

African Entrepreneurs – Successful and Responsible

Episode 11

**Title: “The Harder We Work, The More We Succeed”: Mo Ibrahim,
The African Pioneer Of Mobile Communications**

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INTRO:

Welcome to the final episode of our Learning-by-Ear-series “African Entrepreneurs – Successful and Responsible”. Today you’re going to meet Mo Ibrahim, one of the most successful entrepreneurs of African origin in the world. He’s the founder of Celtel, a mobile communication company with which he captured the African market. But Mo Ibrahim is also a philanthropist who’s trying to improve living conditions in Africa. In order to promote good governance on the continent he invested his own private capital to set up the Mo Ibrahim Foundation. It’s based in the British capital, London - and that’s where our story begins.

1. SFX: Busy street noise, London

2. Narration

It's midday in Central London, and the city is as busy as ever. There's heavy traffic on the roads, and people are hurrying along the pavements. Here, near Hyde Park and the well-known shopping area of Oxford Street, is where you'll find the offices of the foundation set up by Mo Ibrahim, which also bears his name. Our meeting with the founder, who's now in his sixties, takes place in a conference room with plenty of natural light and windows overlooking a little green park. So did Mo Ibrahim's father, a cotton merchant, ever dream that his son would move from the banks of the Nile to the banks of the Thames? That he'd become such a successful engineer and businessman? And that the young Mohammed – known to everyone as Mo – would end up one of the richest men in the world? Mo Ibrahim laughs, and says that his parents gave him and his brothers and sisters the best possible start in life.

3. O-Ton Mo Ibrahim

“Well, I come from a poor family, lower-middle class type of family. And I owe it really to my parents, especially to my mother. She was very keen on education, because education was seen as a way out of poverty. She said: “Look, all of you must go to a university.” We are five children and it was very costly for them and very tough to look after us and to make sure that we are able to go to school and then to university, all of us before we are able to take a job and come to help out. So a great sacrifice from our parents. And I'm telling all the young people who are listening to me now: please go home and study. That is the way out of poverty.”

4. Narration

Mo's parents never needed to worry about *him* as far as education was concerned. Mo was ambitious – and one of the best students in his class in the Egyptian city of Alexandria. His family had moved there from Sudan, and it was in Alexandria that Mo grew up.

5. O-Ton Mo Ibrahim

“Yes, we are Nubians. Our villages are along the Nile. We live there almost for 5000 years, one of the oldest civilizations around the Nile, and it is a narrow valley around the Nile. Migration was quite normal for some members of the family to go and work in the cities, because the land is not enough for people to live off. That is the reason my father went to Alexandria to work there.”

6. Narration

At the age of 18, the young Mo was especially keen on physics and maths, but he was also very interested in social justice. He wanted to make big changes in the world through his work as an engineer; to finally put an end to dependence on other countries; to develop Africa and make it self-reliant – with bridges and roads, a functioning infrastructure. In the years just after many African states achieved independence from their former colonial rulers, this was the idea that was uppermost in Mo Ibrahim's mind. He became an engineer, graduating from university in Egypt with a Masters degree. Then he received his first job offer.

7. O-Ton Mo Ibrahim

“I went to Khartoum to work at the telecom administration and then I went to Britain to continue my education. In Britain I spent a lot of time at the university. (...) I got a grant. It was a grant at that time between the British Council and the Sudanese government and so I came to that grant to do my masters.”

8. Narration

After studying for several more years, and working at the university as a research fellow, Mo Ibrahim gained his Ph.D. and was taken on by a British phone company in the early 1980s. He stayed with the business for eight years before leaving to start his own software and consultancy firm.

9. O-Ton Mo Ibrahim

“I left because I was dissatisfied by work and I was not impressed actually by the way big companies really conduct their business. I think there are a lot of inefficiencies, a lot of in-fighting. I really got fed up with all this and I decided to have control over my own destiny.”

10. Narration

His own company, MSI, started out small, with just one engineer and one consultant. They developed specialized networks and software for the mobile telecommunications industry. Mo and his small team soon realized that, in this industry, if you came up with new ideas and did good work, it was also possible to earn good money. Furthermore, through his company MSI Mo was engaging once again with his youthful ideals: becoming involved in development work and setting up a global network to connect people. The company grew rapidly. One of the areas it focussed on was the development of a “Global System for Mobile Communications”, or GSM for short. This is a form of digital transmission technology. The European and North American markets welcomed him with open arms.

