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Makerere University Business School co-evolution journey: the role of extraordinary performers

Moses M. Kibirango, John C. Munene and Abbey Mutumba

For over 20 years, Makerere University Business School (MUBS)'s source of sustainable competitive advantage happened to be associated with a few forerunner employees' unusual acts in solving prevailing challenges. Correspondingly, their leadership exhibited adaptability tendencies along with the ability to nurture generated ideas. Waswa Balunywa, one of the long-serving employees, joined the institution at its infancy in 1983 at the age of 28 years immediately after graduating with a Masters of Business Administration (MBA) from the Faculty of Management Studies, University of Delhi. In the early 1980s, the Department of Commerce at Makerere University was small, with less than 100 students, compared to the current MUBS of more than 16,000 students.

Balunywa was impressed with the way the Indian education sector supported private students and optimally used the existing infrastructure by letting private students attend classes during off-peak hours. In contrast, the Makerere University model, at that time when Balunywa joined, was based on having classes from 07:30 a.m. to 11:30 a.m. This meant all of the university's classrooms remained idle from lunch time up to late in the evening across all its faculties. Moreover, by then, after the end of civil wars in 1986, Uganda was experiencing an emerging corporate world which attracted globally appealing business graduates to competitively administer their organisations. From 1987, Uganda's leading local media (newspapers, TV and radio stations) and organisational notice boards were hyping the country's scarcity of skilled graduates to take up business administration roles in accounting, marketing, human resource management and other corporate functions.

In the early 1990s, a single company like Uganda Breweries Limited or the Madhvani Group of Companies, among other large private sector investor companies in the Ugandan industry, had a demand for over 50 graduates to perform in such corporate areas for its market competitiveness. Yet, Makerere University, the only university at that time, could produce only 40 business administration graduates because of its rigid 7:30 a.m. to 11:30 a.m. classes. The existing classes' morning hours at that time did not cater to the corporate and working class who were craving to upgrade their respective qualifications through the same university. This, consequently, stimulated the University's Department of Commerce to schedule evening classes, where Balunywa was just starting his career. Local radio/TV talk show moderators and guests were increasingly voicing their complaints against the university's exclusive admission of only the top-performing applicants for the few government scholarship vacancies.

In the same period (early 1990s), according to the literature, the university was experiencing numerous anomalies: gross underfunding; reductions in and late staff remunerations;

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infrastructure messiness and suffocation of academic program developments (Mamdani, 2007; Musisi and Muwanga, 2003; Gregorian *et al.*, 2003; Court, 1999). Many of these hiccups were the consequences of the 1970-1990 political and economic turbulence in Uganda (Makerere University Stakeholders Consultative Meeting, 2006).

Restrictions, tension, opportunity recognition and opportunity evaluations

It should be noted that up to 1993 there were no other universities teaching business education in Uganda, meaning that only 40 MBA graduates from Makerere were entering the job market with business education. Yet, the government resources could not be stretched to admit more students to study business education and there were no privately sponsored students at Makerere University at that time. In 1992, Makerere University had a yearly enrolment of about 2,186 students only. Many of the students who qualified to join university missed out because of a lack of vacancies. More than 500 students were travelling to study abroad including Indian universities, on private sponsorship. These restrictions put pressure on visionary employees like Balunywa and stimulated their ability to identify and attach value to the emerging opportunities.

They started lobbying the Senate, Makerere's supreme policy-making organ, to allow and open the university gates to private students. This was unheard of, and there was a lot of resistance to allow this change of policy. By then, Makerere admitted only government-sponsored students, and could not allow privately sponsored students to join the university. Earlier in 1990, together with the help of Professor Jjuko, by then the Dean, Faculty of Law and Head of the Department of Commercial Law, Makerere University, reluctantly allowed the two faculties to start evening study programs for private students.

Consequences of opportunistic exploitation

The Faculty of Commerce had calculated their break-even point to be at 87 private students. But the private students' scheme yielded an overwhelming response; the first intake in 1992 had 108 students, exceeding the target number by 24.1 per cent! The extraordinary performance of the Faculty of Commerce through their unusual (positive deviance) ways generated a lot of money/internally generated funds for the Faculty and the University by large. This attracted interest and criticism from some quarters at the university who were envious of the enormous success that Faculty of Commerce continued to attain. Also, some top government official started noticing the Faculty's unusual student enrolment and optimism.

