Goldman Sachs Talks
Tom Ilube, Chair of the Rugby Football Union and Founder of the African Gifted Foundation
Kene Ejikeme, Moderator
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Tom Ilube: We're basically building this amazing group of exceptionally gifted young women. Putting them through the school. Then sending them off to university on full scholarships. And then they'll come back and start to make their impact.

[MUSIC INTRO]

Kene Ejikeme: My name's Kene Ejikeme. I look after our Multi Asset Platform Sales team for EMEA and our [UNINTEL] Sales Trading business. And I also co-lead our firmwide Black Network with my colleagues Kyle Williams. But I can't tell you how excited I am to talk to Tom today.

In 2021, Tom was appointed the chair of the RFU, making him the first Black chair of a major sport in England. He's also the founder and chair of the Giftd Foundation within which is an academy called The African Science Academy, which is the continent's first all-girls science and maths

school. He was award the CBE in 2018 for tech and philanthropy. And the list goes on and on and on. But simply, I want to say thank you so much for coming.

Tom Ilube: Thanks very much. Thanks for inviting me.

Kene Ejikeme: So, within the first 15 years of your life, you moved between Africa and Nigeria, UK. Can you talk to us a little bit about that? Where were you born? Why were you moving so much? And really, how did you manage to cope with that much disruption at such a young age?

Tom Ilube: Yeah. I mean, it's really interesting. So, I was born in London. My dad was Nigerian. My mom's English. My dad's passed away now.

I spent the first year of my life in foster care because when you're born in 1963 in London, Black father, white mother, difficult circumstances, brown baby, what do you do? Let's put him in foster care and then come back again. And then my dad decided-- he was working for the BBC way back then. And then he decided he was going to move to Africa. And he got a job in Uganda in East Africa when I was about seven years old.

So, we went over there. And that was a time that Idi Amin took over the country and things got really difficult. We eventually, in the night, we had to escape through Uganda back to London. I was back in London. And then lived here for a few years. And then off we went to Nigeria. My dad wanted me to go over there.

I didn't want to go at the time. My big sports were rugby and ice skating. And I remember saying to my dad, "No, I can't go to Nigeria. You know, ice skating." My dad said, "Ice skating? Very popular in Nigeria. Bring your skates. Bring those." So, I took my skates. It turned out it wasn't so popular.

So, I tried to run away when I was 14. I got to the airport. I managed to close down the whole of Lagos airport because I ran out onto the runway in the middle of the night. And they had soldiers looking for me and they couldn't land planes and all that.

Kene Ejikeme: Were you trying to hail a plane? What was the plan there?

Tom Ilube: Something like that. But after that, I kind of settled down. I enjoyed the rest of my time there. Made lots of friends. And then when I was 21, finished my degree, I came back to London.

Kene Ejikeme: Wow.

Tom Ilube: So, it seems like a pretty normal childhood to me.

Kene Ejikeme: Yeah, pretty run of the mill, to be honest.

Tom Ilube: I think what it does for me is that when things happen these days, when changes happen and, you know, all of the sudden things change, it's very rarely a big deal to me because I saw a lot of change. I've seen a lot of change. I've been in situations.

Kene Ejikeme: Would you say that's one of your sort of secret weapons? Being able to sort of reflect back at those experiences? Or was there a process that you developed during those experiences to help you cope with stress?

Tom Ilube: I think that what it's taught me is that,

eventually, things work out. And so, I tend not to get phased by short-term things. Even if they look like massive obstacles. So, I suppose my threshold for what's a real problem has to be much higher for it to be a real problem. You know?

When I first started looking for jobs-- so, I'd come back to England. I wanted a job. I wanted to work in the technology industry. I did physics at university. We did a bit of computing. Computer industry is just getting going. This is mid '80s. And I thought, right, I'll work in computing.

And people were saying, "Well, how are you going to get a job in computing?" And I thought, well, it's easy, I will just apply to every company in England that has a computer department. I'll start at the letter A. So, that's what I did. I applied to every single company in England that had a computer department that started with the letter A. And they all said no. And then I moved onto the Bs. And ended up getting a job at British Airways.

I applied to hundreds of companies. Literally. When I did my MBA around City University, I wanted to work for one of the strategy consulting firms. I applied to them five times

in a row. I applied. They said, no. That just confirmed that the lines of communication were open. So, I applied again. They said no. Applied again. They said no. The fourth time I applied, I got a letter from the head of HR saying please could I give them a call. I said, okay. Yeah.

