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BEYOND ENTREPRENEURSHIP

Building the Institutions That Retain, Empower and Deploy Nigeria's Entrepreneurial Talent from Within

A THOUGHT-LEADERSHIP ARTICLE FOR NIGERIA'S LEADERSHIP AND POLICYMAKING COMMUNITY

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ABSTRACT

Nigeria's development conversation has long celebrated the entrepreneur who leaves to build something new, while paying far less attention to the intrapreneur who stays and rebuilds an existing institution from the inside. This article argues that the distinction matters more than ever. Drawing on the June 2026 elevation of CRED founder Kunal Shah to global head of WhatsApp, a verified case of an entrepreneurial career culminating inside one of the world's largest corporations rather than outside it, the article develops the case that organisational competitiveness in an AI-disrupted global economy depends as much on institutions that can convert employee initiative into innovation as on the number of new firms a country produces. Using evidence from the World Economic Forum's Future of Jobs Report 2025, Nigeria's SMEDAN/NBS MSME data, national migration statistics, and documented corporate and public-sector cases, the article examines why many Nigerian institutions, private and public, struggle to retain and deploy the entrepreneurial energy already inside their workforce, and why this failure compounds the country's well-documented brain-drain and productivity challenges. It reviews the leadership, cultural and human-resource conditions that enable or suppress intrapreneurial behaviour, drawing on Pinchot's foundational scholarship, entrepreneurial-orientation theory and Amy Edmondson's psychological-safety research, and situates these alongside Nigerian and comparative public-sector cases, including NITDA's internal innovation challenge and international examples from Rwanda, Singapore and Estonia. It closes with a practical framework and recommendations for boards, chief executives, permanent secretaries, vice-chancellors and policymakers, built around the proposition that Nigeria does not simply need more entrepreneurs; it needs institutions capable of retaining, empowering and deploying entrepreneurial people from within.

KEYWORDS

Intrapreneurship, entrepreneurship, organisational innovation, leadership, human capital, brain drain, Nigeria, digital transformation

Introduction

In June 2026, Meta announced that it would invest $900 million in the Indian fintech company CRED and hand global leadership of WhatsApp, the messaging platform used by more than three billion people, to CRED's founder, Kunal Shah. Shah had built his career the way entrepreneurship is usually told: he co-founded FreeCharge in 2010, sold it to Snapdeal in 2015 for roughly $400 million, and then built CRED into one of India's most closely watched fintech ventures. What made the June 2026 announcement different from the standard founder-success narrative is where the story ended: not with Shah building another company outside the corporate mainstream, but with Meta pulling him inside one of the largest corporations on earth to run one of its most consequential products. Bloomberg reported that the move began with Meta's chief product officer reaching out to Shah for his views on the future of WhatsApp; Mark Zuckerberg publicly credited Shah's builder's mindset as the reason he was chosen to lead an organisation that already existed rather than to found a new one.

This episode is worth pausing on, not because one appointment proves a theory of organisational life, but because it crystallises a distinction that Nigerian institutional leadership has been slow to internalise: the difference between entrepreneurship, the creation of new enterprises, and intrapreneurship, the creation, renewal and transformation of value inside enterprises that already exist. The term itself is older than most people assume. Gifford and Elizabeth Pinchot coined the phrase intra-corporate entrepreneurship in 1978, and Pinchot's 1985 book, Intrapreneuring, popularised the idea that large organisations contain what he called dreamers who do: employees who take personal responsibility for turning an idea into an innovation without leaving to found a company of their own. Since then, a substantial scholarly literature, spanning corporate entrepreneurship, entrepreneurial orientation and employee-driven innovation, has tried to explain why some organisations convert that dreaming energy into renewal while others watch it walk out the door.

