

AT THE EDGE PODCAST



SEASON 2, EPISODE 3

AWO QUAISON-SACKEY – What Glitters is People Interviewed by Michael Lee

Awo Quaison-Sackey is Regional Vice President, Human Resources, Africa Region, at Newmont Mining. She has forty years of experience in the manufacturing, insurance and mining industries. She holds a Bachelor of Laws degree (LLB) from the University of Ghana, and Master of Laws, LLM and Master of Business Administration (MBA) from Temple University, Pennsylvania. Awo has participated extensively as a volunteer with such organizations as the United Nations Fund for Women (UNIFEM) where she served as chairperson of the Global Advisory Committee, working to build strategic partnerships between African information technology entrepreneurs and women’s organizations and business associations in different parts of Africa. She also worked with a team to found the Digital Diaspora Network for Africa whose purpose was to leverage the resources of the diaspora to enable economic development in Africa. She has served on the Board of the World Affairs Council of Connecticut – a ninety-five-year old organization established to promote awareness and greater understanding of the world through experiences and dialog. She is currently a member of the Council on Foreign Relations, Ghana. In her current role, Awo participates as a member of the regional African leadership team bringing her human resources expertise to create, develop, and support people practices. She collaborates with other functions to ensure that the employee experience and company values are at the heart of actions and decisions that are implemented. In this role, Awo is able to bring her passion for leadership, employee wellness, community support to implement top-notch programs and policies for over five thousand employees and contractors in the Newmont Africa region.

In this episode, Awo discusses how the lessons of working in Africa can teach America about employee experience, the importance of asking questions and listening, the special circumstances of hybrid work in the mining industry, how after years in the gold business she’s never actually seen gold and how that’s a metaphor for hybrid work, and much more.

Michael Lee

So Awo. Welcome to At the Edge. And thank you for getting on the recording with us. I understand you just a couple of days ago flew across the world from Ghana to Atlanta. So thank you for making time.

Awo Quaison-Sackey

Oh, no, you're welcome. I'm glad to be here.

Michael Lee

You are the head of HR for the African region of Newmont Mining, which is an international mining company based in the US, but with a big affiliate in Africa.

Awo Quaison-Sackey

First of all, we like to call ourselves the largest gold mining company in the world. And we're headquartered in Denver. We operate out of four regions. North America, South America, Africa, and Australia. I'm the head of HR for the African region.

Michael Lee

So how would you say that the issue of work and employee experience is different, or is it, between the different regions of the world?

Awo Quaison-Sackey

I think they're very different. We like to think of it in terms of the maturity journey that any employment environment is in. That's the case with just about everything that we deal with. So whatever the issue is, whether it's inclusion and diversity, whether it's employee experience, we have to consider that Australia is further ahead on the maturity level of culture, work environment, work, things that let's say Africa and South America tend to be laggards in some areas. I think we tend to be a little bit advanced in other areas.

But certainly when it comes to the work environment, the corporate environment, it is very, very different. The employee experience and expectations are somewhat similar, but how we go about dealing with them would be very different in the four different regions.

I'll give you a recent example. When we went into lockdown for COVID, and we had to have people go work from home to work remotely. Somewhere along the way, we realized that it was going to go longer than a month or two. And after we got out of the initial shock, we had to think about, Okay, so what do we need to provide employees to be able to work comfortably from home? In Australia and the US they were thinking in terms of ergonomics, we need to get people ergonomically styled chairs. For us here in Africa, the issue that we were dealing with mostly was bandwidth.

Because once we sent people home, in the office we had broadband, we had VPN, all of that, and most people at home were using hotspots on their phone, or didn't have sufficient data to do work. And that's a fundamental issue that the US doesn't have to deal with. But we had to deal with that here. So we see those kinds of things. But we have to step back and say, what are the issues here? What are people dealing with, and are they fundamentally different?

Michael Lee

It seems like America is just waking up to the idea that that people are actually working in a company and that they're not just chess pieces or some kind of cogs - it seems like a really big awakening, which I suspect in Africa is not so new.