Honourable Amanywa Mushega, then Minister of Education, was impressed with the very fast growth of the Faculty of Commerce. In 1996 he visited the Faculty, and the team at the Faculty explained their aspirations to him. This included building a 10-storey structure for the Faculty of Commerce. The Minister of Education was, however, happy with Faculty of Commerce's performance, as it confirmed that liberalisation of the education sector was a good policy. He promised to hand over the National College of Business Studies (NCBS) at Nakawa, so that the team at the Faculty of Commerce could expand from Nakawa rather than building more structures at Makerere University main campus.

The overwhelming response to the Faculty of Commerce evening study program for private students further spurred a rapid growth of the faculty. By 1996, there were over 1,000 students enrolled with the Faculty of Commerce. Makerere University's other faculties managers started feeling the tension caused by the increasingly growing numbers and revenues from the private students. This was also the time the Government of Uganda (GoU) embarked on the liberalisation of the education sector, which saw the start-up of many private institutions of higher learning, including private universities. The new institutions were impressed with the Faculty of Commerce model of evening classes, and they copied it. For example, the Islamic University in Uganda (IUIU), which was started in 1987, requested Professor Atikoro to help them start a business education program based

on that private evening program model. The study program under the Faculty was to be shifted to the Nakawa Campus which actually started in 1997.

Moving to Nakawa amidst oppositions

The National College of Business Studies (NCBS) staff and those who were opposed to the merger between Faculty of Commerce and NCBS tried to resist, in 1997, the handover their traditional college at Nakawa to Faculty of Commerce. They claimed that the team at Faculty of Commerce was accepting bribes (of 500 million Uganda Shillings) from Sudhir Ruparella (one of the tycoons in Uganda), so that he destroys Nakawa, to make private developments on the 40-acre prime property.

A committee was appointed by the Minister of Education to smoothen the merger between Faculty of Commerce and NCBS. The committee was headed by Mr Kahenano, from the Bank of Uganda, and a member of the Makerere University Council. The Kahenano Committee recommended that the merged entity, known by the names of Makerere University Business School (MUBS), to be established as a constituent college of Makerere University.

Still in 1997, the idea of establishing MUBS as a constituent college of Makerere University was further resisted by some of the staff members at the Faculty of Commerce; these were emotionally attached to the Makerere University main campus, and it was felt that moving off campus would lessen their esteem, plus the quality of their students. This was an addition stiff resistance added. Amidst such resistance, Honourable Francis Babu, then Minister of State for Higher Education, took the Faculty of Commerce to Nakawa in February 1998. He handed over the National College of Business Studies to Balunywa, who was appointed the first Director of Makerere University Business School.

At the time of transfer to Nakawa, MUBS had only two departments. The old Faculty of Commerce was on average having a total enrolment capacity of 200 students. In a deviating manner, Balunywa and his colleagues scheduled consultation meetings with the working-class professionals after 5 p.m. during weekdays. These meetings took place in small tents with makeshift tables and plastic chairs. Professionals who were interested in consultation services from MUBS were served tea to fuel focus group discussions on key issues which required exchange of ideas. They also took advantage of the 40-50 per cent of faculty's lecture halls and tutorial rooms which remained idle from 12:00 p.m., Monday to Friday, and the entire day on weekends. After a while, workshops and seminars emerged from such activities, then short courses, and eventually these turned to be evening study programs for private students.

More challenges and opportunity tension

In 1998, the National College of Business Studies, Nakawa, had a number of challenges at the time it was handed over to the Faculty of Commerce, to later become MUBS. At the time of transfer from the main campus, the Faculty of Commerce had only 40 staff members, and there was no PhD staff on its faculty. At the time of the takeover, NCBS had a total enrolment of 1,500 students who were pursuing diploma courses. However, there was no infrastructure to support this large number of students. Half of the buildings at NCBS were being occupied as staff residences. Some of the challenges at the college were, for example, the secretary to one of the college heads was controlling Block 5 and privately hiring it out to students for personal gain; there were mud structures behind the library; and there were pit latrines all over the campus. The transcripts and certificates from NCBS were being openly sold to interested buyers, and NCBS's academic credentials had lost value in the job market at the time of the merger.

