

KEYNOTE ADDRESS

“From Experience to Expertise: Mastering Your Field”

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Delivered at the J-K Gadzama LLP 11th Hon. Justice Chukwudi Oputa, JSC (Rtd) Annual Professional Training and Mentoring Programme, on March 14, 2026.

Introduction

Distinguished colleagues, respected mentors, devoted mentees, ladies and gentlemen.

It is a profound honour to stand before you at the 11th edition of this Annual Professional Training and Mentoring Programme instituted in honour of Hon. Justice Chukwudi Oputa, JSC (Rtd) – a jurist whose sharp intellect, moral courage, and elegant writing earned him the enduring title “the Socrates of the Supreme Court.”

"Standing on the Shoulders of Giants" - The Imperative of Mentorship: We Rise by Lifting Others

One of the most memorable experiences of my life as an undergraduate student was in my second year: I received a call to the office of the revered Professor Ebere O. O. Osieke (of blessed memory), then Dean of the Faculty of Law, University of Jos. Trembling, I went to the office, having had no personal relationship with Professor Osieke, wondering what lay in stock for me, the son of a village farmer, without a social pedigree that would ordinarily attract the attention of a distinguished law professor.

Alas, a pleasant surprise awaited me: “Congratulations young man”, Professor Osieke said to me. “Your performance in my course, constitutional law, is very impressive. You deserve every commendation. But you must not rest on your oars. From now on, I’ll be watching your back. I’ll be monitoring your performance. If you don’t sustain the tempo, you’ll incur my wrath. If you encounter any problems do not hesitate to let me know. Good luck.”

Professor Osieke kept his word. He did not ask me what my ethnic nationality was. He did not ask me what my religion was. He did not ask me what my state of origin was. He did not ask me what my parents did for a living. All he saw was a promising student and, to his credit, mentored me by availing me his giant shoulders to stand on and aim for the top. You can imagine his joy when I graduated with a First Class Honours law degree. Thankfully, I recounted this ecstatic experience to rapturous applause and standing ovation in Professor Osieke’s

honour when, as Attorney General of Plateau State, I gave the keynote address at the 2005 Nigerian Association of Law Teachers (NALT) conference hosted by the Faculty of Law, University of Jos.

For context, it is instructive that the Faculty of Law of the University of Jos produced its first First Class Honours graduate in 1980, from the pioneer cohort.

It would take another decade before the second First Class Honours graduate emerged in 1990 – an honour I was, by the grace of God and through purposeful mentoring, privileged to attain.

After 1990, the Faculty did not record another First Class graduate until 2014 - 24 years later! - when I assumed office as Dean of Law. This gap did not arise from a lack of capable students; rather, the environment required to help such students thrive had not been fully established.

During my four-year tenure as Dean, the Faculty produced a total of four First Class Honours graduates. This significant milestone did not result from lowering academic standards; on the contrary, we strengthened them. The key difference was the deliberate creation of the right environment: one that combined structured mentoring with a robust accountability framework, enabling our students to excel.

When Isaac Newton wrote, “If I have seen further, it is by standing on the shoulders of giants,” he captured the timeless truth that greatness is rarely achieved in isolation. His genius did not diminish his humility; instead, it highlighted the power of learning from those who have gone ahead. This is the essence of mentorship. Every mentor provides a taller vantage point – offering wisdom, perspective, and clarity that accelerate a younger professional’s growth. And every mentee, by honouring and building upon that guidance, extends the legacy of those giants. In law as in science, mastery is not

merely individual accomplishment; it is the cumulative strength of generations lifting one another toward excellence.

“We rise by lifting others” is more than a moral slogan — it is a principle that defines meaningful success. True growth is never a solitary climb; it is a shared ascent in which each act of guidance, support, or mentorship strengthens the entire community. When we help others find clarity, confidence, and opportunity, we deepen our own competence and character. In lifting others, we build networks of trust, we create legacies that outlive our individual achievements, and we shape a profession where excellence is multiplied, not hoarded. Ultimately, the heights we reach are determined not just by our personal effort, but by how many people we empower to rise alongside us. With proper mentorship, it is never lonely at the top!

The fierce urgency of mentorship initiatives — such

as this one — is underscored by growing apprehension in certain circles that the legal profession in Nigeria is becoming increasingly saturated, leaving little room for newly called wigs. At the same time, there is a mounting concern that rapid technological advancement is transforming the legal landscape with such ferocity that many lawyers engaged in traditional legal practice may soon be at risk of displacement. In these circumstances, mentorship becomes indispensable. It offers clarity, guidance, and perspective, enabling new wigs to approach legal practice with innovation and strategic focus so that their skills and expertise remain rare, relevant, and difficult to replace.

