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MEN OF INFLUENCE

Leading with Purpose
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Dr Maurice D Smith: A Legacy of Leadership in Caribbean Higher Education

DR. MAURICE SMITH: AN ADVOCATE FOR EDUCATION AND POLICY INNOVATION

Dr. Maurice Smith is a towering figure in education and policy, with a career devoted to transforming educational systems and leadership development. Having started his career in Jamaica's Ministry of Education, Dr. Smith quickly rose due to his visionary thinking and commitment to excellence.

His efforts have shaped policies within the Caribbean and influenced global perspectives on education equity, teacher development, and the modernization of curricula. A dedicated advocate for lifelong learning, Dr. Smith's contributions are a testament to the power of education in shaping societies, a philosophy rooted deeply in the Jamaican tradition of empowering youth through knowledge.

Dr. Maurice D. Smith is a prominent figure in Caribbean education. He serves as University Registrar and Chief Administrative Officer at the University of The West Indies (The UWI). In a compelling dialogue with Dr. Rixon O. Campbell for INUA Magazine, he reflects on his lifelong dedication to teaching and leadership.

From Childhood Aspirations to Educational Leadership

"Who is Maurice Smith, the young Maurice?" Dr. Campbell inquires, inviting Smith to share the roots of his remarkable journey.

"Maurice is a teacher at heart," he responds, a sense of purpose evident in his voice. "I was made for this. This is my destiny." Recalling his formative years, Smith reminisces about how he would stand in front of the television, emulating a teacher. "From a young age, I had this propensity to teach. Even in school, I often took on the role of the teacher when my own was absent, marking registers and guiding my peers."

Dr. Campbell probes deeper, asking, "Did your teachers support your decision to pursue teaching, especially given the societal pressures to become a doctor or lawyer?"

Smith reflects, acknowledging mixed responses from his educators. "Many thought I should be a medical doctor," he shares. "But I was determined to follow my path. Teaching is a calling; it's a disposition. That early recognition guided my career choices."

Navigating Support and Expectations

Dr. Campbell steers the conversation toward Smith's family dynamics: "Were your parents supportive of your choice, considering the expectations for gifted children in Caribbean culture?"

"My father was not particularly present," Smith explains, "but my mother has always been my quiet supporter. She has never tried to dissuade me from pursuing my goals.

Whatever major decisions I made, she always gave me the wings to fly."

He adds, "Some teachers were concerned about my choice because they felt teachers didn't enjoy a particular quality of life. But for me, success is walking in the purpose for which you were created. I believe where God leads, God feeds."

Overcoming Leadership Challenges

Dr. Campbell focuses on Smith's impressive career trajectory: "You've held prestigious roles, including with the World Bank and in higher education. What leadership challenges have you faced along the way?"

"Age has been a factor," Smith admits. "At 47, many assume I'm younger based on my appearance. They often perceive me as inexperienced, which can be challenging. But I consider it an asset; I don't feel the need to prove anything. I'm comfortable being myself."

He continues, "Another challenge has been related to my ethnicity. As a Black man in global education, I've faced assumptions about my expertise based on where I'm from. Yet, I embrace these aspects of my identity, viewing them as strengths."

Defining Leadership Style Across Sectors

As the conversation deepens, Dr. Campbell inquires about Smith's leadership style: "In your various roles within the Caribbean University system, what would you say is your dominant leadership style? Did you adapt your style for corporate versus higher education environments?"

Smith contemplates this: "People often think corporate environments are unilateral, while higher education is collaborative. However, I've found that success in both requires a clear vision, effective communication, and consensus building. Leadership is about setting direction, achieving goals, and motivating people."

He emphasizes, "I prioritize engaging with people, helping them recognize their potential, and fostering their talents. Whether in corporate or education, investing in people leads to organizational improvement. An organization is a collective of people, values, and ideas. If you make your team feel valued, they will give you their best efforts."

Inspiring Others and Fostering Growth

Dr. Campbell concludes the interview by exploring Smith's philosophy on leadership: "What do you consider your greatest strength and achievement in your career?"