The reason this distinction matters for Nigeria has little to do with fintech in Mumbai and everything to do with an uncomfortable paradox that sits at the centre of the country's development debate. Nigeria is not short of entrepreneurial energy. Nigerians build businesses at a scale that dwarfs most peer economies: the most recent SMEDAN/NBS national survey found more than forty million micro, small and medium enterprises employing close to sixty million people and contributing roughly half of national GDP. Nigerians also succeed spectacularly abroad, in Silicon Valley, in London's financial sector, in African fintech, and in the diaspora professions that increasingly define how the world thinks about Nigerian talent. And yet the same country loses an estimated 150,000 skilled professionals a year to emigration, according to the Nigerian Economic Summit Group, while surveys have repeatedly found that a majority of young, employed Nigerians

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would leave if they could. The puzzle is not that Nigeria lacks talent or ambition. It is that a great many Nigerian institutions, corporate and public, appear unable to convert the entrepreneurial instincts of the people already inside them into institutional renewal, and lose those people instead, to resignation, disengagement, or the departure lounge at Murtala Muhammed International Airport.

LEADERSHIP REFLECTION

Does your organisation genuinely encourage entrepreneurial thinking in the people already inside it, or does it unintentionally teach them that the surest path to influence is to leave?

This article develops that paradox into an argument with practical consequences for leadership and policy. It treats entrepreneurship and intrapreneurship as complementary rather than competing forms of value creation, examines the organisational conditions, leadership, culture, psychological safety, incentives, that enable or suppress intrapreneurial behaviour, and draws out what this means for Nigerian private-sector firms, public institutions and universities in an economy being reshaped by artificial intelligence and digital transformation. It draws on documented corporate cases while resisting the popular temptation to reduce complex organisational failures to a single cause; a company that missed digital disruption rarely failed for one reason, and treating a famous corporate decline as a morality tale about a single missed invention does a disservice to the more complicated truth uncovered by business historians. The purpose throughout is not nostalgia for Silicon Valley folklore but a serious, evidence-based case for what Nigerian leaders can actually do differently.

The Case That Triggered the Question

Kunal Shah's rise deserves closer examination precisely because so much of it is unusually well documented for a contemporary business story, which matters given how quickly unverified claims about entrepreneurs circulate on social media. Multiple independent outlets, including Bloomberg and TechCrunch, confirmed that Meta's $900 million investment valued CRED at approximately $4.5 billion and that Shah would step down as CRED's chief executive, handing day-to-day leadership to MitenSampat, while retaining his personal shareholding and moving into the WhatsApp role. Zuckerberg's stated rationale, that Shah had built one of India's most important technology companies and brought a builder's mentality needed to run the world's largest messaging app, is a matter of public record rather than speculation.

What is less well established, and should be treated with appropriate caution, is the precise scale of Shah's personal wealth, which multiple outlets described as unverified and ranging anywhere from roughly $500 million to considerably more, depending on how privately held CRED shares are valued. The distinction matters methodologically as much as journalistically: an article that borrows the parts of a contemporary story that are documented, while flagging the parts that remain speculative, models the kind of evidentiary discipline that Nigerian institutional decision-making sorely needs. Too many boardroom and policy conversations in Nigeria proceed on the strength of anecdote, rumour and imported management folklore rather than on verified data, and the habit of separating what is known from what is merely repeated is itself a leadership competency.

The substantive point Shah's story illustrates is narrower than the headlines suggest, and more useful for that narrowness. Meta did not simply admire an outside entrepreneur; it moved him inside the organisation to solve an internal problem, arguably the definitional act of converting an entrepreneur's instincts into an intrapreneurial mandate. The lesson for Nigerian leadership is not to hire famous founders, which is neither replicable nor, on its own, transformative. It is that the most consequential organisations in the world increasingly treat the boundary between founding companies and renewing them as porous, and structure their leadership pipelines to move talent across that boundary in both directions. Nigerian institutions, by contrast, still largely treat the two as separate career tracks: the ambitious and the entrepreneurial leave for themselves, while the compliant and risk-averse are the ones who rise inside.

