

Ashesi University

In this People First Talk with **Patrick Awuah** of Ashesi University, we explored what it takes to grow ethical, compassionate, purpose-driven leaders who go beyond the status quo to change society. Watch the talk [here](#).

Key ideas

- **Purpose shapes everything, more than strategy or structure alone.** Patrick invited deeper consideration of aligning on a clear purpose to guide daily decisions and signal what really matters. For example, a vision centered on everyone “*reaching their full potential and contributing to society*” would lead to very different actions than simply aspiring to rank as the number one university, against more traditional standards. It’s important to craft purpose in a way that everyone in the organization can see it as a North Star.
- **Leadership is built through shared ownership, not compliance.** Ashesi began with strong role modeling and clear rules, and while this was important, it alone didn’t fully shift behavior. After a year of student-led debate, Ashesi introduced a student-owned honor system, removing exam proctoring and trusting students to hold each other accountable. This collective process plays a major role in shifting the culture toward shared responsibility, and cultivating agency in students.
- **Enabling the leadership of others requires letting go of control and trusting in collective leadership, especially in hard moments.** Patrick shared how he brought his team into a financial crisis, openly naming risks and uncertainty, sharing his own vulnerability, and inviting their input. This shifted leadership from top-down decision-making to a distributed model, enabling others to step into leadership.
- **Culture only becomes real when it’s explicit, embedded into systems, and reinforced consistently.** Ashesi codified its values (scholarship, leadership, citizenship) into specific behaviors and built them into 360° performance reviews. People are evaluated not just on results, but on how they achieve them. Misalignment with values is taken seriously, even for high performers.
- **Young people should be exposed to big questions early.** Ashesi hosts leadership seminars for students to reflect together on questions like: *What is a good leader? What is a good society? What is servant leadership?* Alongside this, they use simulations to help students practice navigating ethical dilemmas they will face, and real-world community projects, building judgment and allowing them to broaden their perspective.
- **We need to proactively design resilient systems.** Drawing from nature, resilient systems are characterized by diversity, buffers, modularity, constant adaptation, and risk management. Ashesi applied these same principles to its own organization, enabling it to withstand shocks and stay resilient.



Patrick Awuah

Founder & President,
Ashesi University

“When you’re navigating a lot of difficulty, the courage and vulnerability of the leader is very important. It can be infectious.”

— Patrick Awuah