



Debra Lee



Leading in the B-Suite

Powerful conversations about life, race and leadership

"We Need To Create Black Wealth And Pass It Down To Our Children"

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Adam Bryant 

Managing Director at The ExCo Group (formerly Merryck & Co. Americas)

***Debra Lee**, the former CEO of BET Networks and the co-founder and partner of The Monarchs Collective, which works*

*to help diversity boardrooms and executive ranks, shared powerful lessons with me and **Rhonda Morris**, the chief human resources officer of Chevron, for our interview series with prominent Black leaders. Subscribe [here](#) for future *Leading in the B-Suite* interviews.*

Morris: What were you like as a child? And what were important early influences for you?

Lee: I was very shy. My father was in the Army. He was a captain most of the time and became a major before he retired. We moved around a lot, and moving every two or three years made me even more shy because I was always the new kid, which brought me too much attention. I didn't like it.

But I was an avid reader. I'm the youngest of three children, and my father encouraged my love of books. He would give me a copy of the New York Times children's book review special edition that came out right before Christmas, and I was allowed to pick out as many books as I wanted.

I went through it and meticulously circled every book I wanted to read. I was always very smart. I wasn't always the smartest kid in the room, but I was up there. My dad also gave me a dollar for every 'A' grade on my report card, so that was a real incentive.

When I was in sixth grade, we moved to Greensboro, North Carolina. It was the first time we had lived in the South, and I went to my first all-

Black school. And all of a sudden, I was thrust into leadership roles. I was elected class president on the first day of sixth grade. They didn't even know me, but it was kind of like that famous "Mikey" ad for Life cereal — you know, give it to Mikey, the new kid.

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students like me who were
smart and cool.*

That's where I learned about leadership because everyone expected you to do well. Greensboro had a vibrant Black middle class, including an upper middle class of doctors and lawyers and there was a Black bank. So even though it was still segregated, we didn't feel that we lacked for anything. We never had to go to the White part of town. We had nice houses and a great school that we were very proud of.

It wasn't until I broke out of the crowd and went to an Ivy League school that I really found myself because I didn't want to be the smartest one in Greensboro. I wanted to be cool, and I didn't want to be light-skinned. I wanted to be darker. There are a whole lot of things that I would have changed about myself if I could have back then. But when I went to Brown, I found students like me who were smart and cool, who wanted to do things in the world, and who were at the top of their class.

I was born the year *Brown v. The Board of Education* was decided so I had educational opportunities. I went to Brown University and

Harvard Law School and was part of the first generation of Black students who could pick where they wanted to go to college. That also changed my life.

Bryant: You said you didn't want to be light-skinned. A lot of people don't know about skin-tone issues. Can you talk more about that?

Lee: Well, this was the age of Black power, and I went to an all-Black high school, so they were very militant. And the last thing you wanted to be was light-skinned with long hair. Kids used to chase me home in Greensboro and call me "Whitey."

My afro was so big back then, and I was so skinny. I looked like I was going to fall over. But that was my way of trying to fit in. I just didn't like that stereotype of light-skinned with long hair. It's probably why I wear my hair natural to this day.

My dad was from Charleston, South Carolina, and they had a hierarchy there, too, but it was the opposite. The lighter your skin, the better you were treated. In fact, in some Black households, if you were darker than a paper bag, you had to go around to the back to get into the house.

Those are the things, Adam, that we don't often talk about, but dark-skinned people will talk about how hard it was growing up and feeling not popular because of their skin color. But I think light-skinned Black people have as much to complain about because of the way we were treated, so it could go either way. It was something that was very

important.

Morris: What was the big inflection point for you that really set your career on a different trajectory?

Lee: It was being brave enough to leave a big law firm to join BET when it was still a small start-up. We didn't even have cable in DC at the time, so no one at my law firm had ever seen BET. So everybody was saying to me, "What are you doing?" I knew about them because they were a client.

Everything else in my life up until then was building a resume so I could do what I wanted to do, and going to BET was what I wanted to do. But my father wasn't happy about me leaving the law firm. He asked me why I would leave and I said, "Well, Dad, I'm not having fun anymore." And he said, "Fun? If it was supposed to be fun, they wouldn't call it work."

The second big inflection point was when Bob Johnson [a co-founder of BET] allowed me to start taking over more of the business, including building our first production studio and running our magazine division. Eventually, I became chief operating officer, and that's when I learned I really love business.

Bryant: What are the headwinds you've faced in your career as a Black woman, and what tailwinds helped you navigate them?

Lee: I've lived in both integrated and segregated environments

throughout my life. Working at BET was like going to a Black city, and race became pretty much irrelevant in terms of my career. When Viacom acquired us in 2000, I was already president and COO, so I went in at a certain level.

I don't think I faced as many headwinds as most people, and the tailwind was just having to get the work done and not having time to think about it. That continued my entire 32 years at BET because after we became part of Viacom, the goal was to be better than other divisions. We had to prove that we were as good as MTV or VH1 or Comedy Central.

I would say to them, "As a race, we've always had to do more with less."