So, I gave the woman a call. And she said, "Tom, you don't have the right background. You don't have the right experience. We will never offer you a job." I waited two weeks and I applied again.

So, if I want to go for something, you know, when other people sort of get tired and give up and "Oh, it's not working" and so forth, I just keep going because I've just learned that, actually, that persistence-- you have to have talent as well, and ability, but then persistence just drives you through.

Kene Ejikeme: That actually answers my next question, which was, you know, how were you able to start so many businesses, successful businesses? I think it's six or seven startups. You started successful startups. And anybody that knows anything about starting a business knows, you know, in order to get one that works, you have to have

many that haven't worked. So, in order for you to have six or seven that have been as successful as they have, you must have had a lot of ideas, plans, launches that have failed. And I'm guessing, is that how you're able to go through? Just by saying, you know what, bad idea, move onto the next?

Tom Ilube: I think I just like that thrill of starting with a blank sheet of paper. Thinking of an idea. Pitching to someone. And then they actually give you money. And you think, whoa. And then you hire someone and then they leave their job and come and work for you. And you think, my goodness. And then gradually, something starts to take place and customers start to buy things and you see it come to life.

So, I suppose I found that that's a bit that I'm good at. And that's the bit that I enjoy. I realized at some point in my entrepreneurial career that you get to choose what stage in a startup's journey you want to do. You know, some people say, "Well, why didn't you stay with your first company and run it for 20 years?" And people sometimes feel guilty if they sell out early and so forth. But I don't. I'm not that guy. I'm the early stage guy. I will start with a blank sheet

of paper. I'll create it. I'll get it off the ground. And if someone else wants to grab it and take it forwards, then that's great. And then I'll go and do it again and do it again.

Kene Ejikeme: That's a great personal insight, actually, because I've run across a lot of entrepreneurs that sort of, you know, treat those companies as their baby. Right? And they hold on and they hold on and they hold on. And, you know, in some cases, their skill set isn't what the company needs to thrive.

What do you think makes an idea a successful idea from a successful idea that's scalable? What is the difference? Because I think in a world where capital is cheap and, you know, everyone's looking for the next unicorn, it's all about scale, scale, scale, scale, scale. So, in your experience, what do you think is the key differentiating factor between those two ideas?

Tom Ilube: I suppose it's getting very clear on the customer that you're targeting. Actually, Mike Harris, who was the founder of Egg, was really, really good at this. We would sit round and brainstorm ideas. And we'd say, "Oh, what do you think of this? What do you think of that?" And

he would say, "Well, I don't really care. The only thing that matters is what the customers think of this and think of that. So, we can be as clever as we like, but let's get out to customers. Show them the idea. And let's see whether they like it."

And then within that, allowing yourself to say we're not necessarily designing this for all customers. You know? Sometimes you'll get people who design things and they're trying to think of every corner case and, "Well, that wouldn't suit that customer, so let's add this feature. And this wouldn't suit that customer." And the thing just gets broader and broader. He was brilliant at saying, "No, these are the customers I'm after. I'm really not interested in those customers. Someone else should service those customers. I'm after these ones and I'm going to try and design the most compelling, but also the simplest product, for that market. And then I'm going to focus my attention on that. And I'm going to make sure that that market is big enough in order to build a scale business." I learned a lot from that.

Kene Ejikeme: So, let's pivot slightly. So, you are, I mean, I'm sure I'll embarrass you by saying this, a

trailblazer. All the things that you've done, a majority of them had not been done before. And so, you know, within that, someone with your background in these places, in these rooms are not common. In all of these situations, you're by yourself.

How do you think, sort of, diversity and inclusion has evolved in technology, specifically, in the technology sector, specifically, since you started in business all those many decades ago?

Tom Ilube: I mean, it's evolved a lot. So, you know, after I left British Airways, my first job [not at British Airways], we're about 2,000 people working there. And as far as I knew, there were three Black people. That's what the environment was like that I was going into. And at the end of my first week, as was traditional in those days, we all went for a drink on Friday after work. And this guy came up to me and he took me to one side, big noisy pub, and he said, "Tom, there are friends of mine who would have you swinging from the nearest tree. Anyway, have a good evening." And then he walked away.

Kene Ejikeme: Nice guy.

Tom Ilube: Right. So, then you have this sort of, wow, what do you do with that? Do you hit him? Do you--

Kene Ejikeme: Yep.