Opportunity recognition, opportunity exploitation and the MUBS transformation

The MUBS journey at Nakawa began on a tough note, with resistance from most of the new stakeholders. To overcome this challenge, change management committees were instituted at all levels to address the emergent disruption of status quo. The students, academic staff and non-academic staff all participated in different committees to examine, evaluate and pre-chart a way forward for the new entity.

The new team at Nakawa was very firm on what to do and how to do it. The old academic staff at NCBS, Nakawa, who had the minimum qualification of a university degree were absorbed on the basis of their capacity to integrate into MUBS. Those capable of attaining more academic qualifications were facilitated to undertake post-graduate training; those not fit to be trained as university teachers were rejected. Those not capable of integrating in the new arrangement were returned to the Ministry of Education headquarters. Quite a number of old staff members of National College of Business Studies upgraded to master's degree, of which many are now PhD holders.

Conflicts and compliance tactics

At the time the Faculty of Commerce moved to Nakawa, it had distinguished itself as Makerere's cash cow. In a very short time after starting the private students' scheme, it started generating unfathomable cash flows. This elicited envy and malice, and once the transfer to Nakawa was completed, some in the administration at Makerere University main campus sought to dominate the decision-making processes at MUBS. The vision to build a ten-storey structure for Faculty of Commerce at the main campus was now transformed into building a new structure at Nakawa. MUBS had planned to invest up to US\$1m in the building at the main campus. Part of this money was now redirected to building a new Block (10) at Nakawa. It was estimated that the construction of this block would cost 120 million Ugandan Shilling, but some in the administration at main campus wanted the building to be done at 500 million. This situation triggered the first full-blown conflict between MUBS and Makerere University. It was a difficult situation, because although the funds for the construction were from the MUBS private students' scheme, Makerere University refused to give MUBS authority to spend the money. With this in mind the Director of MUBS decided to defy Makerere University and told the students to start banking funds directly on MUBS accounts, which were not controlled by Makerere University. The leaders at Makerere fought back and rejected MUBS students. Early in 1999, Makerere University manoeuvred and made Balunywa, the Head of MUBS, and Sam Sejjaka, his Deputy, resign.

Positive deviance dramatized

It was the first time in Uganda for a head of a government department and his deputy to simultaneously resign. This phenomenon created enormous public interest and anxiety. The MUBS versus Makerere University quarrel was now in the spotlight. Leaders in government took interest in the matter, and questions were asked in high circles as to what the problem was. His Excellence (HE), the President of Uganda, Museveni, initiated an investigation into the matter. Upon receiving the report on the genesis and nature of the conflict between Makerere University and MUBS, he appointed Balunywa and Sam Sejjaka, Principal and Deputy Principal of MUBS, respectively. This was one month after the duo had resigned.

The Ministry of Education realised the flaw in the law that established MUBS. This law was revised under the Makerere University Constituent College Amendment Order 2000. In the new law, MUBS was given an independent council, and it was given financial and administrative autonomy from Makerere University. The new environment set the pace for the rapid transformation of MUBS.

Distinct new venture emergent practices and the MUBS sprint

The return to office by Balunywa and Sejjaka provided the motivation and urgency to deliver the MUBS Dream. They had correctly read the opportunities available in the country's education sector:

- there were inadequate facilities for training in business education;
- there was an absence of management education; and
- there was a lack of research in these two areas.

He therefore set out to build MUBS to fill these critical gaps in education. This necessitated a change in leadership style. Whereas Makerere University was impersonal, MUBS set forth a new management and leadership style, which relied mostly on the individual's effort and input. At MUBS, everybody mattered, and each person's contribution was acknowledged. The work philosophy was to grow the institution based on the work, and then identify the people to fill the positions. Indeed, the numbers exponentially increased, as shown in [Table I](#).

