

## **LIVING LEADERSHIP - Femi Ayanbadejo**

[Femi Ayanbadejo] (0:00 - 0:37)

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So when I say suffering, think of it as discipline. Think about it as a debt and a payment for something that you've won. And when you look at it that way, it's pretty easy to suffer.

[Mike Doyle] (0:38 - 1:06)

Welcome to Living Leadership, a podcast brought to you by the Center for Innovative Leadership at the Johns Hopkins Cary Business School. I'm Mike Doyle, serving as the Executive Director. The conversations in each of these episodes will be led by current faculty and MBA students from the Center, blending academic insight with real-world experiences.

Join us as we uncover the traits that not only define great leadership now, but will continue to do so in the decades to come.

[Vidith Huot] (1:08 - 2:05)

Today on the Living Leadership podcast, we spotlight Femi Ayanbadejo, NFL veteran and innovative founder and CEO of Health Reel. I'm Bede Thuit, an MBA candidate at the Cary Business School, and your host for today. Femi shares his journey from professional sports to technology and consulting, highlighting his commitment to collaboration, self-awareness, and leveraging adversity for growth.

He also highlights the importance of blending personal and business relationships. In our discussion, Femi talks about his transition to entrepreneurship, driven by desire to engage in disruptive innovation in the fitness industry. He reflects on how early challenges shaped his resilience and approach.

He also emphasizes the collective effort required for success, acknowledging the roles of mentors, family, and even doubters. Join us as Femi delves into these insights, offering lessons in leadership, resilience, and continuous personal and professional development.

[Femi Ayanbadejo] (2:07 - 2:13)

My name is Femi Ayanbadejo, Super Bowl champ, and I'll just say human and technologist.

[Vidith Huot] (2:14 - 2:20)

Fantastic. Thank you. And for those unfamiliar, can you tell us a little bit more about your story?

[Femi Ayanbadejo] (2:20 - 5:33)

Yeah. So, you know, I grew up in Northern California, actually played college football at San Diego State University on a football scholarship, and never thought I would play one down in the NFL, and I ended up playing 11 years in the NFL, was undrafted by the Minnesota Vikings, then went to the Baltimore Ravens, which is the only team of consequence in this list of teams I'm going to mention. The rest are not relevant, but I do love and support all my former teammates and every organization that gave me a chance.

But I'm a Baltimore Raven. I did play for the Miami Dolphins, the Chicago Bears, and the Arizona Cardinals as well. And after my retirement in 2010, I dove headfirst into the human performance space.

I opened up my own training facility in La Jolla, California, was a certified nutritionist. So everything from fitness, boot camps, nutrition, running a business, I was co-founder of that business. I had a 35% equity stake in that business for about five years.

And my kids were in Maryland at the time, and I really wanted to be closer to them and help their mom raise them. We were not married, and she was from Baltimore, and I met her when I played for the Ravens, and my kids were really little. And I thought that that transition from retirement to kind of finding my next opportunity to the next opportunity, it was important that they were part of that equation.

So I decided I wanted to go back to grad school. And the reason I wanted to go back to grad school was the rise of wearable devices and AI. This is about 2012, 2013, 2014, when I started thinking about this.

And I officially sold my house, sold my business, moved back to Maryland full-time in 2014, enrolled at Hopkins in an executive MBA program, and it was the best decision I ever made for my family and myself. And so let's just say that it was positive self-disruption, which I've grown very comfortable with. And I think if you're willing to take risks and you're willing to kind of make that jump from one cliff or one island to the next, you'll find great opportunity there in that risk-taking.

And I guess you can say I'm a bit of a calculated risk-taker, with that being said. So fast forward to now, I've been a part of multiple companies at the C-level, whether that's co-

founding, strategy, business development. I've kind of done a little bit of all of it.

I really love strategy and business development because it kind of puts you in the center of everything, which I really enjoy. I love being a teammate. I love being a collaborator.

Everything I do is focused on collaboration and not transaction. I don't believe in transaction. And I don't believe in building relationships for the short run.

I believe in building relationships for the long run. There was this methodology a long time ago that you don't mix up business and personal stuff. I completely disagree.

Everything I do is because I enjoy it. Everyone I work with is because I like them. And I choose these things consciously and purposefully.

And I think this idea of segmenting and bifurcating your life based on the myriad of things, these roadblocks that we create, these barriers that we create, I completely disagree with it. I actually think that harmony and bliss are in the co-mingling of your life in every single way. There's an honesty in it.

