



Don Yaeger

Oguo, thank you so much for joining us today. We're grateful to have you.

Oguo Atuanya

Thanks, Don. Nice to be here. Thanks for having me.

Don Yaeger

So, studying your journey I'm so fascinated. Of all the people I've had a chance to engage in this conversation I've never had one that has anywhere near your pathway. So, this is awesome. You grew up in Lagos, Nigeria, and you're playing soccer and you're running track. Tell me how those sports played a role in your childhood.

Oguo Atuanya

So, I don't know if you know it or not, that soccer is huge. In Nigeria, every young boy grows up wanting to be a soccer player and wanting to end up playing for the national team. In fact, one piece of history is that my uncle, my mom's youngest brother, actually played for the Nigerian National Team. I think that's actually where the whole athletic lineage began. But by virtue of that, it was such a huge competition to make the high school teams and then have a chance to be selected for the under 16 World Cup team and all that stuff. So, having to battle through that competition gave me the perseverance and the mental toughness, and then just the love to live my life that way moving forward.

Don Yaeger

Yes, so actually, when was the first time you actually picked up an American football versus, I'm going to guess it was called football where you were? When was the first time you actually picked up an American football?

Oguo Atuanya

Yes, it's actually called football because they believe that's real football. American football is sort of, you know, sequentially laid. It's just something fake that we Americans have sort of adopted, but I think we're in England, this must have been in 85, I believe. This was the Super Bowl between the Patriots.

Don Yaeger

And the Bears.

Oguo Atuanya

And the Bears. Yes. So, you know, the Fridge was a huge, huge phenomenon in England, and every kid who had a rugby background sort of connected rugby to football and everybody wanted to be like the Fridge, and then in certain niche stores they would sell American football. Right? So that's where I actually first picked up one. A little smaller than a rugby ball. But nonetheless, the same structure, if you will. And it just got me intrigued with that. And with the entire game, how dominant the Bears were. Walter Payton, who you and I had a discussion about. I just fell in love with them and the position at that point.

Don Yaeger

But let's say you're in prep school in Devonshire. Right?

Oguo Atuanya

Yes, just did a quick stint over there that was really just transitional.

Don Yaeger

And was that a family thing? Or how did you end up in Devonshire?

Oguo Atuanya

Well, we ended up in England, because we always went back and forth anyway. On my way to the US, we sort of stuck there for a bit. It's just the transitional situation between Nigeria and the US.

Don Yaeger

And then ultimately, you would end up in Weber State.

Oguo Atuanya

Correct.

Don Yaeger

Now again, as I said, not a typical path. I don't know that I've ever interviewed anybody that's gone from Nigeria to Weber State. How did you ultimately choose to go to school there?

Oguo Atuanya

My sisters were actually going to school there. They had transferred from Colorado to Utah. And Weber State, particularly in Utah. So, we went out there to visit them, loved the landscape, loved the people.

They of course, had made very deep connections in Weber State and Utah. And really just decided to stay there.

Don Yaeger

You go there, you're going to play football, and you're going to be a running back. You're either going to be Walter Payton or the Fridge, which looking at your size. You're stuck between the two, right?

Oguo Atuanya

Yes.

Don Yaeger

A little bigger than Walter. Not nearly as big as the fridge.

Oguo Atuanya

Yes.

Don Yaeger

And how did that decision happen where you decided that you were going to play that particular sport at a high level? My guess is you could have played soccer or the other football there and been quite successful. How did it come to be?

Oguo Atuanya

Yes, the thing about it was soccer was not big, at least not that part of the US. There were a bunch of big college programs on the East Coast and some parts of California. So, you had, I think, North Carolina, Clemson, those schools had huge programs back then. But not in Utah. I think at that point we just did had a club team or something like that. And then I sort of became friends with some football players, but we stayed and ran into a couple of coaches and one of them under Mike Price at the time just asked me to come out and try out and walk on. That's exactly how that happened.

Don Yaeger

Wow. So, what was it that you loved about football, American football?

Oguo Atuanya

I think what struck me first about the game was just the sheer intensity of the game. One, the fact that this was probably the most strategic. And I would say probably I think it's the most strategic sport out there, right? Because you've got three sets of 11 players, offense, defense, special teams. Every single person has an assignment. It's individual, yet it has to jive as a team. And it's has to sink for things to work at the same time because it's a game of inches and seconds or things don't work. So just the precision around the game was what intrigued me the most.