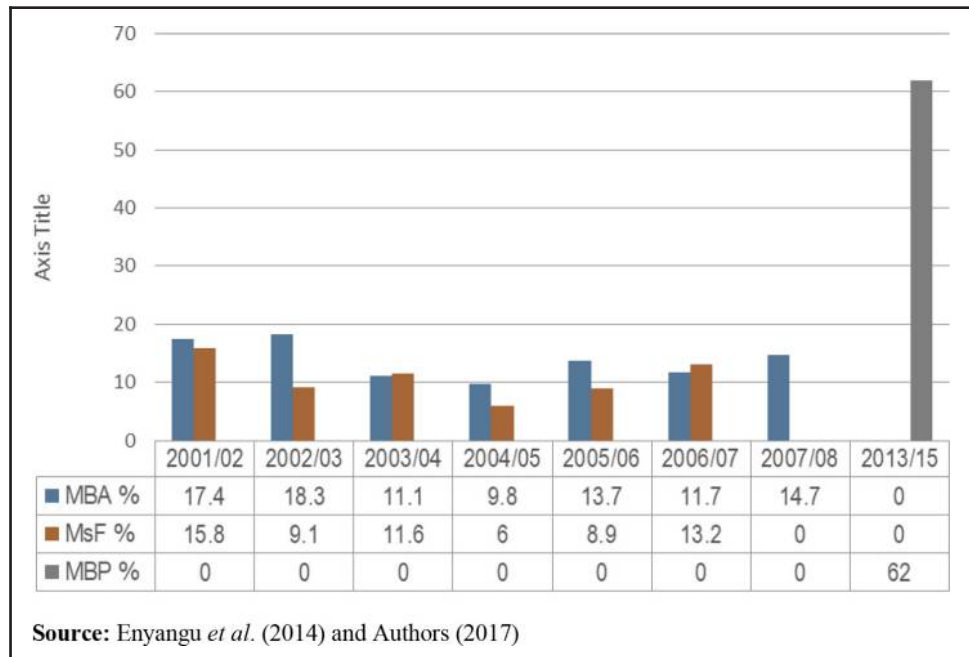
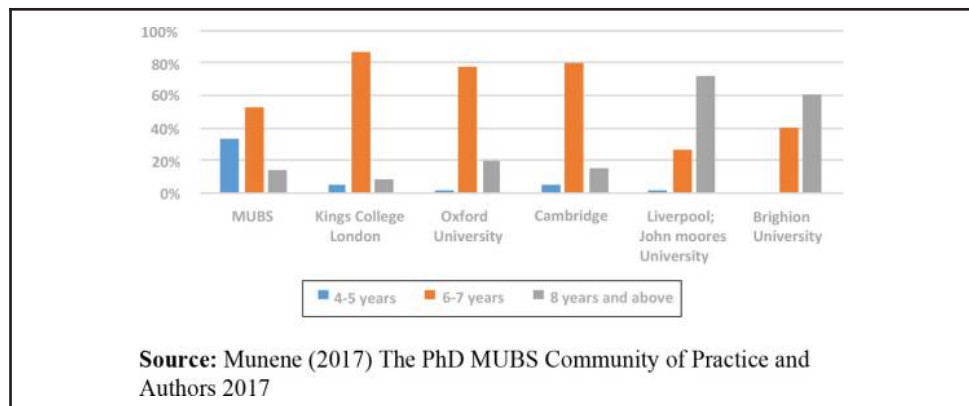
Within a decade (as indicated in [Table I](#)) student enrolment numbers soared from 108 students in 1992 to 1,287 students in 2002 (1,191 per cent) and to 16,000 students 10 years later (1243 per cent) ([Makerere University-Omaswa Task Force Report, 2014](#); [Makerere University-Planning and Development Department, 2013](#); [Mamdani, 2007](#)). The performance continued from enrolment increments to quality master's and PhD completion rates. This came as a result of Professor John C. Munene's teaching innovation and introduction of peer learning which was made compulsory for MBA, and the community of practice learning model, a self-learning through sharing, was introduced for the PhD students. MBA out-performed MsF. The variation currently attributed to the introduction of peer learning. See [Figure 1](#) for MUBS completion rates for selected masters. Another development emerged through the community of practice learning model for the PhD students which improved the PhD quality (an average of three publications per PhD graduate) and competitive completion rate. See [Figure 2](#) for PhD completion rates.