11. O-Ton Mo Ibrahim:

“We had 400 engineers working for us in the United States. So it was engineering, we never thought of a business. We were just a bunch of engineers, enjoying what we were doing, and we were going around and were doing what we liked to do and we discovered that we could make a lot of money doing that, so why not.” (laughs)

12. Narration

In Africa, however, Ibrahim’s company was encountering a lot of practical obstacles. But obstacles are there to be overcome!

13. O-Ton Mo Ibrahim

“Actually we didn’t get any work in Africa, because we discovered there was no investment in Africa, no networks in Africa, and that is why later on we decided to go and build those networks ourselves. And that was how Celtel was built, actually.”

14. SFX: Montage of various mobile phone ringtones

15. Narration

Digital music and electronic beeps, noisy and quiet – it’s impossible nowadays to imagine even the remotest corners of Africa without the ringing of mobile phones. And this is thanks in large part to Mo Ibrahim. After selling off his first business, MSI, for the gigantic sum of more than 600 million US dollars, he was able to turn his attention to his second business, Celtel. Celtel offered to provide mobile telephony for Africa. It was a pioneering product. Mobile phones operate independently of complicated technical infrastructures – and Mo Ibrahim is convinced that this idea can really move Africa forwards. That’s why he still hasn’t retired after selling off MSI.

Even if his work on the African continent offered many new opportunities, Mo Ibrahim still frequently had to deal with problems and setbacks in developing what was for Africa an entirely new technology. But you’d be wrong to think he compromised as a result.

16. Mo Ibrahim

“We don’t compromise because we learned very early on - compromising is a very slippery road. If you start to compromise, you will never know where you end. Setbacks? We had a lot of setbacks, as in any business or in every life. There were some places where we paid for that, where we wanted the license (...), but we couldn’t build a network, because we found the environment to be really, really hostile, and we refused to play ball, because we refused to compromise, so we handed the license back with a lot of investment and we said that we were not going to do it. So in a couple of situations – yes, we had some problems, we lost some money. But in the majority of what we have done, succeeding was profitable and that is the way of doing business.”

17. SFX: Coins jingling

18. Narration

That's the sound of a lot of coins all jingling in one hand. It's tempting to believe that, in Mo Ibrahim's hands, everything just turns to gold. Celtel is one of the most successful African companies in history. The business was so profitable that a Kuwaiti firm was prepared to pay almost three and a half billion US dollars for it. Mo Ibrahim sold Celtel in 2006, just a few years after he started the company. But still he didn't retire. He used the proceeds from the sale to set up the London-based foundation that bears his name. The Mo Ibrahim Foundation aims to award a prize of five million dollars and a lifelong pension to African heads of state who do their job especially well. In this way Mo Ibrahim hopes to encourage 'good governance' in Africa, and to contribute to upholding democracy, the rule of law, and safeguarding human rights.

You may well now be asking yourselves how you too can have a successful career or build up a business, even if your name is not Mo Ibrahim! His recipe for success sounds pretty uncomplicated:

19. O-Ton Mo Ibrahim:

“To start with – there is no short cut. Young people really need to study, to study hard. There is no way of just achieving immediate success. And the problem sometimes is that young people often look at some phenomenal successes of people like a pop-star, a musician, a footballer and say, “Wow. If I can kick a football very well, I will become a Drogba, I can make millions of pounds.” But that is a very, very narrow road actually, because out of one million people, there will only be one Drogba. What we need is to look at achievable targets, and what is wrong with being an engineer, an agronomist, a teacher or a doctor? Let us do that. And the bottom thing for us to understand is that nothing comes for free. It is hard work. And the harder we work, the more we succeed. Africa is predominantly young. We have a huge percentage of young people and that ought to be the future of Africa. We really need to rely on our young people to re-change the face of what is going on in Africa.”

(20. SFX: Montage of various mobile ringtones)

OUTRO

“You are the future of Africa”. With those words from Mo Ibrahim, the British-Sudanese pioneer of mobile communications in Africa, we conclude this final episode in our series “African Entrepreneurs – Successful and Responsible”. The reporter was Ute Schaeffer. If you want to listen to this episode or other Learning by Ear programmes again, please check our website at www.dw.de/lbe. If you want to contact us, or tell us what you think of our programmes, please send an e-mail to lbe@dw-world.de. We look forward to hearing from you. Bye for now, and remember: you are the future of Africa.