

stars insights: 4 January 2017

“I want everyone to see Africa as a business opportunity”

Exclusive interview with Charles Fordjour Agyemang, Head Policy and Governmental Affairs Africa, F. Hoffmann La Roche Ltd., Ghana, stars alumnus

1. If you could re-design the education system in the country where you live, what changes would you make to better promote the leadership skills of the younger generation?

I think one of the biggest challenges that the existing educational system in Africa faces is that, students have the wrong mind-set about who should find them a job after graduation. Many of them think that it is the government's responsibility to employ every educated person after school. It is critical for our educational system to educate students in a different way so that they can feel empowered to create their own business and generate their own income. They should be able to see that the best way is not to work for somebody else but for yourself.

Therefore, the educational system needs to focus more on helping people create the entrepreneurship mind-set, so that they can see themselves as the solution providers, and see government as the one who sets up the policy framework for them to leverage and deliver on their vision. In addition, helping people to develop the entrepreneurship mind-set can also support them to create bigger dreams, which I think will bring a brighter potential for Africa's future development.

Furthermore, the education on IT in our schools is very theoretic, which in a large extent is due to lack of availability of the gadgets for practical lessons. It is important to develop the hands-on experience from the basic level of education. For example, children should be put as close as possible to computers, so that they can touch, see and use them, and these devices become part of their daily lives. This will improve skill set of the potential work force for African countries in the short to medium term.

2. What is the most valuable leadership lesson you have learned from your own experience?

Never assume that people have understood your vision as a leader because you addressed your entire team or you have it posted on the walls. In-depth discussions, answering questions, addressing doubts and potential misunderstandings between me and my team is always important afterwards. In fact, I have a checklist of the questions I should ask, for example: what is your

understanding of what I said? Do you believe in it? If you need to make a change, what will you do? Where do you think you need my help, and where will you be able to deliver by yourself? How often do you need to talk with me?

3. You have had 18-years experience in pharmaceutical industry, in your opinion, what are the most critical and urgent problems in Africa's healthcare system, have you found out any practical solutions for these problems?

The healthcare problem in Africa can be summarized by just one word: **ACCESS**. Access is like a chain with many different elements and barriers, which starts from the awareness of patients, quality and quantity of infrastructure and diagnostics, quality and quantity of healthcare practitioners, right policy and regulatory framework, availability of funding to ensure patients do not pay out of pocket, efficient supply chain that ensure availability and affordability, etc. However, patients in Africa often do not have answers to these questions, they are limited by these barriers from getting full access to healthcare. Improving the healthcare system in Africa is all about removing these access barriers.

All of these questions are equally important for the healthcare system, we cannot address the access issue by solving some of them and neglecting others. Partnership is key. It is unrealistic to expect African governments to find solutions for all the questions. When (pharmaceutical) companies go to Africa, it is important for them to know that they should build up partnership with other industry players, as well as with governments to address these access challenges together. It is the only effective way for drug companies to find the need for their drugs, and only when they are able to remove those access barriers, can they experience the potential market value of their drugs.

4. It is widely recognized that leadership plays a critical role in the Africa transformation. In your opinion, what kinds of leadership are needed in improving Africa's healthcare system?

I think the key to a successful leadership in Africa's healthcare system is ability to change mindsets for all to see good health as a critical ingredient of national growth.

In Africa, everyone pays motor insurance for our cars and do routine checks on our cars. However, it is very seldom that people buy health insurance or even just have routine medical checkups. We need the change of mind-set that people realize they should invest and take care of their health. Getting all to realize that paying something annually for your health is the right investment and ultimately working with stakeholders to get governments to buy into Universal health coverage for its population will be key.

5. You said that your career ambitious is to explore business opportunities which can address the healthcare problems in Africa, could you please give us some examples on how you can achieve this goal?

I always say that the disease burden in Africa is the potential business opportunity for healthcare companies. For example, if you go to Brazil where there are 200 000 women living with breast cancer and the associated big value of the pharma business in breast cancer, when compared to the low current value in Africa where there are 460 000 women living with breast cancer, it is obvious that if access hurdles were addressed equally the business opportunities in Africa will be double.

That is the reason why I want everyone to see Africa as a business opportunity – because we are sitting on the disease burden. Charity or philanthropy is good but not a sustainable solution. How long can anyone or any company keep on providing free drugs? It is more important to provide the drugs at lower costs and keep the system sustainable. I often ask drug companies to imagine how the African market will look like for our business if we can, together with the governments and stakeholders in the countries address the access barriers. How early we are able to remove all these barriers will be how good we can look like in Africa.

This interview was conducted by Dr. Sophie Liu at the sidelines of stars Switzerland in September 2016 in Stein am Rhein.

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