Awo Quaison-Sackey

The culture, the word culture here can be here at Newmont. I'll speak for Newmont, pretty paternalistic. On the other side of paternalism is entitlement. So when I got here, my feeling was that there's a whole lot of entitlement and a lot of employees don't think from a commercial standpoint, they think in terms of well, what's the company going to do for me today? Which by the way is similar to what employees in the US think. What's the company going to do for me today? But here, for example, we give employees every month, we give them a long bar of soap, a packet of detergent, mosquito spray and mosquito repellent, because we want to make sure that they're able to keep things clean and able to abide by our value for keeping malaria out of the home. And at Christmas we give people a Christmas hamper. And when I say hamper, I think picnic hamper. Is that what comes to mind for you?

Michael Lee

Well because I'm also straddling America and Africa, yes, picnic hamper, but I do understand what you mean. But maybe explain for everybody.

Awo Quaison-Sackey

So was I shocked when I realized I got to my house, and I was told my Christmas hamper had been delivered. It was like ten pounds of - not ten pounds, more than that, sacks of rice! And like ten gallons of oil and you twenty-four cans of mackerel. My first reaction was, Get this out of my house! Because it seemed like it was way too much.

But that's the kind of thing that we provide that feeds into the employee experience here and unfortunately, into the entitlement mentality that you wouldn't see happen very often in a US corporate environment. And it's needed here because the level of poverty is extreme, the level of unemployment is high. So I can understand the rationale for many of the things that we do. But I also feel like it's important to be on a journey that would take all of us from entitlement towards a more commercial-minded mindset, where we can help the business make business decisions.

Michael Lee

One of the big things that's happened because of COVID, but it's gonna extend far beyond it forever, is the nature of this hybrid experiment. That hybrid work is now becoming the norm in a mining company. There's people that are gonna have to work in the mines. But other than that, how are you handling hybrid in locations like South America or Africa where you have bandwidth issues, because without bandwidth, it's kind of hard to have hybrid work work.

Awo Quaison-Sackey

As a corporation in every region, we've decided that we will embrace hybrid working. And then we define it based on what each region can accommodate. So the mines never closed. The people who are operators and maintenance at the mines stay in the mines, and they have their schedule and their shift.

So when we talk about hybrid working, it's really the support staff at the mines, possibly, as well as the regional offices. Our office in Accra versus our mine sites at Ahafo, for example. In South America, their regional offices are in Miami, and their mine sites are in Chile, Argentina, and Peru. And same with the US. There is a difference between the regional office versus the mine sites.

So when we looked at hybrid working for us, we actually combined the need to provide the opportunity for people to work remotely with the fact that we needed new office space. And so people actually want to work at home, we've had the office closed since March of 2020, we have never reopened it. What we've done is that people who want to come to the office to work, or who need to come to the office to work because of bandwidth or because they're accessing applications that they can only do from the office, just let their functional leaders know, and then they come into the office.

But our plan going forward is to move to new office space. And we are intentionally setting that up. So it doesn't accommodate all one hundred forty or twenty reserve employees. It can in a situation where everybody needs to come in. But we're setting it up with just twenty offices, and then everything else is open space. And each function will determine who comes into the office knowing that we don't want more than fifty percent of the population in at any point in time.

So there are some people who love working remotely, they get to be with their kids, they get to be a little bit more flexible in their schedule, they love the fact they actually feel more productive being at home than they were in the office. More power to them. And I think we can accommodate that. We might have a rule that every now and then each functional leader will decide what now and then means, when you can come to the office. And then there'll be a cadre of people who probably will come to the office all the time, because they need to work together in groups.

So that's how we're accommodating it here. In Denver, for example, they have something similar, they open up the office space, and they have no assigned offices. So anybody who's coming in just books the time that they want to go in. So very similar, but you know, a little bit different based on where they are and their maturity versus where we are.

Michael Lee

Now I understand that you personally are actually taking on the effort to work entirely remotely from a different continent, running the African HR from the United States to see if that can work. Can you tell us more about that? And how that would work? And how others might use that model?

Awo Quaison-Sackey

Yeah, so we'll find out whether it really works long-term or not. But the Accra Regional Office is based in Accra, and I had already moved out of Accra. I had moved to a town about forty, sixty kilometers west of Accra called Winneba, my hometown. So I was working from Winneba. At some point, it became clear to me that if I can work from wherever, then I can work from the US, what difference does it make? I would go to Accra from time to time, but I realized that a couple of weeks would go by where I didn't go to Accra. So I applied under the working remotely policy that we have. And both my bosses said of course you can work from the US. So we have an arrangement now. I'll work remotely for a couple of months and then I'll go back to Ghana for a couple of months and then come back here. So far on day two, it's working pretty well.

