was carrying for the second time to ensure I had not missed out on any household as the crowd of excited people steadily grew before me. I sighted a little girl who would not stop staring and smiling at me.

“*Sabo ne*”, she said to a woman that I suspected to be her mother meaning, “She’s new” in Hausa language. “Hello and how are you doing?” I said to the little girl and she replied with giggles and hid behind the woman. I asked the same questions again this time in Hausa and she replied, “I understand English and I am fine”. I immediately felt ashamed of myself for judging the little girl’s ability to speak English and went back to my distribution of relief materials.

I finished my distribution early and took a tour around the camp. As I walked around making observations and taking photographs, I met the little girl and her mother again and this time I knew not to judge but to ask questions. I found out the little girl's name is Halima and her Mother is Roseline. I sat with them in their tent and Roseline told me her story. Her story of how the school where she was a volunteer Mathematics teacher in Maiduguri was attacked by Boko Haram members and how she ran for her life with her little girl Halima for days in the forest without food and barely drinking water. Alongside others, they were heading for Cameroon but were rescued midway by the Nigerian military and were brought to the Ngala IDP camp. She left Maiduguri town without her husband, and until then she did not know if he was dead or alive.

“All of that is behind me now, I am making a life for myself and my daughter, I am now the Women’s leader in this IDP camp,” She bragged with a smirk on her face. I won the election fair and square! “I will teach all the young girls and women here how to make *cool cash*,” she continued. “I teach them Mathematics in the camp school and a little science. I also teach the women how to weave raffia into beautiful storage, baskets and bags. These were sold to traders from Cameroon and Maiduguri who visited the camp regularly.”

Do you know what people in this camp call me? Roseline asked me with a stern look. What? I asked, they call me madam president. I will not only stop at being the women’s leader in this camp, one day, I will be the president of Nigeria. She continued to tell me how she had also rallied the men to teach the boys in the camp skills they had learnt before moving to the IDP

camp. She told me how she organized other women to transfer their skills to the younger girls. How they save up monthly to buy new machines and equipment for themselves and the girls.

After my conversation with her, I thought to myself, alas, this place is not as bad as I thought.

“All our knowledge has its origin in our perceptions”

— *Leonardo Da Vinci*

The first responsibility of a leader according to Max Depress is to define reality. Reality is subject to how we understand the world, how we think, it works. But oftentimes it's not that straightforward because even though we live in an era when information can easily be gotten from the internet. An era where with a simple click on the Google search bar and you will find yourself in a sea of conflicting data.

This raises the first lesson I learnt from my experience at the IDP camp. How can you differentiate between right and wrong information? How can you pick out information that has been manipulated to suit the narrative of its promoters? How can we sort through data gotten from different sources to arrive at one clean information without altering it?

The logical response to this would be that it takes proper evaluation and analysis for one to get the right information needed. It is a known fact there is a lot of jargons online and conducting your personal research will help a leader in making better-informed decisions. This may be costlier and time-consuming but you would be rewarded with quality decision making and in turn, better leadership.

On the flip side some of the big questions of life ~ How should we live? What is the right economic system to institute? What choices should we make? ~ That bedevil us, individually and collectively, have no facts to appeal to.

To this, I'd say the first task a leader must do is learn to recognize the various biases people are susceptible to, acknowledge it and then consider an alternative opinion. The leader is also subject to various biases.

In praise of Bias, the author concludes by saying, “We don't need our information stripped of bias, we need to evolve our way, through a clash of ideologies, towards the best kinds of bias.”

It's human nature to be biased, the question is what would we do with this biases.

Before my trip to Ngala, I had armed myself with various articles, and write-ups about the displaced people in Ngala but nothing prepared me for the shock I experienced. I had never read about the organized political systems in the IDPs, nor the highly educated and entrepreneurial minds these young adults in Ngala possessed. All I saw in all my research was a weak population waiting for aid to be handed to them. It's typical for stories to be told from a single perspective if only I had considered what possible biases the writers could have (negativity bias) and imagined other possible realities I'd have less shocked.

Follow effective action with quiet reflection. From the quiet reflection will come even more effective action.

Peter Drucker

My trip to the IDP camp enabled me to see a different population from my online research. I saw people willing to make a change in their lives and not just collect handouts. It helped me to critically analyze and evaluate the situation of displaced persons and rethink the modality of our operation in giving humanitarian assistance. I and a team of ten were able to conduct research on how to improve humanitarian assistance not just in Ngala but in Bama, Gwoza and Rann IDPs and a new model of assistance was developed. Now the humanitarian assistance in that region does not only give relief materials but also engages in capacity strengthening.

It's not enough to spend time and money sourcing information, it's important to remember that information is gotten from human beings who are subject to biases. Critical thinking should start with realizing that the basis for thinking, which is information could be incorrect.

Effective leadership is not about making speeches or being liked; leadership is defined by results not attributes

Peter Drucker

I drew a lot of leadership lessons from Roseline. Despite finding herself in critical and unfamiliar situations, she rose above the odds and not only uplifts herself, she does so to others as well. She found herself in an unknown territory far away from home, she is able to do something to change her situation. This is exemplary leadership with results to her daughter and the young girls around her.

Roseline comes from a society that does not support women being the sole providers in their homes or women leadership as it is the norm in Northern Nigeria, Roseline is quick to embrace the change in gender roles. She willingly presents herself to be voted in as the women leader and actively goes in search of new ways to provide for her family.

According to Drucker in his 1959 book "*The Landmarks of Tomorrow*", knowledge workers and their productivity would be the most valuable asset of the 21st century. A knowledge worker is a person who is able to transfer information and teach others after they have solved a problem and can link information from different sources to form new information. A knowledge worker is a controller, helper, learner, linker, networker, organizer, retriever, sharer, solver and tracker. These are also the qualities of 21st century leaders.

"It had long since come to my attention that people of accomplishment rarely sat back and let things happen to them. They went out and happened to things."

Leonard Da Vinci

Roseline is a 21st century leader; she is not just an ordinary leader but a knowledge worker. She is able to combine not just a divergent way of thinking but also a convergent way. She was able to learn and adapt to a new way of living and also teach those around her how to adapt to the new life they have found themselves. She was able to link the women in the camp to the traders so they could sell their merchandise. She also organized the men to transfer their skills to the young boys. She saw a problem of finding a new means of livelihood in the camp and solved it.

She managed to critically examine the problem and bring practical solutions. Despite her current conditions, she still has dreams of one day becoming Nigerian's president.

How does one critically think in critical times?

The 21st century leader must believe that critical thinking isn't rocket science, it's as simple as this:

First accept that basis of your thinking which is information could be flawed, consider alternative perspectives and then choose the best option.

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