It reminded me of high school, now that I think about it. If you attended a Black high school, you didn't have many resources. And so when my executives would complain about not having as many resources as the other divisions, I would say to them, "As a race, we've always had to do more with less, so don't tell me about what they have over at MTV. We've just got to get the work done."

Luckily, I had passionate executives and employees working with me, and they took such pride in BET, especially after we changed the brand and went through our transformation to start doing original programming. We got rid of a lot of the music videos that people didn't

like, which was the reason there were protesters outside my house for seven months.

At one point, videos were 60 percent of our programming. When we started out, it was Aretha Franklin and Earth, Wind & Fire and Lionel Richie. No problem with them, but then it turned into gangster rap. A preacher brought his congregation to protest outside my house every Saturday for seven months because of three videos he wanted me to take off.

We were the only Black network for a long time. I brought “Being Mary Jane” to the air. I was very proud of the work we did. I could put a spotlight on Black people who were doing great things other than music and sports. It was rewarding.

Morris: Being attacked by Black people must have been challenging. How did you handle it?

Lee: I don't like being attacked by anyone, but I especially don't like being attacked by Black people because the Black community is very important to me. No matter what I did in life, I wanted to do something to have a positive impact on the Black community. So when there were protesters outside my house, that was really hurtful personally.

In a similar vein, the Black community for a long time had this idea that BET should be a not-for-profit. They would ask, why are you all concerned about making money? Well, if we don't make money, we can't give charitable contributions and we can't make programming,

and we wouldn't be in business. When I would give speeches, invariably that would be one of the questions.

That kind of criticism was easier to take because mostly it was from people who just didn't understand business. When we sold to Viacom, one of the reasons I came out on the stage every year at BET Awards was to remind people that a Black woman ran this network, that we didn't sell out, that we didn't change the executive team, and that White people weren't running BET.

They approved my budget once a year, but I said they're never going to tell me what to program because they are not who we represent. That was a hard balance to strike, internally at Viacom and externally.

Bryant: Tell us about your current venture, The Monarchs Collective.

Lee: After George Floyd's murder, we had a lot of thought-provoking conversations with friends and family. My partner at Monarchs Collective, a woman named Rabia de Lande Long, who was an executive coach for my executives at BET, and I were talking about how all of a sudden how many companies were saying they were supportive of Black Lives Matter and that they were giving \$10 million checks to NAACP or National Urban League. Some companies were even doing beautiful ads about their commitment to racial equality.

But millennials in particular were saying, if that's true, how many Black people do you have on your board, and how many people do you

have in your C-suite? And all of a sudden, we could say “Black” again. It wasn’t “people of color.” We saw this Black man get killed on video, and his death showed us how much inequality there is in the world. So this moment came about where companies were embarrassed.

*If a company wants a Black
director, we can find one.*

I’ve been serving on boards for over 20 years, and I know the benefits of doing that. I also know it’s not difficult to find Black people to serve on boards because of everyone I know. So Rabia and I decided to start this company with a focus on changing the complexion of corporate boards. We want to be the matchmaker. If a company wants a Black director, we can find one, and we’ll train the candidate if they’ve never been on a board.

I’m really passionate about it. For me, it’s all about creating Black wealth, and if we never do that, we’ll have more George Floyds. We need to create Black wealth and pass it down to our children. We need to have our own businesses and get rid of this systematic racism that still exists after all these years.

Bryant: Why are conversations about race and racism in corporate America still such a struggle?

Lee: It’s because of the way people grew up and just not understanding each other. Because of the different communities we come from, people

are able to go through life without talking about it. You pick your friends in college, you picked your friends in graduate school, and usually they're people like you.

From our perspective as Black people, we end up being the token a lot of times, and you don't want to have to be the one always speaking up about race. I don't mind speaking up. I'm a Black woman. I know I'm going to bring it up, and I know that Black employees are going to ask me to speak to them. That's part of my responsibility. But you often wonder, when are White people going to start speaking up, too?

Part of being on a board is asking questions and challenging the CEO or whoever is presenting, and complimenting them when they do a good job. But race is still such a sensitive topic.

Morris: What career and life advice do you give to audiences of young Black college grads?

Lee: I would start with saying that they should find a company or an industry that they're passionate about. We all work so hard, and if you're not passionate about it, it's going to feel like work. And if you're interested in moving up the ladder, it's going to take a lot of hard work.

And I'd encourage them to get to know the people they work with. I always say that you should never ask someone to be your mentor because that's the kiss of death. I do have mentees, and those relationships have grown organically.

And when you get a chance to talk to someone who's in a position to maybe help you, don't be a fan girl or fan boy. I've had women get on the phone with me and take up half the time talking about how they can't believe they're talking to me. Meanwhile, I'm thinking, well, it's not going to happen again.

I see things changing around me, like Roz Brewer becoming CEO at Walgreen's, and Thasunda Brown Duckett running TIAA, and Mellody Hobson starting a \$200 million fund for Black businesses with John Rogers, her co-CEO at Ariel Investments. So I'm an optimist.