The only challenge we have with the whole hybrid working and working remotely are time zones. So if you think about that we're a global company, and the leadership is global. The mine sites don't have an issue with this. But when we need to get somebody on the same conference call or Zoom call, we use WebEx call. So that's Australia, Africa and the US, and Denver is on the west side of the US, that's a problem, because somebody has to be compromised in terms of their work hours. So it's something we're still wrestling with. We'll see whether it works or not.

But I think it's the way we need to consider the employee experience going forward, and see how we can accommodate that. In addition, we will also realize legal and immigration considerations that have to be taken into account. So we're looking at all of that and sort of wrestling through all of that.

Michael Lee

Do you have any tips you picked up so far that you can suggest to listeners about how to make global hybrid work?

Awo Quaison-Sackey

Stay involved. I stay in touch with my folks. Last March, when I was here, we had an employee strike. So I just keep working, but somebody said, you're managing a strike from the US! I said, Oh, is that what I'm doing? It was kind of funny, I hadn't realized I was doing that. But yeah, I think the thing is to stay involved. And to make sure that the team that you have is actually empowered to do the work and make decisions without you there.

So I think I've gotten to that point where, you know, at some point, whatever they decide in the heat of the moment has to be okay. Because if I'm trying to manage every single detail, then I should be over there. I think part of it is just establishing the boundaries around what decisions people can make and how. And then managing myself and my feelings about how something should have been done that haven't been done in an OK way. It takes some maturity on an individual's part. And also some, I'll call it flexibility with people and managing my direct reports to make sure that they feel completely empowered and not afraid to move.

Michael Lee

Do you see any things that are specific to Africa or other developing economies that can be offered to the employee experience in the more developed economies?

Awo Quaison-Sackey

You know, I think something that I've become much more aware of working in Ghana the last five years that I probably wasn't, we talked about in the US, but it's, if I was going to put words around it, it's bringing the whole self to work. Now they've become very aware of people's families and personalized, much more so than I was in the US, because people actually spend a fair amount of time together on a personal level. It's a much smaller community than that I was used to in the US. Put it that way. So you know, people's religion is really important here. Not that it isn't in the US, it's just it takes on a much bigger dimension. And what people feel they need and what they need you for and how they hold you as somebody who can support and help them feels much bigger here than it did in the US. And I think it's made me consider my role to be one where I really have to take care of people. I really, really have to understand what their issues are and deal with the whole person.

Michael Lee

It seems like that's a big topic of conversation these days, around how to make hybrid and remote work actually work is that we need to take account of the whole human being in every employee.

Awo Quaison-Sackey

So if I was going to put it in terms of some of the languaging we use in HR today, I would say that maybe they need to learn emotional intelligence. They need to learn to be empathetic. They need to, and it's something I've had to learn also, you may need to ask about the person before they ask about the work. For example, they need to care about the fact that when you're on a Zoom call, the two-year-old toddler comes to sit on their father's lap, or - something you won't see in the US - a chicken's clucking in the background. So include all of that.

And make sure that you're staying in tune with the fact that the cultures here are different. So there might be more people in the background or that the person has to take care of them, than there would be in a typical nuclear family in the US. Here in Ghana, for example, one of the statistics that's prevalent is that each person that's working takes care of eleven other

people. And with the unemployment rates being as high as they are, you just know that your folks have to deal with way beyond what they might have in the US in an environment that is much more difficult.

We've just rolled out the COVID vaccine for employees, because Ghana is one of those countries that has not had a wealth of vaccines. So we were able to get imported into Ghana a certain amount. And Newmont participated with the American Chamber of Commerce here in Ghana to get a supply. And we recognize that we couldn't just vaccinate our employees, we had to vaccinate our employees' dependents. And on top of that, we had to also vaccinate the household. Now, in the US, that would not have been so much of an issue. But again, if everybody working is taking care of eleven people, or more than that, we were bringing in the extended family, we're bringing in the people in the community that have regular contact with our employees. And so taking care of somebody who's an employee expands to include eleven or twelve other people.