This made MUBS the leading and biggest business faculty/school in Makerere and in Uganda. Out of Makerere University's 35,000 students in 19 faculties, 45.7 per cent were from MUBS; far more than School of Agricultural Sciences (SAS) which had more grants

Table I MAK–(MUBS, SoA and SAS) registered students 1992/1993 to 2012/2013

<i>(Makerere University Annual Report 2013)</i>	<i>After fee paying students' intervention</i>		
	<i>1st decade 1992</i>	<i>2nd decade 2002</i>	<i>3rd decade 2012</i>
<i>Makerere University (MAK) with 18 Faculties</i>			
Total number of students	2,186	10,666	35,000
Number of students (% increase)		388%	6,273%
<i>Makerere University Business School (MUBS)</i>			
Total number of students	108	1,286	16,000
Number of students (% increase)		1,091%	1,144%
<i>School of Arts</i>			
Total number of students	364	2,550	8,395
Number of students (% increase)		601%	229%
<i>School of Agricultural Sciences (SAS)–an example of a more grants that the two faculties above</i>			
Total number of students	160	225	1,930
Number of students (% increase)		41%	758%
MUBS/MAK ratio	4.9%	12.1%	45.7%
SoA/MAK ratio	16.7%	23.9%	24.0%
SAS/MAK ratio	7.3%	2.1%	5.5%

Note: This gave an approximate increase of 95% students per year in MUBS

Figure 1 MUBS completion rates for selected masters**Figure 2** PhD completion rates

than MUBS. Enrolment in MUBS exceeded all other Makerere University Faculties of Humanities (see Table I). From then on, several units in the university not only utilised the available resources, but expanded their academic menu to more than 280 full-fledged academic programs. Such a menu with attractive study options was able to respond to the newer need that was available in the market such as tourism and communication.

By the end of the 2012, in its third decade, MUBS had developed 7 faculties, with 14 departments, and had established 4 upcountry campuses, in Jinja, Arua, Mbale and Mbarara. Two of the campuses started with two departments each. In line with the education leadership structure (organogram), MUBS leadership established the four campuses and appointed directors for the upcountry campuses at the level of faculty deans. MUBS enrolment numbers soared to 16,000 students (46 per cent of all enrolled students in Makerere University, the mother university). MUBS then became the second biggest educational institution in Uganda, with the potential and capacity to outgrow its organic parent (Makerere University).

MUBS leadership has established a number of annual conferences like the Annual International Management Conference (AIMC), whose 22nd edition is underway, and is a member of annual regional research conferences like the Operations Research Society of East Africa (ORSEA) which brings together a number of East Africa's top universities and corporations. Even at its faculty and department levels, the business school has emerged with periodical community-engaged learning platforms like the Annual MUBS Hospitality Day which brings together Uganda's tourism and entertainment-business leaders) and the quarterly MUBS Economic Forum which is one of Uganda's Vision 2040 platforms for sharing knowledge. MUBS has also become a centre of entrepreneurship research and development through collaborative research platforms like the GEM Reports and ecosystems like the Innovation Hub which is under construction at its MUBS Entrepreneurship Center. Such benchmarked growth continues to be generated by MUBS leadership, especially during chaotic times (Mutumba and Kibirango, 2016).

According to the School Principal (Professor Waswa Balunywa), the tremendous growth came out of doing things differently from others (Kibirango *et al.*, 2017).

Explanations for MUBS transformation

MUBS' inspiration

Balunywa over time inspired others, and he maintained personal relations with all employees, both academic and administrative staff. For example Balunywa often asked about how well the cleaner's family is doing. In his leadership, he declares to have enjoyed respecting everybody as an individual, and he believes in reciprocity. He desires to work with individuals rather than titles. He believes that God's blessings can be bestowed upon an individual who loves and respects everybody (Kibirango *et al.*, 2017).

As a Principal, he often emphasised that good ideas normally come from the least expected people. So, everybody should be given an equal chance to contribute his/her ideas. Most of the good ideas that have propelled MUBS to excellence have come from the stakeholders, and the school leadership has embraced other people's ideas. In this process, people are allowed to make mistakes in the implementation of different ideas. Such mistakes made in the learning process are not punished (Kibirango *et al.*, 2017).

He also believed that for every nine failed ideas, there will always be one idea which succeeds. It is this one idea which succeeds that is pursued relentlessly to fully flourish.

It has been reported by interviewed MUBS faculty and staff members that Balunywa used to ask staff going to him with problems to propose solutions to the matter at hand, and in this way, many workable solutions to the various MUBS challenges were identified (Kibirango *et al.*, 2017).

