Kigali: Most entrepreneurs spend years learning how to start businesses. Nigerian business icon Tara Fela-Durotoye came to Rwanda to teach something far more difficult—how to leave them.

Standing before a packed audience of entrepreneurs, executives, investors and business leaders at the Kigali Serena Hotel, the renowned entrepreneur, author and mentor delivered a message that reached beyond profit margins and business growth.

Through her East African tour themed “Building Beyond You,” inspired by her newly published bestselling book of the same title, Tara challenged founders to rethink success—not as the ability to build companies around themselves, but as the courage to build institutions that can thrive long after they are gone.

Across Africa, where thousands of businesses disappear with their founders because succession planning is rarely discussed, Tara’s message struck a powerful chord.

It was particularly significant in Kigali, a city that has rapidly positioned itself as one of Africa’s fastest-growing hubs for entrepreneurship, innovation and investment.

At the heart of her philosophy is a simple but profound statement that has become the defining message of her movement.

“Growth becomes dangerous when the founder becomes the system.”

It was more than a memorable quote. It was a diagnosis of one of Africa’s biggest business challenges.

Too many companies, Tara explained, depend entirely on one individual. Every decision, every approval, every relationship and every opportunity revolves around the founder. While such businesses may appear successful from the outside, they remain fragile because they are built around personalities instead of systems.

Throughout the afternoon, Tara repeatedly encouraged entrepreneurs to shift their thinking—from becoming indispensable to becoming impactful. Businesses, she argued, should never rely on the founder’s constant presence.

Instead, they should be driven by clearly defined systems, empowered teams, strong governance and a culture that continues even when the founder steps away.

Her authority to speak on the subject comes from personal experience rather than theory.

Nearly three decades ago, Tara began her entrepreneurial journey with just 15,000 Nigerian Naira—approximately US$100 at the time.

She started as a bridal makeup artist, serving individual clients and struggling like many African micro-entrepreneurs whose businesses exist largely to meet immediate financial needs.

Rather than remaining a service provider, however, she saw every obstacle as an opportunity to expand.

She established Nigeria’s first professional makeup academy to train beauty professionals. When her students needed quality products, she created one of Nigeria’s first indigenous cosmetics brands.

She started with only three eyeshadows and three lipsticks, refusing to wait until she had enough capital for a large product line.

When conventional retail channels failed to reach customers, she developed an entirely new distribution network by training young women to become independent product retailers across Nigeria.

Years later, after building a nationwide retail infrastructure, global cosmetics giant Maybelline chose House of Tara as its Nigerian distribution partner.

Tara (right) in a panel discussion with select business leaders in Rwanda

Looking back, Tara says none of these achievements happened because she had abundant resources.

They happened because she continuously built systems capable of solving problems as her business evolved.

Yet perhaps the most remarkable chapter of her entrepreneurial story came not when she built the company, but when she deliberately stepped away from it.

After spending twenty-five years growing House of Tara into one of Africa's most recognised beauty brands, Tara handed over leadership to a professional managing director.

For many founders, such a decision would be unimaginable.

For Tara, it represented the very purpose of entrepreneurship.

She explained that she could confidently leave because she trusted three things: the people she had developed, the systems she had built and the vision that extended beyond herself. What she wanted was never to remain permanently at the centre of the organisation, but to ensure the organisation no longer needed her to survive.

One of the strongest messages she delivered in Kigali concerned leadership development.

Many entrepreneurs, she observed, hesitate to train employees because they fear losing them to competitors.

Her response immediately resonated throughout the room.

"If you train them, they might leave," she said. "If you don't train them and they stay, what happens to your business?"

For Tara, developing people is not a business expense but a long-term investment in an entire ecosystem. Leaders should not fear producing future competitors because those same individuals raise standards across industries and strengthen African economies.

Her message became even more compelling when she turned her attention to Rwanda.

Speaking candidly, Tara praised Rwanda's remarkable transformation and described it as one of the few African countries she follows closely because of its leadership, governance and development journey.

"We are so proud of this country because it represents many of the things we wish we had across the continent,” she told the audience.

But admiration quickly turned into challenge.

She reminded Rwandan entrepreneurs that a supportive government alone cannot build globally competitive companies.

“Paul Kagame has done a great job in creating an enabling environment,” she said. “What are you going to do with it?”

Her appeal was for Rwanda to move beyond celebrating good governance and begin producing globally recognised brands capable of creating thousands of jobs and inspiring the continent.

She envisioned a future where Rwandan companies become reference points across Africa, proving that the country’s remarkable national transformation can be matched by equally remarkable business success.

The forum’s central message found a powerful local example in Josiane Nsanza, Chairperson of the Rwanda Private Sector Federation Industry Cluster.

Sharing her personal journey, Nsanza illustrated exactly what Tara meant by building beyond oneself.

After her father’s death, she inherited leadership of a mining company employing roughly 4,000 people. Rather than collapsing under the weight of succession, the company continued expanding because strong systems had already been established.

She explained that since becoming Managing Director, the business has continued recording average annual growth of approximately 38 percent while diversifying into mineral trading and creating even more employment opportunities.

“I didn’t start from zero,” she reflected.

“I started from a system that worked.”

Her testimony became living evidence that succession is not simply about handing over ownership. It is about preparing people, building structures and creating organisations capable of surviving uncertainty.

As the discussions progressed, one question continued resurfacing throughout Tara’s presentation.

“If I step away today, what stops working?”

It is a question that every founder, regardless of industry or company size, must eventually confront.

For Tara, legacy is not measured by awards, wealth or public recognition. Neither is it measured by the buildings a business constructs or the profits it generates.

Legacy is measured by what continues growing after the founder has left.

That philosophy explains why the “Building Beyond You”** movement has evolved beyond a bestselling book into a continental leadership movement that is encouraging African entrepreneurs to build businesses that become institutions, institutions that nurture leaders, and leaders who continue creating opportunities for generations to come.

Her visit to Kigali therefore represented far more than another motivational business seminar.

Tara (middle) interacting with some of the women business leaders in Kigali, Rwanda

It reflected Rwanda’s growing role as a continental meeting place for ideas shaping Africa’s economic future. As Kigali continues to attract investors, innovators, and entrepreneurs from across the continent, conversations are increasingly shifting beyond how to start businesses toward how to sustain them across generations.

Perhaps that is why Tara Fela-Durotoye’s message resonated so deeply with Rwanda’s business community.

The country’s remarkable national transformation has always been built on institutions rather than individuals.

Her challenge is that Africa’s businesses should now follow the same path.