The critical question, therefore, is this: What are their passions, and which problems are they most determined to solve? The law is not confined to the courtroom; it can be applied across countless sectors — Artificial Intelligence, entertainment, fashion, information and communications technology, medicine, and many others. When young lawyers align their legal training with areas that

genuinely interest them, they create unique value. The law, after all, is a living stream, ever flowing and ever adapting, carving its path through the landscape of human affairs and finding expression in literally every sphere of human activity.

I specially commend Chief Joe Kyari Gadzama, SAN and the J-K Gadzama LLP family for initiating and sustaining this platform that blends rigorous training with a culture of mentorship. In a profession as demanding as ours, this convergence is not merely useful – it is essential. Thank you for availing your giant shoulders - both physically and metaphorically - for the younger generation to stand on and dare to dream.

From Experience to Expertise: Why Expertise Matters

Expertise is indispensable in the legal profession because the practice of law demands precision, sound judgment, credibility, and the ability to solve

complex problems. For a lawyer, expertise is not merely a professional advantage – it is a professional necessity. The following reasons explain why expertise matters, especially for lawyers:

1. "Specially Skilled": Expertise and Admissibility in the Law of Evidence

One of the most fascinating recognitions of the value of expertise appears in our law of evidence. Under the Evidence Act 2011, the general rule is that opinion evidence is inadmissible. Section 67 tells us that a witness ordinarily cannot come to court and tell the judge what he thinks or believes. The law demands facts, not speculation.

But then the law makes a remarkable exception.

Section 68 provides that where the court must form an opinion on matters involving science, art, foreign law, handwriting, fingerprints, or other specialised knowledge, the opinions of persons specially skilled in those fields are admissible.

In other words, while ordinary opinions are excluded,

expert opinions are welcomed.

Why?

Because the law recognises that there are matters beyond ordinary human experience. When technical questions arise, the court turns to experts for guidance.

So when we speak today about moving from experience to expertise, we are not merely talking about professional prestige. We are talking about developing the kind of knowledge and competence that the legal system itself recognises as well informed, objective, reliable, and valuable.

2. "Stand Out, Stand Tall": Expertise Enables Specialization and Distinction

The legal profession is highly competitive. Expertise allows a lawyer to stand out by becoming known for competence in a particular area of law.

Specialization not only enhances professional

recognition but also allows lawyers to handle complex and high-value matters that general practitioners may not be equipped to manage.

Expertise sets you apart.

Experts carve out a niche.

3. Expertise Enhances the Quality of Legal Advice

Clients seek lawyers primarily for solutions to difficult legal problems. Expertise enables a lawyer to interpret statutes, analyze precedents, and apply legal principles accurately to specific situations.

Without deep knowledge and understanding, a lawyer risks giving incomplete or incorrect advice, which can have serious consequences for clients' rights, businesses, and liberty.

4. Expertise Builds Professional Credibility

In the legal profession, reputation is built on

demonstrated competence. Judges, colleagues, and clients quickly recognize lawyers who consistently display mastery of their field. For example, Chief JK Gadhama and I, and a few others, were recently invited by the Federal High Court to serve as amici curiae in a Suit which, in the words of the Court, raised the “novel issue” of the legality of the “establishment and operation of a shadow government within the Nigerian democracy.”

5. Expertise Improves Advocacy and Persuasion

Effective advocacy requires more than eloquence; it requires deep command of legal principles, precedents, and strategy.

A lawyer with expertise can anticipate opposing arguments, identify the strongest legal authorities, and craft persuasive arguments grounded in sound legal reasoning.

This depth often makes the difference between success and failure in litigation or negotiation.

6. Expertise Builds Confidence

When you know your field thoroughly, you speak with authority, contribute boldly, handle challenges calmly, and confidently.

7. Experts Command Better Opportunities

With expertise comes better-quality work, more challenging assignments, leadership roles, and access to eminent circles.

8. Experts Earn More

Markets reward rarity.

When your skills are deep and hard to replace, your value increases – professionally and financially.

Expertise brings leverage.

9. Expertise Gives You Influence

People listen to, respect, and follow those who

demonstrate mastery.

Experts shape conversations, policies, strategies, and even industries.

Influence flows naturally from competence.