Don Yaeger

As you're there on that team, at Weber, when was the first time it really became evident to you that all of that precision and all those moving parts coming together was really a thing of beauty?

Oguo Atuanya

I think it was one of the spring games that we had. Actually, not the spring games but that spring of, and I'm dating myself right now, 88? And you've watched film, you sort of isolated yourself in position drills. We've simulated certain plays and passes and then sort of bringing it together in a scrimmage. And then just watching that whole thing work at that point where, again, each individual brought, their assignment, to the field as a team, and at a particular time, everybody had to execute their assignment flawlessly. And you had successful players yet. On the other hand, you also saw where some people did not execute, and it affected the rest of the team. That's when it just clicked. It's sort of goes beyond that practice still, but that's when it clicked. Truly, the team was much bigger than the individual and yet one individual could be a weak link. That would disrupt the entire team. That was just phenomenal seeing that whole thing play out like the first time.

Don Yaeger

When you're looking at your athletic career, you're looking at the opportunity to learn these things, but learn them through different sports, right? Football being the last of those. Was there someone along that journey, a coach or a mentor, somebody that was really, really important to you that you think back and about all these years later?

Oguo Atuanya

Yes. I mean, there were so many different individuals, right? At different junctures. My uncle first and foremost from a soccer perspective. I just thought he was wonderful.

Don Yaeger

He made the national team. Yes.

Oguo Atuanya

I mean, there's some drills that he took me through as a boy, that at the time, I thought were crazy. But just the way I developed persevering through those, I still think about them today when I do certain things. And then when it came to football, I'd say, a couple of people, one was Dave Arslanian, who was a head coach at the time. When I joined the team. He is actually the offensive coordinator for the running back coach Mike Price, but I just loved Coach Arslanian as a human being. He's just that guy of high integrity, really cared about people, not just this team, but for folks on the other side of the field because I remember speeches he gave, 'Hey, go in there, do what you have to do. Don't hurt anybody, don't be malicious.' So, he really influenced me throughout that period, and then taking some of that into life beyond football. And then lastly, we had a running back at that time he and I went in backfield, George Jackson, George's just... He had this quiet poise about him, was not too rowdy, but tough as nails. Right? So, he took a play, get in there, just execute and was never too, "Rah! Rah!" You would sort of glean and tap into his leadership by the way he went about himself. He had this very unassuming way of coming to you when you've made mistakes, really focusing on your strengths within the context of that mistake, getting you to do better, versus just diving in and criticizing you for your weakness. So, some of that still stays with me today.

Don Yaeger

You still stay in touch with George?

Oguo Atuanya

I do. He and I haven't chatted for a while. But up until about two years ago, we'd stay in touch. I mean, we still stay in touch through Facebook. So...

Don Yaeger

It's always good. That's one of the things I enjoy about this is sometimes we leave these calls or these interviews, people realize, "I need to reach back and touch that person again." You and I ended up at a table together in Greenville, South Carolina at an event. I had the chance to sit there and listen to your history, listen your story. I was just riveted. But part of what you shared with me was that currently, your son was at the time, playing college football but he actually made the choice to step away from football and focus on track and field, and some of what we discussed was guidance you were giving him at that time. I wonder if you'd share with me a little about that. How did you counsel him as he's thinking about this sport that has taught you so much, but now he's trying to figure out his own future?

Oguo Atuanya

Yes. I mean, he had some disappointments, with football, you know, injuries, going into a program. Weber State has just gotten so strong lately, and he was one of 10 corners, being a kid that came from high school that was featured in high school, and now coming in where he's sort of in the middle of that shuffle and getting lost every now and then in the shuffle. So, he got a little frustrated. So, he decided to try and focus on track. One of the things I told him was say, "Listen, the lessons that you learned from football and track in high school before that is again being part of a team, being a positive contributor to a team." I think ultimately, what you do beyond that is leave that team setting and go into society and continue being a positive contributor to society. Right? So, in society, wherever you end up, you leave that situation better than you get there. And what I told them was that part of getting to that was sticking with education. That was the one non-negotiable was get that education. I think that the podcast I sent to my niece about two weeks ago, is always something that's threaded within the family is that recognition of what excellence is and just not excellence in sports. Speaking with Nneka and her career at the sports but just excellence in life. He's sort of transcended the situation and done it well.