Two Faces of the Same Coin: Entrepreneurship and Intrapreneurship

The scholarly distinction between entrepreneurship and intrapreneurship is not merely semantic. Entrepreneurship, in the tradition running from Schumpeter through contemporary opportunity-recognition theory, concerns the identification and exploitation of an opportunity through the creation of a new venture, typically at the founder's own financial and reputational risk. Intrapreneurship concerns the same underlying behaviours, opportunity recognition, innovativeness, risk tolerance and resource mobilisation, exercised inside an existing organisation, where the institution rather than the individual bears the financial risk and, if the venture succeeds, captures a share of the resulting value.

This has led some scholars to prefer the broader label corporate entrepreneurship for organisation-level phenomena and to reserve intrapreneurship for the behaviour of individual employees, while others use the terms interchangeably. What unites the literature is agreement that large organisations are not inherently incapable of the innovativeness, proactiveness and calculated risk-taking associated with entrepreneurial orientation; they simply require different institutional scaffolding to produce it. Where an entrepreneur risks personal capital and reputation on an unproven idea, an intrapreneur risks career capital, credibility with a manager, and the political cost of championing an unpopular proposal, inside an organisation that may reward conformity more reliably than it rewards experimentation. The conceptual distinctions that matter for leaders are less about definitions and more about what each requires: entrepreneurship requires access to external capital and market opportunity; intrapreneurship requires internal autonomy, psychological safety and a credible promise that initiative will be recognised rather than punished.

This is also where the popular but oversimplified account of famous intrapreneurial products deserves a more careful reading. Gmail is frequently cited as the paradigmatic case of Google's twenty-percent-time policy, which allowed engineers to spend a fifth of their working hours on self-directed projects. The fuller history is more instructive than the folklore: Paul Buchheit, Gmail's creator, has said in interviews that building an email client was in fact an official assignment rather than a purely discretionary side project, even though it grew far beyond its original brief through the kind of internal experimentation the twenty-percent policy was designed to protect. The nuance does not weaken the case for intrapreneurship; it strengthens it, because it shows that what mattered was not a single celebrated policy but a broader organisational tolerance for engineers pursuing unscripted problems, and for founders choosing to back an internally generated idea that had not been requested by any customer or executive. Amazon Web Services followed a similar pattern: a retail company's internal infrastructure need was recognised by leadership as a product the rest of the world would also pay for, and was allowed to grow into a business line that today generates a substantial share of the parent company's operating profit. The Toyota Production System, similarly, did not emerge from a single inventor's garage but from decades of shop-floor employees being systematically empowered, through continuous-improvement practices, to stop the line and propose process improvements, an institutionalisation of intrapreneurship at a scale few Western commentators fully credit.

The cautionary cases deserve equal rigour. A well-known photographic company is routinely summarised as the business that invented the digital camera and then refused to sell it, but business historians have documented a more complicated failure involving cannibalisation fears, a highly profitable film-and-chemicals business that leadership was reluctant to disrupt voluntarily, and strategic missteps in how the company tried to monetise digital imaging, rather than a simple failure of internal invention. The collapse of once-dominant mobile-handset makers in the smartphone era involved software-platform decisions, ecosystem competition, and organisational culture, not merely an absence of internal innovators; some of these companies are known to have had internal prototypes of touchscreen smartphones years before their rivals launched, which makes the failure one of organisational conversion rather than one of missing intrapreneurial ideas. The lesson for Nigerian leaders is not that intrapreneurship guarantees survival, but that its absence is rarely the sole cause of decline and its presence is rarely, on its own, sufficient; what determines outcomes is whether an organisation's leadership, incentives and governance are structured to notice, fund and scale the ideas already circulating inside the building.