There's a transparency in it. And I think you go a lot farther doing things that way. So that's my little soapbox lecture to start this off.

[Vidith Huot] (5:34 - 5:39)

I pause purposefully because I want people to really process all of that.

[Femi Ayanbadejo] (5:40 - 8:03)

Yeah, no, I think it's important to recognize that the walls we build only lock us out of things. They don't open things up. And sometimes we do that subconsciously and sometimes we do it consciously.

And I encourage people to be mindful about when they're locking themselves out of things as well as others. Because at the end of the day, as humans, we do things much better when we collaborate. And every single thing I've done, I've had team members, teammates, and help and support.

And one of my favorite sayings, and this is something that I've made up in one of the methodologies that I do, I do a lot of guest speaking and team building for organizations from schools to real estate companies. You name it, I've kind of done all of it. My focus now in my consulting business is individual to institutional health strategies.

And a lot of the stuff that I talk about relies on this equation. Selflessness plus self-awareness equals self-actualization. Selflessness plus self-awareness equals self-actualization.

Think about that for a minute. The idea that you're gonna give up something for someone else makes you better. It actually raises your awareness level.

It raises the opportunity of the people and companies that you're collaborating with. But the beauty of that is that it comes back to you. You don't always know when or how.

But when you become selfless, people become selfless for you. And the ability to be selfless is rooted in your self-awareness and understanding that it's not transactional. It's collaborative.

It's an energy that you put out that comes back to you. So this idea of selflessness plus self-awareness is really hard for people to wrap their head around because they're really not looking forward. They're kind of looking down at the next step as opposed to the next 10 or 15 steps.

And the truth of the matter is you need to be telescopic and microscopic in your analysis. You need to be able to switch lenses as required. And this is the idea behind this awareness and selflessness component that I've infused into everything that I do.

And I fail at it all the time. But guess what? Because it's such a big part of my kind of mental rubric and analysis that it's easy for me to kind of go, oh, dang, I didn't do that right.

I'm not following my own. I'm not taking my own medicine. And so now that I say it so much and I do it so often, every time that I present or that I speak, it's at the tip of my tongue.

It's at the forefront of my mind. And it helps me. So people think that I'm here helping you.

You're actually here helping me. This is cathartic for me too. It allows me to go into my bag and remind myself about what really matters.

Every time I do this, I'm reminded about what really matters. So I'm actually getting something out of this too. It's just a little bit different than what you're getting out of it.

[Vidith Huot] (8:03 - 8:42)

We are audio only, but I am grinning and beaming right now. You've just given folks an entire NBA experience in the first two minutes of our interview and our conversation. So thank you so much.

So yeah, you're a pro at speaking. You were a pro in the NFL. Being a former competitive athlete myself, I know that transitioning out of your sports field, your arena of competition, and moving and kind of re-identifying yourself can be difficult.

How did you manage going from, you know, climbing the mountain of the NFL to transitioning over into entrepreneurship?

[Femi Ayanbadejo] (8:43 - 13:30)

Yeah, I just knew what I wanted for myself. And I took lessons from the guys that came before me. For those of you that are big football fans, I played with Junior Seau.

And Junior Seau committed suicide due to CTE. And traumatic brain injury. I won't go down that medical rabbit hole right now because it's not pertinent to this discussion.

But I saw other guys I played with. Idle time post-NFL career is not good time. So I watched and I learned and I took notes.

And I said, I'm not going to be idle. I'm going to dive headfirst into the next thing. And that was what I knew, which was fitness.

I've been training my whole life for myself to make myself better. And I wanted to pass that knowledge on. And the best way to do it was to open a business, collaborate with some folks that I knew and trusted.

And we made a kick-ass gym in a facility in La Jolla. High net worth people willing to pay a lot of money to get insights from pros. And I love that opportunity.

But I wasn't so locked in on that. I'm always looking at the next thing. And so I think my ambition and my desire to consume and take on risk is because I've never had anyone believe in me or support me.

I've always just had to believe in myself. My motivation starts inward. It doesn't come externally.

It starts internally. I've had coaches tell me I'm not good enough. I've had people tell me I wouldn't get into Hopkins.

I've had people tell me I'd never work with NASA. I've had people tell me I'm dreaming too big. Obviously, those people didn't know me.