Michael Lee

We have the Great Resignation, the whole idea that forty percent of people are willing to leave their job rather than go back to the office full time in the United States. It's being forced on employers to work in collaboration with employees, rather than employees working for them, in a sense. So how do we help them have this mind shift? How do we help them get the skills to make this work?

Awo Quaison-Sackey

I think the question is kind of like who's in Grant's Tomb? How do you teach people? You teach them. You have to start the conversation and actually really have the conversation about behaving in a certain way, and actually also letting people see what happens when you don't behave in that way.

So we spent a fair amount of time in Newmont talking about the growth mindset, talking about different aspects of emotional intelligence, how to talk to employees, how to do performance evaluations. I know a lot of companies do that. But down to the level of what conversations to have, in order to make that happen. Last year, I laughed a little bit, because at the beginning of the lockdown, we set out the communication to managers to say, when you call your employees, you know, spend five minutes asking about their family. So I would call my employee and I'd say, "This is my five minutes asking you about your family."

Now, it's something that I normally have learned to do, because of again, working here gets very personal, but it's something that I think the answer is, you just have to teach people and you just have to make it a subject, make it a topic of conversation. Because otherwise if people aren't visible, it's invisible to people.

Michael Lee

Some of the other issues that would be interesting to talk about are, What does Africa and other parts of the world have to offer around the idea of how to engage employees more, and actually get them happy to be working for the company? What have you learned in your time

in Africa that would that would help people in the developed economies who are learning to deal with how to work to be better at it?

Awo Quaison-Sackey

I think the answer is probably the same everywhere, which is to ask the employees. So we talk a lot about speaking up, we talk a lot about getting employee input. Last year, 2020, we did a number of spot surveys where we would send out a short survey for people to answer to find out what was going on for them what their key issues were, we do that a lot. I think that's the only way to find out what it is that your employee population needs. And it's not so you give everything but it's so you get a feel for what they're dealing with. So that you can actually help them with what they're dealing with. And that spans every issue.

We probably we didn't have as much as Australia had, we had a little spurt in mental health issues during 2020. A little spurt. But here, we're still dealing with the stigma of it and the lack of information around it and how people view any kind of mental illness. And so we've done a lot in terms of just basic education. That's another area where we are more at the beginning of the maturity curve than other economies might be. But we need to spend time on that. And part of it is asking employees talking to them.

And then when we're when we see a situation where we can intervene, actually doing what's needed with the individual, but doing as much as we can publicly around the issue - not around the individual, around the issue - that individuals face, so that other people, especially the workgroup that the person's in, are aware that these things come up and how important they are for us to deal with in a certain way. So it's just constant conversation, constant education.

Michael Lee

What would you say to companies, employers, who are like, there's enough work to do, I don't need to be having this constant conversation?

Awo Quaison-Sackey

That is the work! You know, a lot of companies, including ours, say that people are the most important asset. And if they are, then why wouldn't you talk to them? So, you know, I'm saying this because I'm in HR, for sure. But I'm also saying this because as a senior manager in a company, that is the work that we have to do. We've got to set the tone and set the environment so that the people who are working who are actually - you know, I don't do gold. I don't think I've ever actually seen gold while I've been here. The people who actually do handle the work and do the hard work, we're supporting them in getting that done. And is it different here? Yeah, it is different. It's different in so many levels. But it's the same concept of making sure that your people know that they are important, and that you actually spend a fair amount of time finding out what is going to work for them in order for them to do the work for all of us.

Michael Lee

It's interesting, the metaphor there, if you work for the largest gold mining company in the world, and you never see any gold. I think that's another interesting metaphor for hybrid work. The work doesn't always have to happen in one place. How does that transform our understanding of what work actually is?

Awo Quaison-Sackey

You know, we're still learning how it transforms how we understand work, or how we understand performance, and how we value people, it and we're all on that journey right now. And remember, I said earlier that the people who are actually digging up the ground and sifting through the dirt and processing the gold, they can't work in a hybrid fashion, they're tied to the ground.

So there's an element where those of us who are able to work remotely need to understand that we're not any better or worse off than the people who are working in the mine. We can work remotely, but we've still got to produce. And the people who are working the mine need to not see those of us who are working remotely as having some advantage, given that they are actually the producers. So we're still on the journey of how we do that. We're still building our intelligence around that. I don't know where it's going to end up. But it's not going back to where it used to be for sure. We know too much. And we can't, we cannot unlearn what we've learned over the eighteen months.