Why the World Now Needs Both Kinds of Builders

The urgency of this argument is not abstract. The World Economic Forum's Future of Jobs Report 2025, based on survey data from over a thousand employers representing more than fourteen million workers across fifty-five economies, forecasts that technological change, demographic shifts and economic pressure will displace ninety-two million jobs by 2030 while creating a hundred and seventy million new ones, a net gain of seventy-eight million globally, but a churn that will require nearly forty percent of core job skills to change. Fifty-nine percent of the global workforce, the report finds, will need reskilling or upskilling before 2030 simply to remain employable, and employers rank the resulting skills gap as the single largest barrier to business transformation. Artificial intelligence and big data top the list of fastest-growing skills, but the report is emphatic that human skills, creative thinking, resilience, flexibility and collaborative problem-solving, remain equally critical, precisely the behavioural repertoire associated with intrapreneurial employees rather than merely technically proficient ones.

This is the deeper reason intrapreneurship has moved from a Silicon Valley curiosity to a leadership imperative for every serious economy, including Nigeria's. An organisation facing this scale of disruption cannot simply purchase its way to competitiveness by acquiring new technology; it must also cultivate employees capable of recognising where existing processes, products and services need to be reimagined, and it must do so faster than external competitors or informal-sector alternatives can capture the same opportunity. Artificial intelligence in particular changes the calculus in two directions at once. It automates routine cognitive tasks, which reduces the value of pure compliance and procedural execution, the very behaviours many Nigerian organisational hierarchies most reliably reward, while simultaneously lowering the cost of experimentation, since AI tools now allow a single motivated employee to prototype, analyse and test ideas that would previously have required a dedicated team and budget. Organisations that treat AI purely as a cost-cutting or automation tool, without also loosening the internal constraints on employee-led experimentation, are likely to capture only half of the available value. The proposition worth stating plainly for Nigerian boards is this: technology alone does not create organisational transformation; it is organisational culture, leadership behaviour and human capability that determine whether new tools translate into renewed competitiveness or merely into faster versions of the same constrained processes.

The Nigerian Paradox: Abundant Talent, Constrained Institutions

Nigeria's entrepreneurial energy is not a matter of aspiration alone; it is measurable. The most recent SMEDAN/NBS national MSME survey found that Nigeria's micro, small and medium enterprises number more than forty million, employ close to sixty million people, representing roughly three-quarters of the national labour force, and contribute somewhere between forty-six and fifty percent of GDP depending on the year and methodology used, figures the International Labour Organisation has separately corroborated at around forty-eight percent. Wholesale and retail trade, agriculture and informal services dominate the sectoral mix, evidence of an economy in which entrepreneurial activity is not an elite pursuit but a near-universal survival and growth strategy. On any honest reading, this is not a country of thwarted ambition; it is a country in which ambition routinely bypasses formal institutions altogether because formal institutions have not made themselves worth staying inside.

The same period has produced a well-documented exodus of exactly the professionals whose skills Nigerian institutions most need to retain. The Nigerian Economic Summit Group has estimated that roughly 150,000 Nigerians leave the country annually as part of what is popularly known as the japa phenomenon, a figure consistent with National Bureau of Statistics data showing substantial net emigration annually and with United Kingdom medical-regulator records showing that the number of Nigerian-trained doctors registered to practise there climbed from around 4,500 in 2021 to more than 10,000 by 2022. Surveys have repeatedly found that a substantial majority of young Nigerians, and a majority of currently employed Nigerians across full-time and part-time roles, say they would relocate abroad given the opportunity, even though many already hold jobs. This is the paradox in its starkest form: an economy overflowing with entrepreneurial self-starters is simultaneously haemorrhaging the professionals whose energy, once inside an institution, could be converting that same entrepreneurial instinct into organisational renewal, rather than a one-way ticket out.

