

Kike Oniwinde Agoro

Founder and CEO of BYP Network



Kike Oniwinde Agoro talks to Jane Wakefield about the parallels between sport and business, how to turn failure into success and why running a business can sometimes feel like chewing on glass.

Kike Oniwinde Agoro is the CEO of BYP Network, a multi-million-pound company focused on advancing the careers of Black professionals.

Growing up in East London and later as a competing athlete, Kike didn't have diversity at the top of her agenda, however this changed when she entered the world of investment banking. "I stepped out of that East London bubble and I saw the wider world and it was not as diverse as London. I went into the world of work and I didn't see Black people there," she tells me.

Kike studied Economics at Nottingham University, and got an internship at Deutsche Bank, as part of a diversity programme.

"At the time I didn't know why we needed diversity programmes but even there, out of 20 people on it, only two were Black. I remember thinking that was a bit strange. Even in this diversity programme, we're quite under-represented."

Further internships at Goldman Sachs, Barclays and Citi Bank cemented her belief that it wasn't the right world for her. "I just felt very out of place. You just feel 'oh my gosh, should I even be here because no one is really here is like me.'"

"I remember asking a guy on an internship how he got the opportunity and he said it was his Dad who got him in. I remember thinking that I'm an international athlete with many internships under my belt and A* grades with no connections – yet no one really looks like me – the standard for entry is different. It just very much felt like a place I didn't belong."

She founded her company in 2016 after the Black Lives Matter campaign

took off, and it was a movement that had a profound effect on her. "I thought about my own experience with the lack of diversity in investment banking and I realised that something needed to change, so if I could find others that think the way I do, we could come up with ideas and a plan of action and the companies, across all industries, that say the talent doesn't exist would see we do. I wanted to change the Black narrative"

It is now a hugely successful enterprise but when she launched it from her bedroom she wasn't even sure how to fund it. "I never knew that you could get funding for your business because, at the time, there was no one to tell me that, there was no information. It wasn't on TV and I had never seen an advert for it. You don't know what you don't know, right?". And she

added, "Even when we do know, the statistics tell us that we can't raise funds anyway as Black/ female founders".

However, she doesn't want to dwell on the depressing statistics or the reasons behind it. She feels there is far too much negativity in the mainstream media and beyond when it comes to the Black community, and she isn't in the interview with me to focus on the negatives.

Instead, she wants to ensure that other Black founders do know how to get funding, and to open up a pipeline of Black talent. BYP runs conferences and weekly events connecting and up-skilling Black professionals. Whilst as the Vice-Chair of

the London Chamber of Commerce Black Business Association, she helps "ensure that Black business owners get the information and support that they need to fund and scale their businesses".

Her company allows Black professionals to find one another alongside job opportunities and mentorship and provides content focused on positive role models and visibility. BYP Network hosts weekly events, leadership conferences and career fairs whilst helping organisations attract, retain and engage Black talent including through their job board.

At the time of writing, it has 25 chapters across the world, including in Dubai, Lagos and Nairobi with a 2024 focus on bringing Black senior leaders together across

industries to collaborate on accelerating positive change in the Black community.

Getting there has taken ambition and grit. These characteristics are nothing new to Kike, the businesswoman, because before she became a CEO, she was an international javelin thrower with big ambitions on the world stage. So it comes as no surprise that her three top tips for business success could equally be applied to the sporting world;

Vision, Resilience and Mentors.

"I wanted to be a world record holder in javelin and that too is true of business – you have to shoot for the stars." Resilience is something she learned via the many hard seasons on the athletics circuit. "You train

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Leaders lives

from October to April in the gym and outdoors in the cold and wet without competing. Then in April you start competing and I'd take part in maybe 20 competitions between then and August, with anywhere from three to six throws per competition. 17 out of 20 of those competitions would be terrible. I didn't get a personal best, I didn't throw as well as I wanted. I didn't win."

And then she would question herself. "Why can you throw a thousand times

and every throw is different?" She learned though to start revelling in the successes, however small they were. "In sports you fail more than you achieve but it takes one throw or one competition to make the whole year a success. And that feels similar in business. One deal can change your business." Understanding this cycle of success and failure and the resilience needed to deal with it was to come in very useful when she swapped her running shorts for business suits.

"Every business, every business owner – no matter what they are trying to build – will understand that entrepreneurship can be like eating glass every day. By its very nature, it is very difficult because you're creating something that doesn't exist that you can envision but not

everyone can see it."

"You are coming across different people with different motivations, you're coming against fires every day. It's literally a very difficult journey. And other entrepreneurs and I are very guilty of glamorising entrepreneurship – we only show the positives and the good times and the rewards. But the reality is that 90% of businesses die by year five. So even when you think you're doing well,



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something happens. You just have to be resilient. You need grit and you need to see failure as a way to succeed. And just as in sport, you need to

surround yourself with a good team and people who believe in you. Mentors in business are equally crucial. They're definitely there for different periods of the journey. Like some of them you don't need for the next part because that's not their forte," she says.

Kike's mentors included a woman who opened the door to the investor community, another who was able to "get my name in the room and advocate for me", while a third pushed her to be more ambitious even when she was winning pitch competitions and feeling that she was at the height of her ambition.

Her own ambitions for her javelin career ended in 2018 when an injury coupled with lack of coaching left her demotivated.

"I accepted that okay I'm not going to be the world record holder or make the Olympics and, at the same time my business was picking up. I had won £40k from three pitch competitions and there was a lot of PR around it so I decided to go full time by stopping Javelin and leaving my job."

In a nod to her sporting career, the business now has

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What was the best advice you ever received?

Not to argue. That advice came from my mum. My brother and I used to fight all the time and she would always say "just don't argue". One day when I was about 17 I took it onboard and I haven't really argued since.

What piece of tech (other than your phone) could you not be without?

CarPlay.

Tell me something surprising about you?

I'm terrified of spiders.

What are your top 3 tips for business success?

Resilience, mentors & vision.

What would you have done if you hadn't been an entrepreneur?

Climbed to C-level/ senior position in a start-up.



a new career advancement platform called Javelin, which aims to help millions of Black professionals progress, "symbolising the concept of propelling yourself from point A to point B and hitting the targets one desires".

The decision was taken early on to make BYP Network a business rather than a charity. "Companies should pay for access to this talent. You pay

recruiters so why should it be free to hire Black talent?", Kike asks.

She sees her role at Boardwave as being a continuation of what she has achieved in her business so far, "representing my

community as well as learning from others. Being part of Boardwave is a great chance to connect with other young CEOs, the next wavers and also to learn from other seasoned CEOs to

see how I can make a difference to my business," she says.

Kike's latest adventure is parenthood, and again she is embracing the inevitable challenges it brings. "You need a village to raise a child. My mum passed away sadly and I can only imagine if she was here how much easier it would be." As we speak, her 16-month-old wakes up early from her nap.

I ask what her ambitions are for her baby daughter and if being a parent has made her more ambitious. "If I'm honest, having her hasn't made me more driven because I always felt this isn't just about me and my family. It's about your family. It's about the world," she says. "But of course, I want her future to be more diverse and more equitable and that means making sure she is exposed to diverse communities and that she has a wide perspective on the world."