"My ability to inspire people and help them extend beyond their limits is my greatest strength," Smith responds with conviction. "Improving individuals improves the organization, whether in higher education or corporate settings. This philosophy has driven me throughout my career for over two and a half decades."

Dr. Campbell nods appreciatively, encapsulating the essence of Smith's journey—a testament to the power of purpose, resilience, and the transformative impact of dedicated leadership in education.

In this profound and enlightening dialogue, Dr. Maurice D. Smith delves into the complexities of leadership, education, and societal values in the Caribbean. He discusses challenges and opportunities in shaping the region's future, underscoring the need for effective leadership.

Dr. Campbell opens the conversation by addressing the issue of ineffective leadership, a challenge not just in the Caribbean but globally. Dr. Smith emphasizes that this dysfunction often stems from the misconception that academic qualifications automatically equate to leadership capabilities. He elaborates, "While education is essential, it does not inherently bestow leadership skills. Effective leadership involves critical competencies such as vision creation, effective

communication, empathy, and the ability to foster performance among others."

As the discussion shifts toward mentoring, Dr. Smith recounts his experiences with mentors who guided him throughout his career. He highlights the reciprocal nature of mentorship and stresses the importance of nurturing future leaders. "Leadership is not merely about personal success but about the long-term viability of institutions," he asserts, emphasizing the need for succession planning to prepare the next generation.

When exploring organizational culture, Dr. Smith shares insights into fostering collaboration and inclusivity within The UWI, which serves 17 Caribbean countries. He discusses navigating the complexities of a diverse environment and adapting his leadership style to meet various stakeholders' needs. His approach involves setting clear targets, celebrating achievements, and creating a supportive atmosphere where staff feel like family.

Dr. Smith reflects on the pressing challenges facing higher education in the Caribbean. He emphasizes the need for institutions to balance innovation with accountability,

ensuring they provide value for citizens' investments. He expresses concerns about the sociocultural shifts leading to an overly capitalistic focus in education, advocating for a balance between economic progress and social cohesion.

Artificial intelligence emerges as a pivotal topic, with Dr. Smith discussing The UWI's efforts to develop clear policies surrounding AI's impact on teaching, learning, and research. He acknowledges the complexities of navigating this rapidly evolving landscape while ensuring higher education remains relevant and effective.

The issue of gender disparity in higher education also features prominently in the conversation. Dr. Smith notes that most students enrolled in Caribbean institutions are women, highlighting the need for targeted efforts to encourage male participation. He identifies economic barriers and structural challenges as critical factors contributing to this disparity, advocating for a reimagining of the educational experience to better accommodate men's needs.

As the discussion nears its conclusion, Dr. Smith reflects on the transformative potential of higher

education institutions in reshaping societal values. He expresses excitement about governance challenges and the opportunity to address them effectively, reiterating the need for dialogue and collaboration to foster a more equitable society.

In a poignant moment, Dr. Smith shares the advice he would give his younger self, underscoring the importance of resilience and learning from every experience. His perspective on failure—viewing it as a learning opportunity rather than an endpoint—illustrates a mindset rooted in growth and perseverance.

As the interview wraps up, Dr. Smith conveys a powerful message about shared aspirations that unite us globally. He urges individuals to focus on what connects us rather than what divides us. He calls for a more outstanding commitment to understanding and supporting one another, asserting that real progress stems from collaboration and empathy. Finally, Dr. Campbell inquires about the potential for expanding The UWI's influence in Africa. Dr. Smith enthusiastically responds, detailing ongoing initiatives to establish deeper connections with African nations. His

vision for UWI as a global institution open to collaboration and partnership underscores the university's commitment to fostering relationships that transcend geographical boundaries. Dr. Maurice D. Smith illuminates the Caribbean's challenges through this insightful dialogue and offers a hopeful outlook on the transformative power of education, leadership, and community. His dedication to nurturing future leaders and fostering inclusivity is a beacon for the region, encouraging a collective effort toward a brighter, more equitable future.