Don Yaeger

I love it. Sports runs deep in your family we mentioned Nneka and Chiney your two nieces both of whom play in the WNBA for the LA Sparks. You've mentioned your uncle. I know your nephew was a linebacker at Weber, as you think through the families and how sports has impacted all of them. Are there things that you all get a chance to talk about because of your multiple relationships within sports that you think could create a neat conversation for you when you get a chance together?

Oguo Atuanya

Yes. The other ones we didn't mention actually my two other nieces, younger ones also played basketball at Rice. In fact, a funny story two weeks ago in Dallas, the last niece. She just completed a senior year at Rice. And she'd been the Conference USA Player of the year back to back and we're in Dallas to watch our tournament and right at a will call window is when we're actually told that the tournament was canceled. Fun story there. But yes, when we get together, we talk about different sports, we've all played, the parallels that we draw. And it always comes back to one theme.

Perseverance of mental toughness, that attitude of not letting any situation get too big for you, that attitude of, having that fortitude to push through obstacles. And then lastly, again, I go back to that excellence, get back into society and make it better than you found it. So, this is sort of where stories coalesce around-

Don Yaeger

All come together, and then they're able to look at you and see how business can be done with the same philosophies in mind.

Oguo Atuanya

Yes. Especially if you go back and speak about the two nieces that played at Stanford and before the WNBA, and we talk about just the strong alum community that Stanford has. In fact, my sister told a funny story about how Chiney, the second niece is pretty close to Condoleezza Rice. Once Condoleezza Rice was in Houston and wanted to see Chiney and my sister sort of had to push Chiney to make the appointment, as she was saying, can you believe this? Kids don't realize how significant these sorts of relationships are. And she also told me that Condoleezza was trying to get Chiney to play golf. Right! I mean, you know how important golf is in the corporate world, how it sets up a forum. So, you have very sometimes tough conversations in a relaxed setting and get to a productive outcome. So, a lot of times, there's disciplines that we've learned in sports, can certainly transcend and translate into helping you address tough situations in the corporate world.

Don Yaeger

Yes. One last question. On this personal side, I read where you volunteer, as a youth counselor and a coach in Kirkland, have been near Seattle Boys and Girls Clubs. Tell me a little bit about that experience. About being on the other side as a counselor and as a game coach.

Oguo Atuanya

Yes, it was very interesting, but very fulfilling, actually most of the kids on that team, but by the way, what I did was help coach the Kangs. That was a football team that fed into the junior high system of the questers in high school. Where my son ended up playing, we had kids from all sorts of situations on that team. So, while this was set up under the guise of football and being a football coach, we also had the ability to be a number of things to these kids, there were a couple of kids whose dad had just passed away. So, you had to be a surrogate dad. There were a bunch of kids who had issues where you had to be more or less like a guidance counselor to them. And then there were all the other kids who you knew that beyond just playing football you were setting them up. You were building their characters up to be very productive young men in society. It was a lot deeper than football. I got just immense fulfillment from watching these kids grow based on the impact hope we had on their lives.

Don Yaeger

You know, earlier when I asked you about an influencer, you shared a little of your uncle, right, obviously, who had so much and was so talented in touch and drills and did other things with you that were teaching you some disciplines as a young man. At Microsoft, where you are today. Are there some mentors or others that you turn to today when trying to work through the challenges of daily business life?

Oguo Atuanya

Yes, again, I tried to take so many different things from so many people, right? First and foremost, though, Satya who's our CEO. I mean, I didn't talk to him personally. But when you pick up certain messages and the culture that he's tried to drive, you read his book, "Hit Refresh," and realize that as a company, we had to hit refresh a few years ago when he took the helm. And just his approach of listening more than we talk, we used to be known as a company that talked more than we listen. And just the way his personality is sort of threaded within how we operate within Microsoft right now, which is one of real humility. He's a very humble individual. And then there's this element where he's really, really maniacal about community citizenship. So, you see that on a daily basis, just driven through the way we do stuff on Microsoft. And also, are there individuals at different ranks? Right. There's an individual called Mohammed Abdullah, who I've known for almost about 16 years now at Microsoft, we started in the same group, and again, I gravitate towards people of high character, just high integrity, and he's one of them. So, every now and then when I face challenges, I go to him and we chat through it, and there's my immediate boss, who is David Smith, who's a great family man, as well as having that desire and that drive to succeed. He also is a human being; he brings that human element to the fray. And that's something that's not seen a lot these days in our world because it's so competitive, right? These are some of the individuals I look to as I navigate to everyday life in corporate America.

