

Authentic as Skittles

By Yikee Adje (FSO, SPO for USAID/DRC, Executive Coach)

When I was a little girl, I remember watching a commercial for a nonprofit raising money to feed children in Africa. I remember thinking, *When I grow up I am going to walk along those dusty streets with a basket full of Skittles and pass them out to all those children.* At the time I couldn't imagine anything better than Skittles to give to those kids; it was my favorite thing in the world. That is the moment I began to yearn for a career in international development. Over the past two decades my idea of "What can I do to make this world a better place?" has changed constantly. My journey has taken me to nonprofits, for-profits, nongovernmental organizations—domestically and internationally on four continents—ending with me now here at USAID for 12 years and counting. What a glorious journey it has been, and what a blessing it is to come to work each day knowing that I am doing my part to make this world a better place. At USAID/DRC we work to protect the Congo Basin rainforest, the "second lung" of the world after the Amazon rainforest, and I know I play a part in ensuring that future generations can breathe. What greater purpose could I find in a workplace?

That said, we all know that working in international development, and particularly in a large bureaucracy like USAID, is not easy. We face myriad challenges every day to do good, and many of these challenges come from within. They are related to our own heavy processes and the need for multiple layers of approvals for even the simplest of actions. On an individual level, the work can feel overwhelming. I know I am not alone in this Agency to feel the weight of my conscience pushing me to do good, and simultaneously, the stress clawing at me, the burdens squeezing the breath out of me as I work to overcome them, and I wonder how much more of myself do I have to give before I am burnt out completely? As a child of Chinese immigrants, I know how to be quiet and to work hard. To ensure I had enough for myself and my children, I had to refocus and find ways to work smarter and bust burdens at every opportunity. I built up my "influence" muscles to manage relationships across offices and reporting structures so I could streamline processes and create useful systems for Mission colleagues, driving positive change across the Mission.

I had to redefine for myself what it meant to be authentic in the workplace so that I could make the work (noun) "work" (verb) for me. I learned to embrace my own priorities and find a way to influence my work environment so that it made space for me and my priorities, too.

When I had my first child, I was at a crossroads. I was working in an office where my FSO colleagues and leadership didn't have children with them at post. I was the only office director with a newborn. Everyone else was working around the clock, on holidays and on weekends, and I had to decide, how was I going to work? I decided to dare to work differently. I kept strict working hours, did not respond to emails after working hours or on the weekends, and told my colleagues with no guilt or explanation that I wasn't going to come in to work on a holiday when they asked. Over time, my conviction regarding my work-life balance stance grew. I found ways to work smarter and get my results faster so that I rarely needed to work overtime anymore. I

developed the 3Cs approach—Connection, Communication, and Courage—that focuses on building stronger relationships, communicating more effectively, and showing up more intentionally. Those who apply this approach can find more time for the things that matter most. The experience of taking a stand on work-life balance made me braver, and I became more eager to take on greater risks associated with bringing more of my authentic self into the workplace. My faith tells me to do nothing out of selfish ambition, and yet as FSOs we are encouraged to be visible. I have consciously chosen to be a leader who leads from behind and with humility. I believe wholeheartedly in FSO and FSN empowerment. I believe my responsibility as a supervisor of FSOs is to identify professional opportunities that are commensurate with each FSO's level of ambition. I believe in empowering FSNs to lead as many of the processes at a Mission as is permitted, because a strong FSN cadre equals a stronger and more stable Mission.

I still get nervous when I speak, and I've found ways to work with what I've got. I speak truthfully and directly in tough situations; I negotiate persuasively, using few words but with power, authority, and intention to ensure I get the results. I enjoy solving challenging problems where I bring the calm, rational voice needed in the room.

I have excelled professionally and remained authentic to myself and my priorities. We need to make space for everyone so that we can all be our most authentic selves and bring the best we have to contribute to USAID's mission. During a December 2023 trip to California I, along with other Agency leaders, spoke with students about the great work we are doing globally. I was moved by a student who commented on our group being "like a rainbow" because of our diversity. I felt proud to be a part of such a special moment. I can still hear that Skittles commercial, "Discover the rainbow. Taste the rainbow." It's still my favorite candy to this day.