The experience is that employees often come up with internally generated proposals to solve the prevailing problems (Kibirango *et al.*, 2017). Furthermore, Balunywa loves criticism. He is convinced that criticism makes him and any one work harder, and that one cannot succeed without competition. The things he recalls most vividly are those when he was counselled for having not done well (Kibirango *et al.*, 2017).

Enabled conducive internal working environment

In general, leadership at MUBS allowed employees to speak their minds openly in meetings. The "Delphi method" was used, whereby an issue to be tackled in a meeting is first sent out for comments, and a final decision is made upon the matter in the meeting.

In just three decades, MUBS realised tremendous transformation driven by her frontrunners through their positive deviating behaviour (Kibirango *et al.*, 2017) MUBS started with only one professor and no PhDs among its 40 academic staff members; while Nairobi and Dar-es-Salaam Universities had several PhDs on its staff. The number of MUBS academic

staff increased to more than 400 faculty members. Over 40 academic staff acquired their PhDs and 10 were promoted professors. With this history, it is evident that MUBS' co-evolution trends significantly attract attention as compared to its sister institutions of higher learning, like Dar-es-Salaam and Nairobi Universities.

Restrictions along with adequate governance structures as opportunistic stimulants

MUBS has over time been stimulated by the shortfalls it faced at its inception. It had very limited resources to help it build its infrastructure and human resources. It started as a loser, and was most of the time treated with pessimism. Many people in the leadership of education in Uganda believed MUBS would fail, and were unwilling to commit their support to the outlandish vision of young men who had no prior experience at running a university. These sceptics were wrong, and the young men at MUBS became conquerors.

The very best (*crème de la crème*) of academia, Professor John C. Munene was to this effect also attracted to move from Makerere University to MUBS during its formative stages. This was extremely vital in anchoring the post-graduate programs at MUBS. Balunywa permitted Professor Munene the freedom to do what he wanted to do academically. Munene applied and administered his adult self-learning heuristics and introduced the community of practice which not only accelerated the production of quality graduates needed in the corporate world but also resulted into nurturing MUBS into a leading academic institution in Africa. This lent MUBS credibility, and resulted in attracting additional big names in academia to lecture at MUBS. Among these are Professor Ahiauzu, formerly Vice-Chancellor of Port Harcourt University, who, together with Munene, started the PhD program at MUBS; Professor Michael Frese, a leading academic guru, from the National University of Singapore; and Professor Peter Rosa from The University of Edinburgh Business School, among others.

In this case, the ability to identify, attract and nurture extraordinary performers is not only vital but has also been so significant in the MUBS transformation process. Other important best practices that are key in the transformation process are generated opportunities, enabled multiplicative interactions (generative influence) and enhanced learning from employees and social network agents' differences.

The MUBS coevolution has further exerted enormous impact on both local and regional scenes. For example, MUBS became the regional centre of business knowledge with over 4,000 graduates entering the job market with business education annually. Many others prominent individuals outside MUBS acknowledge having benefited and learnt from Balunywa's intrapreneurial approaches and MUBS's successive story. These have also endeavoured to not only apply such but also share with their colleagues in their respective universities both in Uganda and in the surrounding countries like Kenya and Rwanda. Some of these individuals are Ms Mtango Gladys, a Tanzanian, who, in 1993, started Business Education at Bugema University together with her successor who developed a tiny Business Department with from less than 100 students pursuing only three major concentrations in the year 2000 to over a thousand students currently. Such acquired ideas from the same source have been applied at the University of Eastern Africa, Baraton. Additionally, Mr Mugalu Dan, an entrepreneur by profession and practice, confirmed that he uses Balunywa's inspirations acquired in many of his endeavours, and this has helped him succeed in establishing two entrepreneurial ventures in Uganda so far. The World Bank has also praised the reform as a "quiet revolution" (Bisaso, 2011).

Keywords:

Innovation,
Diversity,
Creativity,
Employee behaviour,
Intrapreneurship,
Event evaluation

Conclusion

Since change is a constant feature in the organisational life, employees and their leadership need to learn the importance of emerging events and how to identify generated opportunities. These (employees and their leadership) should, furthermore, endeavour to learn how to adapt with emanating events. That is when entities experience and appreciate the coevolution of environmental emerging and transformational events with intrapreneurial interactions.

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