10. Expertise Increases Client Confidence and Trust

Clients often approach lawyers during moments of uncertainty or crisis. They place their trust in professionals who demonstrate mastery and confidence.

When a lawyer exhibits expertise – through sound analysis, clarity of explanation, and effective strategy – clients feel reassured that their matters are in capable hands.

When you are widely acclaimed as the "go to" person for a particular problem, clients, colleagues, and leaders approach you with confidence.

Trust becomes your currency.

11. Expertise Contributes to the Development of the Law

Expert lawyers do more than serve clients; they also contribute to the evolution of legal thought. Through persuasive advocacy, scholarly writing, and participation in legal reforms, they shape how the law is interpreted and applied.

Many landmark legal developments have emerged from the work of lawyers who possess deep expertise in their fields.

12. Expertise Supports Ethical and Responsible Practice

Competence is a core professional duty in legal practice. Lawyers have an obligation to handle matters with adequate knowledge, preparation, and skill.

You cannot claim expertise in a field where your

integrity is questionable.

Technical mastery without ethical grounding is professional deception. No amount of brilliance and legal sophistry can make up for ethical deficit.

13. Experts Become Mentors and Multipliers

Experts don't just excel – they contribute. They train others, build institutions, inspire the next generation, and strengthen their profession.

14. Expertise Future-Proofs Your Career

In a world changing through technology, policy shifts, and global trends, general knowledge ages quickly.

But deep knowledge – combined with continuous growth – keeps you relevant.

15. AI and the Peril of not Carving Out a Niche as an Expert

With the advent of AI, many fear that numerous

professions and skills are now in jeopardy. While non-experts have every reason to be apprehensive, experts are secure in the knowledge that even as AI makes it easier than ever to access information and simulate experience, true expertise remains a rare and irreplaceable human asset.

AI can process vast amounts of data and reproduce patterns, but it cannot fully embody the depth of insight, intuition, moral judgment, contextual awareness, and the capacity to navigate complexity with wisdom that distinguish genuine mastery. Technology can support and even amplify these qualities, but no algorithm can truly replicate how thoughtfully and ethically one applies that knowledge in the service of others.

16. Do you Want to Live Forever? - Expertise Creates a Legacy

Experts leave something behind: ideas, frameworks, judgments, principles, writings, students, and mentees.

Mastery ensures your work outlives your time.

A Roadmap to Mastery for Young Lawyers

Experience is the starting point, not the destination. Experience is valuable, but experience alone does not produce expertise. Many professionals have years of practice without corresponding depth.

Mastery in the legal profession does not happen by accident. It is built deliberately – through habits, choices, and consistent discipline. This roadmap breaks the journey into the following actionable steps and measures:

1. Discover your Purpose

Mark Twain: Two most important days in the life of a person: The day you were born and the day you discover WHY - You have no control over the first, but you have a significant measure of control over the second.

Discovering your purpose equips you with the right attitude with which to pursue excellence, because your attitude determines your altitude.

Discovering your purpose gives your life direction, meaning, and clarity. When you understand *why* you are here and what unique gifts you carry, your decisions become more focused, your goals become clearer, and your daily efforts feel more fulfilling. Purpose fuels motivation, strengthens resilience during challenges, and helps you contribute positively to others. It transforms ordinary living into intentional living, guiding you toward a life that is impactful, joyful, and aligned with who you were created to be.

2. Understand the Landscape

Identify the intersection of your strengths, interests, and market needs - Undertake a SWOT analysis.

3. Be SMART in the design and implementation of your goal. In other words, is your plan Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Relevant, and Time-bound?

4. Build Foundational Competence

Before aspiring to be exceptional, ensure you are solid on the fundamentals. Even the most brilliant careers collapse without a strong foundation.

Don't mistake longevity for expertise. Work hard and smart at being the best you can be - and better!

5. Choose a Direction Early

You don't need to "fully specialize" immediately, but you need direction. Clarity helps you invest your energy strategically.

6. Seek Out Mentorship Intentionally

Mentorship accelerates the path to mastery.

Approach mentors with humility and readiness – not entitlement.

Mentorship must be active, not ceremonial. A mentee must show curiosity, humility, consistency, and the courage to ask questions. And a mentor must show openness, patience, intentionality, and generosity of spirit.

Today's legal profession demands collaborative excellence, not isolated brilliance. Mentorship is that critical bridge.

7. Make Learning a Lifestyle, not an Event

Don't become unteachable.