I'm like, if you saw where I came from, I lived in Lagos, Nigeria in a house with no running water or electricity in the 70s. That's where my dad came from. I moved to a housing project in Chicago, Illinois as a 7, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10, 11-year-old.

Cockroaches, drugs, suicide, pimping, and trafficking. That's the environment that I grew up in. But somehow, somehow, I was sheltered enough and had enough guidance from enough people to kind of keep me away from that.

And then my life completely changed when I turned 11 and we moved to Santa Cruz,

California, where my dad did his PhD at UC Santa Cruz. And I ended up living in family student housing for the next seven or eight years. That changed everything.

And I felt safe and I felt secure. And if you look at kind of Maslow's hierarchy of needs, when you have food, shelter, security, then you can really start to self-actualize. I am a living, breathing embodiment of Maslow.

I'm a big fan of Maslow. My psych degree is a big part of that came from my dad being a psychologist and really looking at how important psychology is to your own growth and your own kind of path. I know I'm dancing around a little bit, but I kind of want people to understand that where I come from and my endurance and my resilience wasn't by choice.

It was just what I was born into. But when I look at where I come from and what I can tolerate, it comes from those early sufferings that I had to go through. And I embrace suffering.

I'll embrace all the suffering for just a little bit of bliss, whether that's 40 hours of work on a football field in a gym for a one-hour football game, whether that's spending 500 hours on a methodology to do a 90-minute presentation. I believe in that. I think that suffering, not in a detrimental way, but putting yourself in a position where you're willing to suffer because you know that the other side of that coin is bliss.

There's that feeling you get when you accomplish something. So when I say suffering, don't think of it as abuse or as trauma, although it can be both. Think of it as discipline.

Think about it as a debt and a payment for something that you want. And when you look at it that way, it's pretty easy to suffer. It's pretty easy to say, I'm willing to take that job on and accomplish the task because I know what doing nothing looks like.

I know what being idle looks like. I know what not having ambition looks like. And I know what not having self-belief looks like.

And that's why I'm the way that I am. That's why I make the choices that I make because I know that the other side of that is not good. There's nothing good there because I've seen it.

So all the people out there that are afraid to take risks, all the people that are comfortable and miserable, wake up, don't do it. It's not worth it. You get one of these.

Go hard, be thoughtful, collaborate, build, break the walls down, find people that think like you, find people that don't think like you, but at least that agree that the sky is blue and that two plus two is four. They don't have to agree with you on other things, but at least let's not let the world that we live in, the misinformation, the disinformation that we see, that's the biggest threat to our society and our democracy right now. It's the lies we

tell ourselves and the lies we tell each other.

And I won't tolerate that, but I'm down for a good argument. I'm down for confrontation. I'm down to have a great discussion as long as we can agree on some common elemental things about the world that we live in.

And the sky's blue and two plus two is four is a good starting point.

[Vidith Huot] (13:31 - 13:51)

Thanks for that. And you mentioned that your motivation starts from within. I'm sure you can attest to the fact that you can't, you know, your climb, your rise, your journey wasn't done in isolation.

It wasn't by yourself. Who were some of those guiding figures that helped kind of make sure that you were on the right path?

[Femi Ayanbadejo] (13:52 - 18:36)

Yeah. That's such a great question. And I'm so glad that you asked because it's easy for me to sit up here and speak in platitudes without giving people the respect and the credit they deserve for a lot of my success.

It does take a tribe. There are so many moms and dads that invested in me when they saw that I had nothing. They were willing to give me something.

They're willing to make me a part of their family. There's too many of them for me to list them all. But a lot of that started in Santa Cruz, California.

A lot of those moms and dads that I went to that saw me at Mission Hill Junior High, that saw me at Santa Cruz High, that saw me at Cabrillo Junior College, even folks that met me at San Diego State. I was still a kid, you know. They saw something in me and they saw my grind and my work ethic and they invested and they fed me, literally and figuratively.

Coaches did it. And it's kind of interesting because for every one of those people, there's also a person who doubted me and said I was crazy and said, this kid's never going to be a pro at anything. What's he talking about?

Like, what's he drinking? I love his confidence, but he's definitely living in the clouds. No, my feet have always been on solid ground.

You know what I mean? And so I do think that it takes a little bit of delusion to do big things though. Like every person that's done something good was a little bit delusional, but they probably knew it.

But that's what they had to do because when you think big, you stand out in a crowd and it looks deluded to the average person. But it doesn't mean that it is because imagine if you told every person that did something great that they were delusional. You know what I mean?