It would be too simple, and analytically lazy, to attribute this exodus solely to organisations suppressing entrepreneurial instinct. The scholarly literature on Nigerian brain drain identifies a bundle of interacting drivers, currency depreciation and inflation, insecurity, weak infrastructure, limited research funding, alongside institutional and cultural factors: excessive centralisation of decision-making, promotion systems anchored more in tenure and patronage than in demonstrated initiative, and risk-averse management cultures that treat questioning of existing process as insubordination rather than engagement. What can be said with more confidence is that where compensation and macroeconomic conditions are held roughly constant, employees who experience autonomy, recognition and a credible path to seeing their ideas implemented are measurably less likely to disengage or exit than those who do not, a finding consistent with decades of organisational-behaviour research on job design, autonomy and retention. Nigerian leaders should therefore resist two equally unhelpful stories: the fatalistic claim that emigration is purely an economic phenomenon beyond institutional control, and the naive claim that better internal culture alone can offset a currency crisis. The honest position is that institutional design is one lever among several, but it is the lever most directly within an individual chief executive's, permanent secretary's or vice-chancellor's control, which is precisely why it deserves more deliberate attention than it currently receives.

A NUMBER WORTH SITTING WITH

Roughly 150,000 Nigerians leave the country every year, by the Nigerian Economic Summit Group's own estimate, most of them exactly the calibre of employee every serious institution says it wants to keep.

What Suppresses Intrapreneurship, and What Enables It

The organisational-behaviour literature converges on a reasonably coherent explanation for why some institutions convert employee initiative into innovation while others extinguish it, and Nigerian leaders would benefit from treating this as diagnostic rather than rhetorical. Amy Edmondson's decades of research on psychological safety, beginning with her landmark 1999 study of hospital teams, found something counterintuitive: the best-performing teams did not report fewer errors than weaker ones; they reported more, because they were safe enough to surface mistakes rather than conceal them. Psychological safety, in Edmondson's own definition, describes a climate in which people feel free to take the interpersonal risk of learning, of speaking up with questions, concerns, half-formed ideas and honest accounts of what went wrong, without fear of humiliation or retaliation. Applied to intrapreneurship, the implication is direct: an employee will not propose an unproven idea, flag an inefficient process, or admit that an experiment failed, if doing so carries a realistic risk of being seen as disloyal, incompetent or a troublemaker. Bureaucracy in this reading is not intrinsically hostile to innovation; accountability, coordination and due process are legitimate and necessary features of any well-run institution, particularly a public one spending taxpayer resources. What becomes dysfunctional is bureaucracy that has drifted from accountability into risk-aversion for its own sake, where the absence of failure is prized over the presence of learning, and where every layer of approval exists to diffuse blame rather than to improve decisions.

Nigerian organisational culture, across both private firms and public agencies, exhibits well-documented tendencies toward hierarchy, centralisation and deference to seniority that scholars of African management have linked to colonial administrative inheritance as much as to indigenous cultural norms, a distinction worth making because it resists the lazy conclusion that hierarchy is simply how Nigerians are. These tendencies are neither universal across all Nigerian organisations

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nor immutable; they coexist with genuinely entrepreneurial pockets inside large firms, in fintech, in some state government reform units and in university research centres, that demonstrate the underlying capability is present and simply needs different institutional permission to express itself. What the evidence supports is a conditional claim, not a sweeping one: where Nigerian organisational contexts exhibit high centralisation, limited managerial autonomy, promotion systems weighted toward tenure over demonstrated initiative and weak tolerance for intelligent failure, employee-driven innovation measurably declines and disengagement measurably rises, a pattern consistent with global evidence rather than a uniquely Nigerian pathology.

Human-resource architecture is the practical mechanism through which culture becomes behaviour. Recruitment processes that select primarily for compliance with existing job descriptions, rather than for demonstrated curiosity and adaptability, will struggle to onboardintrapreneurial talent even when leadership genuinely wants it. Performance-management systems anchored solely in adherence to targets set at the beginning of a cycle, with no mechanism for recognising an employee who redesigned a process mid-year, will quietly punish the very behaviour an organisation claims to want. Promotion pipelines that reward tenure over initiative teach every ambitious employee watching from below that patience, not proposal-making, is the surer route upward. None of this requires abandoning accountability or performance standards; it requires redesigning what those standards measure, so that intelligent, well-reasoned failure is distinguished from negligence, and initiative is treated as a credential rather than a liability.

