



Leading in the B-Suite

Powerful conversations about life, race and leadership



It's Important To Find Community And Affinity, However You Define Yourself

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Laurel Richie, a board director and former president of the WNBA who is now an executive mentor for [The ExCo Group](#), shared powerful lessons with me and [Rhonda Morris, the CHRO of Chevron, for our interview series with prominent Black leaders. Subscribe \[here\]\(#\) for all Leading in the B-Suite interviews.](#)

Morris: What you were like as a kid?

Richie: I was curious, kind of feisty, a bit fearless, and from the early stories that my relatives tell, I had a strong honesty streak. I was never good, and still am not very good, at keeping secrets.

I tend to call it like I see it and be straightforward in communication. I don't play games, and that goes back to when I was three or four years old. My aunts will tell me things that I said to them back then, and I think, "Oh, gosh. Wow. That's pretty direct for a little kid!"

Bryant: How did your parents influence you?

Richie: My dad was larger than life, with a great sense of humor. He was about 6'4", and he would give big bear hugs. He didn't sweat the small stuff, and he really believed in enjoying life to the fullest.

My mother was much more focused on the details. If she was trying to solve a problem, she could stay up all night trying to solve it, even while raising four kids. I'd like to think I'm a mixture of the two of

them. Tenacity often showed up in my performance reviews, and so did charisma. My parents were a model of teamwork, whether it came to disciplining us or deciding that we were going to prioritize vacations over new cars. They were completely aligned.

Where I grew up was also a foundational part of my upbringing. We lived in Shaker Heights, Ohio, and until I was in kindergarten, we were in an area that was fairly well integrated. My parents attended the March on Washington in 1963, and that experience inspired them to want to singlehandedly integrate the neighborhood we grew up in.

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They were motivated by Martin Luther King's vision for America, and so they went and found property in an all-White neighborhood and attempted to buy it, but the owners wouldn't sell it to them because we were Black. Then some friends of theirs who were White bought the property and sold it to my parents at cost, and that's where I grew up. There were no other Black students in my elementary school until I was in sixth grade.

I was probably aware of being in such a minority, but it was not a defining characteristic of our lives. My parents were focused on the family. They didn't ignore the context, but they didn't make the context central to our lives. They had a nice way of living a life of purpose

without making it feel heavy and all-consuming.

I ended up being president of the school in sixth grade. I look back on that and think that was quite an accomplishment — not just for me, but also for the entire ecosystem. When I got to middle school, it was much more of a mixed environment.

I remember being very aware for the first time of race, and very aware of assumptions that were made about who you ate lunch with, who you talked to before and after school, the kinds of clubs you chose to join. I remember feeling hurt and confused by people's judgments.

By high school I was more comfortable in my own skin, and I figured out how not to be defined by other people's perception of me, how to confront without being confrontational, and how to make choices and learn to either be happy with them or course-correct. I learned to navigate and to find my people and find my community.

Morris: Were those people typically Black people or people with whom you had shared interests?

Richie: Both. I'm a big believer in the concept of affinity and community — it's important to find affinity, however you define who you are. So that could be as a Black woman, as an African American, as a woman, as a cheerleader, or as somebody who's interested in a foreign language. You've got to find balance that feeds your soul a little bit. I was a synchronized swimmer in school, so I found affinity in that group.

Bryant: You don't meet synchronized swimmers every day.

Richie: I loved it. Our Phys Ed teacher would make elaborate costumes for us. The theme of one routine was devils, so we were swimming in red tights, a red leotard, a red cape, and on the back of the leotard was a styrofoam tail. And we wore swim caps with horns on them. I'd always enjoyed swimming, but I really liked the performance aspect of it.

I share all those details about the costume because it was about being part of a team. I learned that if we are doing a routine, I've got to bring my best self — not only for me, but for my teammates, and we only deliver when we're in sync.

My extracurricular activity in college was theater, and I am a big believer in exposing kids to theater because when you're performing, you have to emote and communicate, with words or with your physicality. You have to be mindful of how your message is being received. Are people moved by it? Are they understanding it? Are they connecting the dots?

The other practical benefit is getting comfortable being in front of people. Before every presentation, I still get butterflies and performance anxiety, but having spent a lot of time performing and being onstage, I move faster through that nervous phase to "it's showtime." There are so many professions and roles in society where you've got to be on a stage or around a conference table, and you have to show up.

Morris: Who were important mentors for you as you were starting

your career?

Richie: Right out of college, I went into the advertising business, and spent a little bit of time at Leo Burnett and then landed at Ogilvy, where I spent over 20 years. When I began in advertising, there were very few African Americans, and there were very few women, and so my early professional mentors were White men.