If they just followed the status quo and didn't dream big, where would we be as a society? And I'm not trying to equate myself to any of those people, but in my little world, my little small C celebrity here in Baltimore, my little small C celebrity that has brought me to this channel, right, to talk to you guys, I recognize it. I know what it is.

There's people that are doing so many revolutionary and evolutionary things and I look up to those people. But in my little world, I inspire people and I love that and I love that I can speak about all these difficult things that I've dealt with and it resonates with them because my trauma is my fuel. Trauma can build you or break you.

It's really about if you let it or you succumb to it. And I can't dig into all my trauma here because it's not the right place, but what I can tell you is that I know I could have been broken, but I'm not. I'm always on my path of using my trauma, talking about my trauma, because I know everyone on this planet has dealt with trauma.

Well, let me say this. Most people have dealt with some level of trauma and I know that I've probably dealt with more than most and it's okay because I don't want you to have to go through trauma to understand where I'm coming from. Maybe my lesson and my story is enough and there's a lot of people that helped me work through that, supported me through that and it's not lost on me.

And like I said, I make it a point to shift between telescope and microscope on a daily basis and that inability is gonna hamper you. You can't just look at the forest from the trees or look at one step at a time. True, a plan does take one step, but that one step leads to 10 steps, leads to 100 steps, leads to 1,000 steps and if you're not looking at where that journey is leading you, then you're, once again, you're not planning appropriately.

You know, a lot of times when I talk to people and this is for business folks, it doesn't matter who you are, I think that there are three important things to making a goal. One, before I even get to what those three things are, not all goals are goal worthy. Think about that for a minute.

Not everything that you think is a goal is not worthy of a goal, okay? The first part of a good goal is analysis. Why is this a goal and what am I gonna bring to bear by that goal for myself or for the people that I'm associated with?

Like, why is this important, okay? So, analysis. The second part of it is action, which is really about discipline.



What are the actions that I'm gonna do day by day, week by week, month by month to assure that I reach that goal? Discipline is where most people break down. It sounds good.

My 30 days in the gym sounds good from January to February, but then after that they give up, right? That's a perfect example of not being disciplined. The third part, so you have analysis, you have action.

The third part, which is also extremely important, is attitude. I believe in positivity. Not this Pollyanna positivity, but I live in a great country.

I have great people around me. Is it perfect? Absolutely not.

But I believe in the power of positivity. And anyone that wants to sell you on negativity, anybody that wants to sell you on pessimism, run as far as you can, as fast as you can. Using negative sentiment to breed an action is foolhardy and a terrible way to get people to collaborate and get in line.

It's just not the way you want to rally people and build sentiment. I just don't believe in that.

[Vidith Huot] (18:37 - 18:54)

I wanted to tap into something that you mentioned before. You mentioned that trauma, if framed and honed in properly, whether that's a lowercase T or a capital T of trauma, everyone experiences their version of it and it's their reality.

[Femi Ayanbadejo] (18:54 - 18:55)

Preach, brother, preach.

[Vidith Huot] (18:56 - 19:12)

What's something that you found really helpful within that first few moments or first few days, first few weeks, whatever that size or scale is? What really helped you to move that event, that experience into a positive direction?

[Femi Ayanbadejo] (19:12 - 23:59)

Let me tell you this. I have a whole trauma rubric and methodology. It's so great that you intuitively went to some of the key things that I like to differentiate for people.

Trauma is from the view of the person who's experienced it. In some cases, it's the victim sometimes, right? Because we can talk about all kinds of trauma where there's actually a victim and a perpetrator.

Some trauma is big T and some trauma is little T. And I have an acronym. It's called

PROOF, P-R-O-O-O-F, which is my trauma acronym.

Positive, random, occupational, the trauma we cause ourselves, the trauma we cause others, occupational trauma, and the special kind of trauma that comes from friends and family. And I separate all these out because it's important to understand categorically that they're not all the same, although they have a massive impact on your mental, emotional, physical, and spiritual health. And it's easy for me to talk about these things because these are literally the things that I start with when I talk to individuals and when I talk to institutions.

And I think for trauma, there's really five. Once I analyze the trauma and I understand what bucket it comes from, there are five things that I look at. The first thing about trauma is you gotta survive it.