Don Yaeger

I think sports, you had these different things that you did that were creating different disciplines for you, were allowing you to each one you're learning from each one, something that you could get better at collectively and from a business perspective. Has there been a specific area of your development, your growth, whether it's in how to manage teams or how to manage employees, where you imagine yourself heading in one direction and then you change direction? Because obviously in a sporting career, you've done that, right? You've maneuvered and change directions. Has it been a challenge like that in your professional career where you started out thinking I was going here; I was going to be this when I grow up? I don't know what you're going to be when you grow up. But one of these days you might get there, and now you're headed somewhere else. So, been some pivot points for you that have been really important?

Oguo Atuanya

Yes, there have been a few done but one of the most recent ones is just as recently as eight months ago, believe it or not, I think when you and I chatted in Greenville. I told you I just came back from the UK where I had run what's called a device sales business, essentially our endpoint intelligent edge business across Europe, Middle East Africa. So huge responsibility, had 122 countries to worry about and about 127 people in the organization and one of the reasons why we went to that role was because, what I wanted to do next was just embark on this career where I did all international business. Well, towards the end of my last contract renewal, had to make a very important decision, sign up for another few years in Europe and outside of the US, or come back to the US. And I think my son's situation played a very pivotal sort of influence on deciding to come back to the US. So that was actually a little situation where I had to make a pivot. Because quite frankly, there were just a ton of opportunities in Europe, you know, that I could have embarked on and could have ultimately led me to one of the things I want to, you know, I keep thinking about doing next which is getting into politics in

Nigeria, right, but I had to make this decision to come back to the US, because of my son. And that sense of adaptability that you get from football. From sports, where you don't know what you're going to have to do next, based on what the team needs, that really helped me make that decision and sort of embark on that decision.

Don Yaeger

That's perfect, because that is exactly, I mean, so sports taught you that, you may think you're headed in one direction, suddenly, the game changes in some small way. But wherever that way changes, if you don't adapt, if you keep headed in the same direction in the game setting in different direction, you're no longer part of the game.

Oguo Atuanya

Yes, this is just one instance that I relate to you. But there have been so many others. But one thing we know in sports is that you have to be very situational. Or you're likely not going to succeed. And these situations come up all the time in corporate America, there's actually a term noun that we use, that we sort of employ in management called situational management. So, you have to assess the situation, very quickly identify the core issues within the situation and implement solutions rapidly and then galvanize your team to execute against those solutions, right? That's all what you're doing in sports that you overlay in the corporate world. And actually, the beauty of the corporate world is that you don't have to do it with as much pressure as you did in sports as a kid. So, it's quite interesting how you have that set of interlock between both sides of life.

Don Yaeger

Yes, depending on where you're playing in sports. You don't have to do it on live national TV in business either. You know, where every move is dissected by somebody. One of the things that struck me is I was studying you as you're educated on three different continents, right, amazing. So, you were able to bring perspectives from all of them into what you've done is they've been an experience where having that breadth of different cultures and the way that they think about things has helped you as you've developed as a business leader.

Oguo Atuanya

Yes, I think, I don't know if this answers the question directly, but I'll take a stab at it. I think, having to go into new environments, and new situations, dealing with new sets of people. And, ultimately, in your way, bringing those people along with you in your life. That's helped me quite a bit in the corporate world, because I've been somebody, being at Microsoft or before Microsoft, that has always tried new things. Take new position an average of every four years, means that you'd have to go into a new situation to learn that situation, deal with a new set of people, and attempt to impact and influence those people that oftentimes you're coming in as a new person. So, you're coming into their world. So, I think the parallel I draw is having to have grown up in so many different places. Get to know so many different people having to settle into life in new places, right? So, it's sort of become a way of life for me. It doesn't phase me to go into the next new challenge in real life.

Don Yaeger

And that's awesome. Because again, I think that is the unsettling part for most people, right is oh my gosh, I know in order to make my way along, I'm going to have to go. I'm going to have to uproot. But for you, you're hitting refresh.

Oguo Atuanya

Yes. The other big thing is, when you've done, a let me put it this way, when you've had the opportunity to live in so many different places, and again, deal with so many different people, instead of becoming a citizen of the world. So that element of diversity and inclusion, and understanding people's perspectives, no matter how different they are it's up to us and being tolerant of them, enough to be able to learn from them. This is a phenomenon that plays in heavily today in the business world. So that's given me the ability to just connect with people in the business world and understand that there's some many different perspectives, that all culminate in the betterment of the entire company. So that element to the individual to the team again.