Michael Lee

What I'm hearing here, that's a really interesting point that I'd like you to talk a little more about, is how do the people who have to be in the central location, and the people that don't? How do we get them to really learn to support each other in the challenges that they each face, given that the challenge is so different?

Awo Quaison-Sackey

I think it's hard, because unless I can put myself in your shoes, and you put yourself in mine, you won't ever know what it's like for me to be in my job doing what I do, and you might think I've got the easier job.

So again, we haven't done much other than through our we have what we call business resource groups, here, women and allies. And then we have a group that handles our indigenous population, we call them the local locals, because they're local to the communities that we mine in. They're local people who are local to the communities. And we try to use them to bring the outside in and also to take the inside out, to kind of educate people about what it's like from different perspectives. I think that's what it is, right? We just need to have people be open to understanding that there is a different perspective, no better, no worse. But it does take something to be a support person working in an office working remotely. And it does take something to be an operator or maintenance person working in the mine. And it does take something to be a woman working in a mine. It does take something to be a local working at the mine side, being part of the community. All have different challenges. And we

just need to talk about those challenges so that people start to understand and be able to be empathetic about each other's challenges and situations.

Michael Lee

If you look at your collective wisdom as someone who's worked in various parts of the world, as an HR expert in a large company, regarding the new way of working, what's the biggest learning?

Awo Quaison-Sackey

The thing that most of us probably don't do that well is to listen. To listen to what the people are saying about their situation. I do a lot of taking notes to self. Somebody says something, okay, it may not be relevant to what I'm doing now, but notice if it's going to come up as relevant later. So really just listening, and seeking to understand what that person is trying to tell you.

For the first time in my career, I have employees calling me on my personal line. So working remotely also enables that to happen, right? So I don't have an office phone, it's tied to my home phone. The people just call and they want to chat about what what's going on with them, or, interestingly enough, to find out what's going on with me. I think that's great. I don't think I've ever had in my career a situation where employees would just call me. And I view that as a gift. In some respects, I'm really glad that they do that. They may want something but that's not the matter. The fact that they call gives me an opportunity to listen to what they're saying, and to see what it is that I can provide or put into the next policy or whatever it is, from an HR standpoint.

Michael Lee

As much as everybody wants to get a lot done, it seems the key right now is to kind of slow down, pay more attention.

Awo Quaison-Sackey

Pay more attention. You said it. And probably to pay attention, you have to slow down, right? You have to focus for at least a minute. I think it's listening and paying attention and whatever is important for what you're doing will actually come through what you're hearing other people talk about.

Michael Lee

What would be the what's the word or the concept for 2022?

Awo Quaison-Sackey

For 2020, it was pivot. Yeah, we were constantly pivoting for 2020. 2021 has been adjusting. Adjusting to the fact that there's not a new normal, and we're not going back. I think 2022 is going to be sort of settling in. We weren't quite sure in 2021. So we've got a lot of tentacles,

a lot of seeds, green shoots. I think 2022 is going to be about, okay, we've got to settle into some level of stability where people can actually have some certainty for longer than a minute. So I think it's going to be that. I think it's going to be trying to get some foundational things laid, and stable, to give people more certainty.

Michael Lee

Any more tips, for what people can start doing in the coming months to start creating a sense of certainty for themselves?

Awo Quaison-Sackey

I think the key thing is to look and see what you can make certain. So we are finalizing some projects that I think will help to do that in certain areas. And once we communicate that to employees, I think it starts us off in the new year with a new base. And I'm really thrilled that we were able to do that, so that we start from there, and then start to listen again newly and pay attention to what it is that's needed next. You know, again, I'm not saying that we listen to pay attention or to provide everything that people say they want, but it is to actually get what the new direction needs to be or what the constant direction needs to be. So I think finalizing whatever we've done for 2021 and then looking to see what are the green shoots that we want to take hold of in order to further the action in 2022.

Michael Lee

Awo, thank you so much for taking the time to be with us and bring us your wisdom. We really appreciate it.

Awo Quaison-Sackey

Thank you so much for having me.