Learning from the Private Sector, Cautiously

Nigerian private-sector firms already contain examples worth studying more seriously than the imported case studies from 3M, Google or Amazon that dominate most local management training. Fintech companies operating in Lagos have demonstrated, under real regulatory and infrastructural constraints, that Nigerian engineering and product talent can build globally competitive digital financial products when given genuine product ownership and a tolerance for iterative failure, a pattern documented in recent industry assessments of Nigerian fintech infrastructure. Nigerian banks that have successfully digitised customer-facing services in the past decade did so, almost without exception, through internal digital-transformation units that were deliberately insulated from the risk-averse incentives of core banking operations, an organisational-design choice, ring-fencing intrapreneurial units rather than expecting existing departments to innovate under unchanged incentive structures, that Nigerian boards outside financial services have been slower to adopt.

The caution required here mirrors the caution applied to the corporate cautionary tales above: Nigerian organisational success stories, like their global counterparts, rarely rest on a single cultural factor. Access to capital, regulatory relationships, founder networks and macroeconomic timing all played roles alongside internal culture in Nigeria's most celebrated corporate turnarounds. The claim this article defends is narrower and more defensible: internal culture is a necessary, though not sufficient, condition for converting talent into competitiveness, and it is the condition most within a Nigerian chief executive's or board's direct control, regardless of what else is happening in the macroeconomic environment.

Public-Sector Intrapreneurship: A Different Governance Logic, Not a Different Human Nature

Public institutions face a legitimate constraint that private firms do not: experimentation with taxpayer resources, public safety and legal authority cannot be pursued with the same risk tolerance as a private product launch, and any serious argument for public-sector intrapreneurship must say so plainly rather than pretending government should simply behave like a startup. What the international evidence shows, however, is that this constraint does not require choosing between accountability and innovation; it requires designing controlled spaces, pilots, innovation labs and sandboxes, where public servants can experiment within clear legal and fiscal boundaries before ideas are scaled system-wide.

Nigeria already has an instructive, underpublicised example of this logic operating inside its own federal bureaucracy. The National Information Technology Development Agency's internal Innovation Challenge invited its own staff, corps members and interns to identify operational problems inside the agency itself; the initial round attracted thirty-five internal submissions, from which thirteen priority challenges were selected and twenty-four internal teams formed to develop solutions, an initiative the agency has said it intends to formalise through a standing Innovation Framework. Whatever its eventual scale, the exercise demonstrates something important for sceptical Nigerian policymakers: the raw material for public-sector intrapreneurship, employees who understand an agency's operational weaknesses better than any external consultant, already exists inside Nigerian ministries, departments and agencies. What is typically missing is not the ideas but a formal channel, and organisational permission, for those ideas to surface, be evaluated and be funded.

International comparators reinforce the same lesson under very different governance systems. Estonia's digital-government transformation, often cited as a model for developing countries, was driven substantially by mid-level civil servants and technologists working inside government agencies rather than solely by externally procured consultants, a deliberate policy choice to build internal digital capability rather than perpetually outsource it. Singapore's public service has long operated internal innovation units tasked with piloting service-delivery improvements before wider rollout, embedding a controlled-experimentation logic into an otherwise famously disciplined bureaucracy. Rwanda's public administration has used performance-contracting mechanisms, the Imihigo system, to give local government officials measurable autonomy and accountability simultaneously, evidence that autonomy and accountability are complements rather than substitutes when the incentive design is right. None of these systems abandoned public accountability to achieve innovation; each redesigned where accountability was applied, at the level of outcomes and pilots rather than at the level of every procedural step, freeing civil servants to exercise judgement within a bounded, auditable space.