8. Build a Visible and Credible Body of Work

People cannot know you're an expert unless you showcase it.

9. Move out of your Comfort Zone - Comfort zones

rarely produce experts.

10. Be intentional about pursuing excellence - be focused, disciplined, curious, resilient, and cultivate communication skills, etc.

11. Develop Analytical and Strategic Thinking

Sharpen your mind by asking “why” behind legal positions, proposing alternative arguments, anticipating risks and implications, and analysing judgments with an eye on reasoning patterns.

12. Build Professional Relationships

Relationships open doors that skill alone cannot. The saying "your net worth is proportionate to your network" readily comes to mind.

13. Maintain Impeccable Ethics - Ethics are your lifelong reputation.

14. Stay Updated and Innovate

Experts stay ahead by tracking new developments, predicting changes, offering fresh perspectives, and adapting quickly.

Resist the temptation to bask in the euphoria of past successes and rest on your oars.

Celebrate and relish your past successes, but set your sight on new horizons.

15. Embrace Constructive Feedback and Accountability.

Don't ensconce yourself in your cocoon or eco-chamber, impervious to alternative perspectives, and revelling in the grandeur of the delusion that you are all-knowing and beyond reproach.

16. Design and Implement a Credible M & E

mechanism.

Conclusion: A Personal and Heart-Warming Account of the Transformative Impact of Expertise

On March 21, 2011, I received an e-mail with the subject "Help for a Nigerian homeless woman with AIDS in California." The e-mail read, in part, as follows:

Dear Professor Dakas,

I am [ABC], an attorney in Los Angeles, California. I represent a Nigerian woman in a pro bono case. I am assisting her in her application for asylum in the United States. I am writing you today because I hope you can help her by contributing a declaration or an expert letter on two issues: (1) the state of the law in Nigeria relating to discrimination against persons with HIV/AIDS; and/or (2) conditions that persons living with HIV/AIDS face in Nigeria... I came across your name when I read your 2010 piece, HIV/AIDS and Workplace Discrimination in Nigeria: Prejudice,

Stigmatization and Legal Shenanigans, during my research on this case. I found your email address by searching your name in Google.

My client has AIDS and currently resides in a homeless shelter in California. Part of her asylum claim is that she has a well-founded fear returning to Nigeria because she will face intense stigmatization in that country on account of her status as a person living with AIDS...

My research into conditions in Nigeria corroborates her fears. First, in 2009 almost 80% of persons living with HIV/AIDS in Nigeria did not have access to needed antiretroviral drugs, according to UNAIDS. Second, denial of employment on the basis of a person's HIV+ status occurs in Nigeria, according to the U.S. Department of State. Employers test prospective employees and deny employment if the applicant is HIV+. Third, more than a few scholarly and news media articles that I have found in my research make clear that the social and cultural stigmatization faced by a person living with

HIV/AIDS in Nigeria is widespread and fierce.

Furthermore, my understanding is that there does not yet exist a federal anti-discrimination law that prohibits discrimination against persons living with HIV/AIDS. Thus, if my client were to return to Nigeria and face discrimination, she would have no legal remedy with which to fight unfair treatment.

I believe a short letter or declaration by a scholar or expert on these issues in Nigeria would make my client's claim stronger by further corroborating her claims about country conditions and by summarizing in one document the conditions she fears in Nigeria. If you believe you can contribute a declaration or letter that speaks to all or some of the issues described above, please let me know.

I plan on filing my client's application this month. Your declaration or letter would become part of my client's application to the United States Citizenship

and Immigration Services, a U.S. federal agency (i.e., this case is not in the U.S. immigration Court)...

Please let me know if you can help by writing a letter or declaration or if you know of a colleague or other expert who could write such a declaration. Thank you in advance for any help you can provide.

In response, and building on my prior research on the subject, I e-mailed an expert legal opinion to him. You can imagine my joy and sense of fulfillment when, on May 12, 2011, I received the following update from the Attorney:

Dear Professor Dakas,

I am happy to tell you that the Asylum Office granted asylum to [XYZ] on Monday morning. She is ecstatic and we both thank you for the time and effort that you contributed to her application. Your declaration was instrumental in obtaining a positive result...

Because of your help, XYZ now has permanent legal status in the United States and can take advantage of benefits available to asylees, including job assistance, cash benefits, employment authorization, medical insurance, and eventually, a green card. These will all go a long way to changing her life for the better. I deeply appreciate your diligence and generosity over these past few months.

Take care.

From Experience to Expertise. See you at the top!