Tom Ilube: And you say, yep. Do you go to HR on the Monday and say this is what happened? Or do you do nothing?

And I think I was about 25, 24 at the time. You know? I just hadn't had that. I didn't know that sort of thing was going to happen. So, then I've got to decide in the moment what do you do.

And as I've gone through my career, I would say in the early part of my career, there would be an incident rather like that maybe once a year, a sort of decent-sized incident once a year. You know? When I applied for some job through a headhunter, the headhunter contacts the bank. The bank says, "Ilube. That's a funny name. You know, is he Black?" The headhunter say, "You can't ask that." The bank says, "Oh, just answer the question." So, she says, "Well, yes he is." And the bank says, "Oh. Haven't you been

told? We don't employ Black people." And then she comes to me and says, "Tom, this is what they said. What are you going to do about it?" Am I going to take on one of the biggest banks in the world?

Now, I'll tell you what I did in those two situations. The first one with the guy that said, "Friends of mine. Swinging from the nearest tree." I did nothing. Actually, I didn't actually do nothing. I went home and cried. And then when I go home at the weekend, then my mom says, "Oh, how was it?" And I say, "Oh, it was really good. Really good." But inside I'm thinking, I don't want to go back. I feel really bad.

But I also thought, if I go to HR and I say after my first week, "John, who's been working here for 30 years said that," what are they going to do? They're going to call John in and say, "Did you say that?" He's going to say, "Of course not. I didn't say that. Tom, you must have misheard." And then word will go round, "Oh, you won't believe it. Tom has played the race card just after a week." And then that would be me for the rest-- so, I just couldn't do anything with that.

However, the bank one, I thought, I just can't let that one pass. So, I went into battle on that one. And then I discovered what happens if a single individual goes into battle with a global bank.

Kene Ejikeme: Institution.

Tom Ilube: You lose. And so, we lost that for various reasons. Actually, the reason why we lost it, I'll tell you this, we were going towards a tribunal. And eventually, someone at the bank spoke to the MD of the recruitment company and said, "If you don't stop this, nobody will do business with you anymore." And so, she said to the woman who made the accusation, "If you don't withdraw your accusation and apologize to the bank, then you're out of recruitment."

And so, that woman then called me up and said, "Tom, I'm going to have to withdraw the accusation." And I said, "Well, that's just how it needs to be." So, that was the end of that. Except that years and years later, not long ago, actually, a few years ago, but not long ago, LinkedIn in its infinite wisdom tried to connect me with the guy at the bank. I was going to accept the connection and endorse

him for racism. But I thought [UNINTEL].

Kene Ejikeme: Here are contacts you may be interested.

Tom Ilube: But, you know, I see in the fields that I'm in, I hardly see those sorts of things of that magnitude happening these days.

Kene Ejikeme: Progress.

Tom Ilube: So, you see lots of smaller things still happening. But you don't see those very overt things so much in the way that you used to.

Kene Ejikeme: Pretty traumatic experience. But thankfully didn't put you off banking completely because you worked here. And am I right in saying in you were probably one of five Black people here?

Tom Ilube: There weren't many of us.

Kene Ejikeme: So then, fast forward a bit to 2017. You've gone on and done very well. In 2017, you're named as the most influential Black person in the UK. What does

one do with that when one is told that?

Tom Ilube: I think the was kind of interesting was that I had to-- I realized before then, I had sort of been a bit in the background. You know? Hunting alone. Just get on and so forth. And I realized that by accepting that, I'd have to accept that I was kind of stepping out into the limelight a bit more and would have to accept that I was a role model to some people. And that if I said certain things, it might carry more weight than it would have done in the past.

And so, it was kind of an interesting step to decide to accept that and take it on. But I did. And it was fine.

Kene Ejikeme: Well, you haven't really looked back since then because, you know, as I mentioned in your introduction, you're now also the chair of The African Gifted Foundation. And within that is The African Science Academy, which is a school of excellence focused on African women, introducing them to STEM. But I'm interested that it's located in Ghana.

Tom Ilube: Instead of Nigeria.

Kene Ejikeme: Why Ghana?

Tom Ilube: So, I decided, it must have been about 15 or so years ago, when I was upstate, when I was going to start doing charitable things, and I started doing charitable things, I suppose, quite late in my career. Actually, I don't feel it was late. But I noticed that younger people now seem to do charitable things earlier on. Whereas I decided I was going to focus on career. And then when I felt ready, I would look at the charitable side. And I decided to focus on education. And secondary education in particular because that's what I find engaging.