At the end of the day, you've gotta survive. Whether that's someone attacking you at work or whether that's literally someone attacking you, survive. Always let your will to survive rise to the top, no matter what it is.

Fight your ass off all day, every day, kicking and screaming to get out of whatever trauma is, big T or little T. That's the first thing. When you have the moment and you have time, you need to assess that trauma.

How did it happen? Why did it happen? Is there anything I could have done differently?

Is it a repeat type of trauma? Is it me? What is the cause of this?

So survive and assess. The next thing is learn. What can I learn from said traumatic event?

What can I learn? And once I've learned something, how do I deploy said learning? And in my experience, and talking about this for five years now, the biggest drop off in participation is from learning to deployment.

Because a lot of times, and this is going to be controversial for some people, wherever you go, there you are. And what I mean by that is you can't run from the trauma you cause yourself. Remember, one of those Os is the trauma we cause ourselves.

A lot of the trauma that we have in our life is a trauma that we cause ourselves for whatever reason. Something we're not willing to face, something we're not willing to deal with inside ourselves, something we're not willing to confront. The majority of trauma comes from that.

Once you recognize that you have a big role in your own trauma, and that your impulsivity or your inability to go from learning to deployment is continuing to hold you back, because what ends up happening is that, and I'm a person who's done this before,

I'm so used to fighting for myself that sometimes I don't realize when someone is giving, or when I was younger, they were giving me a critique that I needed to hear. And instead of listening, I would just react.

I learned to stop reacting, and I learned to take that critique and use it as fuel. That's trauma as fuel. What I talked about 10 minutes ago, that is a perfect example of taking said learning, deploying it in the moment, because the person who's giving me that is positive trauma.

They're giving me a critique, right? This shit doesn't fit together on accident. This fits together on purpose, right?

And so my point is, is that you have to be able to learn, you have to be able to survive, assess, learn, and deploy, and then guess what the fifth step is? Share. That's cathartic, is me sitting here talking about it.

Survive, assess, learn, deploy, share. Vidith, and everybody listening, when I go into businesses, I don't care who it is, where they are, age levels, not relevant. I can shape the wording, the verbiage, the nomenclature down to any age, any group of people, any occupation, any industry, irrelevant, because on a ground level, these are elements of self-actualization.

These are elements of leadership, right? You need to be able to survive, assess, learn, deploy, share. And if you can't do that, you're never going to be the maximal leader or the maximal institution that you could be, because you're bifurcating, segmenting, and creating barriers like I told you before.

This shit isn't on accident, man. This is not on accident. This all fits together the way the universe intended it to.

So I'm just, all I'm doing is uncovering things that are out in the open, and I'm shining a light on them. And I enjoy that. That's the thing that I enjoy the most.

Like people always ask me, what's the thing that you like the most? I like building things. I like shining lights in dark corners, and I like breaking things down and talking about it.

I like to force people to be uncomfortable, because without my discomfort, I would never be where I am.

[Vidith Huot] (23:59 - 24:11)

Thank you for sharing. So looking back at your career, I know it's still ongoing and flourishing. Are there any situations you would have handled differently or things you wish you'd known sooner in your leadership journey?

[Femi Ayanbadejo] (24:11 - 25:21)

Absolutely. There's so many mistakes that I've made. There's so many people that I've gone way too hard on.

I didn't have grace. And one of the things that I teach my kids is that all jokes are not funny to the person at the other end of that joke. And I learned very early on, there's consequences for the words that come out of my mouth.

And I think as a young, ambitious, kind of funny person at times, there's things that I said, and there's people that I probably made the butt of my joke, and I didn't recognize the effect that my words had or that although I meant no malice or I meant no ill intent, it showed malice and it showed ill intent to them. And that's on me. That's my fault.

They didn't ask me to say that or do that. That's on me. There's a level of respect that you need to show people.

There's a level of grace you need to have with people. And that's at home in your house and on the street with strangers and in the office with your coworkers. And I had to learn some of that the hard way.

And another time I can give you some of those lessons that some of those people I talked shit to that I shouldn't have, I had to pay a price for it. And some of those lessons that were difficult are the best lessons that I ever got.

[Mike Doyle] (25:24 - 25:41)

Thank you for tuning in to Living Leadership. We hope this episode has left you feeling inspired and equipped with new perspectives and approaches for leading others. Stay connected with us at the Center for Innovative Leadership for more.

Until next time, keep innovating and leading the way into the future. [♪ music ends ♪]