Don Yaeger

Right, if I'm just sticking in the position room all the time, I don't understand how that plays into the needs of the entire team, but when you leave the position room and you go to the practice field, it's a different game. Right?

Oguo Atuanya

Totally. And having that ability to adapt and change. I mean, Satya calls it having a growth mindset versus having a fixed mindset. So, there's a lot that goes into that these days.

Don Yaeger

Yes. I really want to ask you this, because I know given your broad experiences, but in your time leading teams within companies in your background, which we've already shared is an amazing story. Has there been a time when your sporting background influenced your leadership specifically, with respect to how you built your team? Once you've taken on one of these new roles, and now you're building a team? You're scouting to make sure you're bringing the right talent together. Is there been a time when what you've learned has influenced what you built?

Oguo Atuanya

Yes, I think one of the ones that I gravitate towards all the time is the fact that choosing the right people, or the right players is almost 70% - 80% of the battle. Right? Once you've chosen the right people, then everything else gets easier because you have a set strategy, you know exactly what your tactical executions of the strategies would be. And at least you have a projection of what the outcomes would be. But one variable is always a human factor. Right? So, if you don't get the right human beings in there, then doesn't matter what you draw up. As far as "X's" and "O's," you don't succeed. So again, going back to my days in Lagos, playing soccer and running track and looking at the way some of the coaches I've been associated with very, very meticulous about choosing the people that were on the team, I keep going back to that. And it's unnecessarily picking the most superior athletes. But he always gravitated towards picking the people of high character who knew how to work with other people. One favorite saying that my uncle back then used to tell us was that you'd rather have a star

team than a team of individual stars. And once you get a star team together, they excelled. And if I could just share this one, I heard this story about Jimmie Johnson. You know how he went to Miami and he always recruited certain people. And then he went to the Cowboys. And from what I heard, he had this notion of four C's content, C for content where that individual was just there was just happy to be there happy to be a cowboy didn't contribute anything else, but just you wanted to be there. And then you have this compliant individual, the second seat, who would say yes to everything you told them to do, but never executed. In fact, they go behind your back and poison other people against executing or buying in. And then you had the committed individual who is very, very committed to himself. We get there early to meetings, make sure that he excelled individually. The minute the team lost, he told you, hey, it wasn't my fault. I did my job because I was committed, nobody else did their jobs. And then you had this compelled individual that fought to see who was individual who'd come in, make sure that everybody was ready for what they needed to do, and was just committed and compelled to make the team better where even if the team lost he'd stand up and say, "Hey, my bad, I didn't do what I was supposed to do," even though it didn't relate to him directly. So, I always look for those compelled individuals who weren't all about themselves, but we're about getting the team ready to play. So, you can tie that parallel from sports into the corporate world.

Don Yaeger

You can fill your team and compelled individuals you're tough to beat. You know, at Microsoft, the mission statement of the company, it's been for a few years to empower every person on the planet to achieve more. I assume whatever coach you've played for, and every manager or the leader you've worked for is tried to teach you as well. But when you're looking to guide your team, and you're trying to get them to achieve more, and you found those compelled individuals, what's that piece that you as a leader, have taken from your life, that you're able to help them live out Microsoft's mission?

Oguo Atuanya

It's the self-confidence and belief in themselves. Because if you don't believe in yourself, you can really look anybody else in the eye and get them to follow you. And if you don't believe in yourself, it can't really weather tough situations. And believe me they come up every day on a company like Microsoft. And there are other elements that tie back to you believing in yourself. Elements like the way you go about your business every day. Elements like the way you prepare every day, so that you separate yourself from the rest when you actually have to execute. So, you have to do that as a routine as an individual. But if you have that belief in yourself and the way you go about stuff, are you able to exude that confidence when you manage teams, and be able to drive teams to achieve more than they actually thought they could, in a positive way.

Don Yaeger

Oguo again, it's my honor to have had you as my partner today and to have taught me all that you've taught me in a way that hopefully we're able to teach others and so I'm grateful to you and I can't wait for our paths to cross again one day soon.

Oguo Atuanya

I really appreciate it had a fun chat in Greenville. And I can't wait to do it again.

Don Yaeger

Awesome. Thank you.

Oguo Atuanya

Thank you. Take care.