You know, you can, literally, with teenagers, you'll be in the room talking to them. And if you're boring, they will literally fall asleep in front of you. But if you're interesting and saying something relevant, then you'll see in their eyes that you've changed the direction of someone's life. So, you can just have a real impact.

And I got involved in schools. And I set up a school, Hammersmith Academy in West London. And that's gone on to be a really good school. And I was chair of Ada College, the National College for Digital Skills. And involved

in setting up a school up in Darwin and Lancashire, down in Brighton and so forth. So, I'd set up various schools in the UK. And then decided to focus my attention on having impact in Africa.

And I thought, I didn't want to just set up another school. I wanted to do something different. And in a way, it came from when I was doing physics at university over there, I was quite a smart lad. But there was a mathematician who was doing maths at the same time as I was doing physics. And we did a couple of courses in common. A Nigerian chap. And he was so much cleverer than me. It was astonishing.

But to people who weren't at our sort of level, they would look at us and think we were fairly even. But I knew that I just wasn't on--

Kene Ejikeme: The level.

Tom Ilube: Exactly. Yeah. And he would say, you know, in the evening, he would say, "Tom, let's go to the class and solve vectors." And I would say, "Yes, let's go to the class. That sounds like a good idea." So, we'd go to the class and I

would lie on the table smoking and blowing smoke rings up to the air. And he would be writing vectors. And he'd say, "What do you think? What do you think?" And I'd say, "Yeah, very good. Well done." You know? And so forth.

And then I don't know what happened to him. And I can't even remember his name.

And I was thinking there are young folks like that who have absolutely brilliant minds. Brilliant minds. And I've worked with a lot of people. One of my companies, we invested Tim Berners-Lee to come and be an advisor. My current company, Sir Richard Dearlove is chair. You know, we've got amazing people involved and so forth.

But that chap was easily one of the smartest people I've ever met. But because of his background and so forth, I just don't know where that's gone. I've never heard of him again. And I'm thinking there must be thousands and thousands of young people, literally with the brain power of an Einstein, they just happen to have been born in a village or township or whatever. And that's going to waste.

So, I said, right, I'm going to set up a school that is

specifically designed for exceptionally gifted young people. And then I decided it was going to be designed for exceptionally gifted young women. And it was going to focus on science and technology.

So, we search across the whole of Africa, we get loads and loads of applications from countries all over. And we bring young women in. They're all on full scholarships. And they do A levels in maths, for the maths/physics in ten months, start to finish.

And all of them pass. Every single one of them pass. The majority get A stars. As and Bs. They then go off and get scholarships all over the world. Some are up in Edinburgh. Some in the States. I was over in Columbia recently where some of our students are. Over in Canada. In Hong Kong. All across Africa. They're all doing computer science, engineering, and so forth.

And we're basically building this amazing group of exceptionally gifted young women, putting them through the school. Then sending them off to university on full scholarships. And then they'll come back and start to make their impact. So, that's what we're up to. And it's just

incredible.

I was over there just a couple of weeks ago and, you know, you meet them and you just think, my goodness. On the one hand, thank goodness I'm not at this school because I would be slung out. But also, they are just-- their backgrounds, there was a young woman who, literally, her family couldn't pay for her to go to school anymore. So, she had to be out there earning some money. She was literally one of those girls that you see selling oranges when you pull up, traffic lights, and running up.

And a friend of hers says, "Oh, you used to be good at maths. Why don't you apply to this school I've heard about?" And she said, "Oh, no, we can't pay for it." "No, no, they do scholarships." "They say that, but they don't really do." "Anyway, give it a go."

She did the exam. Her scores were off the charts. We brought her in. She came to us. She got three A stars in ten months from a standing start. And then got a full four year scholarship to Edinburgh University to do engineering. And, you know, things like that, you just think what a waste that would have been if we hadn't managed to find

her and unleash her.

Kene Ejikeme: I mean, you said that most of them get A stars. It's phenomenal. I think the last A level results were 65 percent had A stars. And it's 93 percent that have A star to B, which is [UNINTEL]--

Tom Ilube: It's incredible.

Kene Ejikeme: -- Things they do in one year.

Tom Ilube: Yeah, one year. Yeah.

Kene Ejikeme: [UNINTEL] a question, but why women? Why be focused on young women?