Universities as Both Producers and Practitioners of Intrapreneurship

Nigerian universities occupy a dual role in this argument that deserves more attention than it typically receives in higher-education policy debates. They are, first, the institutions responsible for producing graduates who will either found new enterprises or take up positions inside existing ones, which means curriculum design that treats entrepreneurship purely as business-plan writing, disconnected from the organisational-behaviour, leadership and innovation-management competencies that intrapreneurship requires, is preparing graduates for only half of the economy they will actually enter. A graduate who understands how to recognise an operational opportunity, build a coalition of support inside a hierarchy and manage the political risk of championing change is arguably better equipped for the modern Nigerian labour market, in which the large majority of graduates will work inside existing organisations rather than found their own, than one who has only studied how to write a business plan for a venture that does not yet exist.

Second, and less often discussed, universities are themselves large, often heavily bureaucratic organisations that need their own intrapreneurs: administrators and academics willing to redesign outdated processes, pursue industry partnerships, and commercialise research that too often ends its life as an unread thesis chapter. The theory-practice divide that has long characterised Nigerian higher-education debate is, at bottom, an intrapreneurship problem: research-to-market pathways, technology-transfer offices and industry-collaboration units require exactly the same organisational scaffolding, autonomy, incentive alignment, tolerance for early-stage failure, that corporate intrapreneurship requires, and Nigerian universities that have invested in these units, however modestly, offer a more replicable model for the broader higher-education system than any single celebrated foreign case study.

A Framework for Nigerian Leaders

The evidence assembled above supports a conceptual model rather than a mechanical formula, and Nigerian leaders should resist any consultant's promise of a guaranteed causal recipe; what follows describes conditions that enable intrapreneurial behaviour, not a formula that produces it automatically. Leadership sets the tone by modelling curiosity and tolerating dissent rather than merely tolerating agreement; that leadership posture, sustained over time, shapes organisational culture, the informal rules about what gets rewarded and what gets punished; culture in turn determines the level of psychological safety and trust employees feel, which governs how much genuine autonomy they are willing to exercise even when it is formally granted. Autonomy without the accompanying capability, digital literacy, problem-solving skill, exposure to relevant training, produces enthusiasm without competence, while capability without autonomy produces frustrated competence with nowhere to go. Incentive systems and learning infrastructure determine whether intrapreneurial behaviour, once exercised, is recognised and reinforced or quietly ignored, and governance and board oversight determine whether the resulting innovations are actually resourced and scaled rather than left to wither as unfunded pilot projects. The chain runs, in short, from leadership and culture through trust and autonomy to intrapreneurial behaviour, and from intrapreneurial behaviour through organisational innovation to institutional adaptability and competitiveness, but every link in that chain can break independently, which is why partial reforms, a single training programme, a single innovation challenge, rarely produce durable change on their own.

THE SARUMI INSTITUTIONAL RENEWAL CHAIN

Leadership and Culture — Trust and Psychological Safety — Autonomy and Capability — Incentives and Learning — Governance and Resourcing — Intrapreneurial Behaviour — Organisational Innovation — Institutional Adaptability and Competitiveness. A conceptual chain, not a guaranteed formula: each link can break independently, which is why partial reforms rarely produce durable change.

Nigerian boards and chief executives evaluating their own institutions against this framework might usefully ask a small number of diagnostic questions rather than commissioning an elaborate audit: whether an employee who proposed a failed but well-reasoned experiment last year was treated differently from one who proposed nothing at all; whether the last three internally generated ideas that reached senior management actually received funding, a pilot, or a considered rejection with feedback, rather than simply disappearing into an unanswered email; and whether promotion in the past two cycles rewarded anyone primarily for having proposed and delivered something new, as opposed to having simply avoided visible failure. An institution that cannot answer these questions with concrete examples is very likely one in which entrepreneurial employees are already quietly deciding whether to stay.