Early on, I was assigned to the Kimberly-Clark business and would fly to their office in Neenah, Wisconsin. I was the most junior member of the team, and at the time, Dudley Lehman was the senior member of the client team.

For some reason, he took an interest in me, even though we were total opposites. Across almost every dimension, you would say these two people have nothing in common other than they happen to be at this meeting. But we both loved strategy, we both loved marketing, and we were both really competitive and wanted to win.

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He took me under his wing. He would ask my opinion during meetings. When we'd have client-agency dinners, and everyone would be scrambling to sit next to him because he was the most senior person, he'd save the seat next to him for me.

He taught me the business. He taught me how to show up as a leader, and he invested time in me. I was named the senior account leader, and I'll never know what conversations took place, but I am 100 percent certain that he called and gave his vote of confidence in my leadership.

Bryant: Can you talk about the headwinds you faced in your career because of your race and how you dealt with them?

Richie: I feel blessed that I had a feisty dad and a mom who could find elegance and grace in seemingly small moments. As I have navigated headwinds in terms of race or gender or being the first and the only, I tapped into my dad's feistiness and my mom's grace.

As a Black woman, sometimes you encounter things that are truly discriminatory, and sometimes, because you're the first and the only, you don't know how to interpret things as they happen. They may not be discriminatory, but because it's so uncertain and so new, you don't know.

For example, I remember when I was working at Ogilvy and had moved up the ranks, the head of the agency invited me to a black-tie event. It was the first time I had been invited to join a corporate table that the agency had sponsored. It happened to be for an organization that was focused on social justice.

And I remember sitting in my office kind of stewing. I wanted to feel great that I had finally been invited into this inner sanctum, but I also wondered, why wasn't this invitation for The Met or the US Open?

Why is my first invitation to join the senior ranks at an intimate event associated with a cause?

I went into the president's office and said, "I'm really conflicted. I'm so flattered to be asked to come. I'm really looking forward to it. I love the table you've put together. But I'd like to have a conversation about why this was the opportunity that you chose to invite me because part of it feels great and part of it doesn't feel so good."

As you would expect, he said that it had nothing to do with race and that it didn't even cross his mind. That didn't quite ring true to me — how could it not have crossed his mind? When you are in the minority, there sometimes are a different set of questions that go through your mind: how did I get here, what does it mean, do they really want me at every gala table or only a select few of the gala tables?

Morris: Those are the extra burdens you face being the first and only in a lot of contexts.

Richie: It is really important for all of us to take care of ourselves as we navigate our careers. What that means for me is sometimes I will have to say no to opportunities to educate, to mentor, to invest my time because I need to restore myself and get back to equilibrium.

I have at times felt in my career that there's this whole other dimension of being the first, being the only, being a role model, setting an example, educating others, serving on panels, talking to people, advising HR, and being part of almost every recruiting team because

they needed women and African Americans on them.

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There have been times when the burden has felt too much, and I've learned that it is okay to say, "I'm going to pass on this one. Give me a minute to catch my breath, and I'll be right back at it." And that that doesn't make me any less committed or any less passionate or any less engaged. It's just a moment to pause and refuel to get ready to go back.

Bryant: You've had some interesting career pivots — you moved from advertising to a C-suite role at Girl Scouts USA to running the WNBA. What is your playbook to moving into brand new jobs?

Richie: I collect sayings that inspire me. One is Oscar Wilde's "Be yourself; everyone else is already taken." I've learned to focus on being the best I can be and not to waste time trying to be like somebody else.

I am motivated by Gandhi's "Be the change you wish to see in the world," so I am drawn to opportunities where I feel like I can make an impact not just on the business or the organization but also the next generation and the world at large.

Another favorite expression is "Begin anywhere." I'm often intimidated by new opportunities or big projects, but "begin anywhere" is a good reminder to just get started. If you can write the first draft, for example,

editing is so much easier than writing.

Morris: Any other advice you would give specifically to young Black professionals?

Richie: Be ready. Do the work — whether that's education, self-reflection, networking — and get yourself ready for when an opportunity arises. It may be a stretch, it may be daunting, and it may be a left turn when you thought you were going to turn right.

But if you've put in the time to hone your craft and build your network and understand your personal brand and how you want to contribute to the world, then you can focus on the opportunity and not the work that's needed to get ready for the opportunity.

It is also really important to know who you are, what's important to you, and how you want to be a force for good. We're not going to be on this earth forever, and I think we should all strive to leave things better than we find them. Everybody's going to contribute to that differently, so how do we each find our unique way of making that contribution?

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