Tom Ilube: Before we set up the school, we were running summer schools, which would just be two weeks. One week. Two week long summer schools. And you would have boys and girls coming to those summer schools.

What we would find, and you know, they would do a lot and they'd have an amazing time and so forth. But then when you checked in with them six months, a year later,

you would keep finding that the boys that were interested in maths and science and passionate about it were carrying on with it. The girls who had come to the summer school and were really interested in maths and science and so forth, had sort of veered away from it, either as a result of peer group. Or sometimes in that quite direct African way, their parents, their father often saying to them, "Engineering is not for girls. Stop doing that."

And so, we said, okay, if we want to have a major impact, which bit of the population where we know there's a huge amount of talent is just not getting the opportunity? And can we design a school that is specifically for them?

So, our head teacher is a woman. Our lead maths teachers and so forth are women. The whole environment is geared towards young women to learn science and technology. And I think it's in the language. It's in the examples that they use. And we keep them away from the day to day.

So, because of the sort of backgrounds that they come from, they would often be expected to be the person that cooked and cleaned and looked after the child and served their brothers and so forth. But for this year, where they're

with us, we just take all that away and say, "You're only here to learn and to develop as young women and then go off to the world." So, I think it would have been a very different feel if we tried to make it mixed.

Kene Ejikeme: No, I agree.

Tom Ilube: So, that's why we went that way.

Kene Ejikeme: So, from that to the other hat as chair of the board of the RFU, how did you get into rugby?

Tom Ilube: I started playing rugby when I was about ten years old, 11 years old. And I really enjoyed it. And then when I went off and came back. And then when my son was born, he played rugby from age seven. He's 24 now. And so, I've been in and around rugby my whole life. My older brother who passed away was a big rugby fan as well. So, we're a rugby family in that sense.

But I'd never been involved in the administrative side of rubgy. I started to go onto boards. As my entrepreneurial career developed and my philanthropic career developed, I also started to develop a non-executive career as well. So, I

was sitting on the board. I served on the board of the BBC for about four and a half years. And found that really interesting.

And then I felt that I'd got to the stage where I was ready to take on a major chair role. And I was looking for a sort of national, high profile opportunity to take on. And I got a call, a headhunter called saying would I be interested in applying to be chair of England rugby.

Kene Ejikeme: That's a big call.

Tom Ilube: I took the call. And got into the conversations. I remember going along to the interviews and they were saying, you know, "Tom, you know, the time commitment, well, there's time in the week, but you'll also be expected to give up some time at the weekends as well." I said, "All right, the weekends." And they said, "Yes, you're expected to go to all England matches." I said, "I think I can do that."

Kene Ejikeme: Sounds terrible.

Tom Ilube: "I think that is something I can do."

Kene Ejikeme: Yeah. Sounds terrible. That's remarkable because I think getting inside, because I think when people think about rugby, they think it's elitist. It's only for some people from a certain background. Even people that want to access to game now find it hard. So, what are you doing now in your role to try and dispel some of those myths? Or are some of them true?

Tom Ilube: Yeah. I mean, there are a huge number of people that play rugby. The RFU that I chair, we essentially oversee about 1,900 clubs across the country. Something to the order of 600,000 people play rugby.

Kene Ejikeme: 600,000 rugby players?

Tom Ilube: Yeah, it's just huge. You know. Volunteers all over the country. You know, when England play, you'll have, you know, 6, 7, 8 million people watching and so forth. So, it's a big, a major sport in the UK. And therefore, almost by definition, it can't really be an elitist sport because, you know, you go up north, you go to Scarborough where I've been to the clubs up there, you go to Manchester and so forth, it's just regular people turning

out on a Saturday and training in the week and so forth.

But the big schools do play. The big universities do play. And so, it's got some of that image. But we are really trying to get out into the communities and bring people into rugby. We have an initiative called Rugby United which is specifically about attracting people from minority communities into rugby as well because the values are really strong.

You know, you see that. If you go to Twickenham on a match day, you'll see that the feel of the crowd is quite different to other sports. During COVID, our clubs all over the country were really centers helping their communities.

Kene Ejikeme: I think we're at time, unfortunately. I want to say thank you for an incredible session. It's been amazing. And we can't wait to see what else it is you're going to do and how you're going to get England to win the next Rugby World Cup. Starting with the women.

Tom Ilube: Absolutely.

Kene Ejikeme: Starting with the women right now. But

amazing session, Tom. Thank you so much.

Tom Ilube: Thank you very much. Thank you.