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Recommendations for Leadership and Policy

For chief executives and boards, the most immediately actionable step is treating innovation capability and talent retention as governance issues rather than purely operational ones, with board-level questions about intrapreneurial pipeline health asked as routinely as questions about financial performance. This means creating identifiable channels, an innovation fund, a cross-functional experimentation team, a formal internal-pitch process, through which employees can propose ideas outside their immediate job description, and it means chief executives publicly and visibly backing at least a small number of internally generated ideas each year, since employees calibrate what is genuinely safe to propose by watching what leadership actually rewards rather than by reading a values statement on the wall.

For human-resource leaders, the priority is redesigning recruitment to select explicitly for curiosity and adaptability alongside technical competence, redesigning performance management to distinguish intelligent, well-reasoned failure from negligence rather than treating all failure identically, and building promotion criteria that give visible weight to demonstrated initiative rather than tenure alone. Mentoring and cross-functional rotation programmes, moving promising employees across departments before they either stagnate or leave, are comparatively inexpensive interventions with a strong evidentiary basis in retention research.

For public-sector leaders and policymakers, the Nigerian government at federal, state and local level should institutionalise internal innovation challenges of the kind NITDA has already piloted, extending the model across ministries, departments and agencies with dedicated, ring-fenced budget lines rather than treating each exercise as a one-off communications event. Regulators overseeing sensitive sectors, banking, telecommunications, health, should develop controlled-experimentation frameworks akin to regulatory sandboxes, already used successfully in Nigeria's fintech and payments space, that allow public agencies themselves to pilot service-delivery innovations within clearly bounded legal and fiscal limits before wider rollout, following the logic Estonia, Singapore and Rwanda have each applied under very different governance traditions.

For universities, curriculum reform should integrate intrapreneurship and organisational-innovation competencies alongside conventional entrepreneurship education, and university administrations should invest, even modestly, in research-commercialisation and industry-partnership units structured with the same autonomy and incentive logic that corporate intrapreneurship requires. For individual professionals navigating Nigerian institutions today, the practical implication is less about waiting for perfect organisational conditions and more about recognising that visible, well-documented initiative, proposing solutions rather than only identifying problems, remains one of the more reliable paths to being noticed, retained and promoted even inside imperfect institutions, while accepting that individual agency cannot substitute for the structural reforms outlined above.

Conclusion

The story of an Indian fintech founder moving inside Meta to run WhatsApp is, on its own, a curiosity of little direct relevance to Nigerian institutional life. What it usefully illustrates, however, is a distinction Nigerian leadership can no longer afford to blur: between the entrepreneur who builds something new outside an institution and the intrapreneur who renews an institution from within, and between an economy that merely produces founders and one that also builds institutions capable of retaining and deploying them. Nigeria's paradox is not a shortage of entrepreneurial talent; the country's forty million-plus MSMEs and its globally competitive diaspora professionals settle that question definitively. The paradox is a persistent gap between that abundant talent and the capacity of Nigerian institutions, corporate and public, to convert it into sustained organisational renewal rather than watching it depart, whether to a rival firm, to the informal sector, or to an airport departure gate.

Closing that gap will not come from a single training programme or a borrowed Silicon Valley slogan. It will come from leaders who treat psychological safety, autonomy and the intelligent tolerance of failure as governance priorities rather than soft-skills afterthoughts, from boards that fund internally generated ideas as deliberately as they fund external consultants, and from a public sector willing to let its own civil servants, who understand its dysfunctions better than any outside adviser, propose and pilot the fixes. Nigeria does not simply need more entrepreneurs. It needs institutions capable of retaining, empowering and deploying the entrepreneurial people already inside them, and that is a leadership choice available starting now, in the next board meeting, the next performance cycle and the next budget line, not a condition that must wait for the economy to improve first.

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