



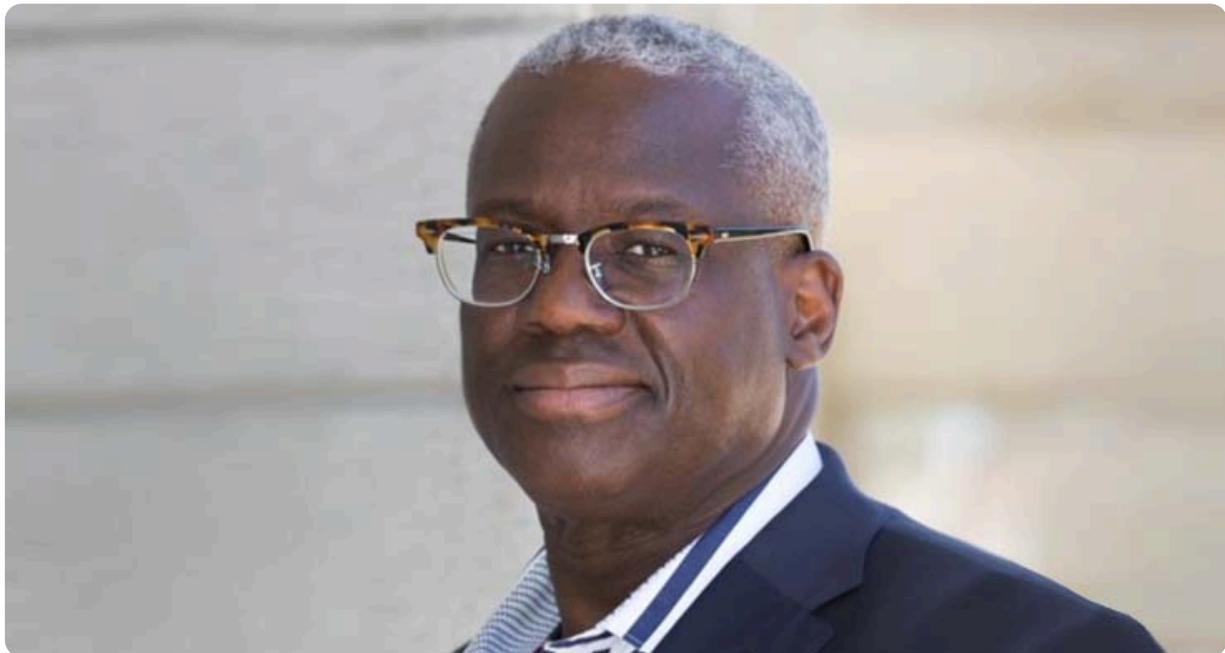
Leading in the B-Suite

Powerful conversations about life, race and leadership

 Biweekly newsletter

We Need To Call Things What They Are If We're Going To Ever Make Progress

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James D. White, a veteran business leader, board director, and author of the forthcoming book, "Anti-Racist Leadership: How to Transform Corporate Culture in a Race-Conscious World," 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: Tell us about your early years and the important influences for you.

White: I'm a native of St. Louis, Missouri. I'm the product of Rose and James White, and they have shaped everything I've done across my career. I came from humble beginnings, a working-class family. I was the first member of my family to graduate from college.

I was not the first member of my family to attend college, but I was the first to graduate. It ended up being an important responsibility for me that I finish that part of the journey for the family. Education changes the trajectory of families for generations, and it certainly has been that for our family.

An important part of my story occurred in elementary school. In fourth grade, I was in an overcrowded public-school classroom with about 30 kids. We never had a permanent teacher that year, and we were taught by maybe four or five different substitute teachers. I ended up being tracked to a slow 5th grade class.

My mom demonstrated the kind of leadership that I aspire to show, with empathy and action. She shepherded me through that experience. I was an introverted kid, a polite kid. But we worked through that year, and it ended up being a transformative experience. I ended up two years later being offered scholarships to prep schools on the East Coast.

I also played some sports growing up, including basketball and football. Another pivotal moment for me happened when I couldn't make the varsity basketball team, and I ended up on the debate team instead. One of the foundational skills that I developed early on was the ability to communicate and to problem solve and to leverage data to explain complex ideas.

I was part of the INROADS pre-business program, so I had internships before going to college and additional internships for most of my college years.

Bryant: What was your first leadership role once you started your career?

White: At the age of 24, I was managing a team of sales folks in the Minute Maid division of the Coca-Cola Company. The average age of the people who worked for me would have been 40-plus. But I learned early on that you lead individually, and you get to people's discretionary effort by how much you care and how much you listen and how much you understand what their ambitions and passions are. And that group helped coach me as I came up to speed as a leader in that role.

My biggest challenge early on came from the fact that my first sales territory was in the southwestern and southeastern parts of Missouri and in some parts of Arkansas. And in my sales territory in Arkansas was the headquarters of the Ku Klux Klan. That had to be removed from my sales territory, of course. As a young person, I didn't think much about it at the time, but much of my sales territory in Southwest and Southeast Missouri would have been "sundown towns."

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back in time.*

And sundown towns are where Black and Brown people probably shouldn't be after dark. I remember one particular sales call where the person said to me, "James, we heard you were in town, and we would suggest that you're not in town after dark." And this was somebody who was trying to be helpful.

I'm a kid from the city of St. Louis, so this was a cultural environment that was unfamiliar to me. The summer before taking that first sales job, I was in New York City doing an internship. So it was almost like I had gone back in time. I learned a ton about people, and foundationally people are all the same if you get to the core of it.

Morris: What were some of the other big breaks that led to more senior leadership roles?

White: I learned not to give up at the first sign of challenge. There was

a significant moment in my career when we were transforming Ralston Purina, which is now called Nestle Purina, where I worked for almost 16 years. The company was going through a re-alignment, and there were going to be six really important jobs in the commercial selling organization.

I had had, up to that point, a pretty successful run. In my heart and in my head, I knew that there might be one or two people better than me for one of those six jobs, but there couldn't be six other people in this company who were more qualified than me. But fast forward, and there ended up being six other people in those roles.

I ended up in a role that was almost an afterthought. And the big lesson for me was about controlling your own fate. I was disappointed over one weekend and then showed up for the assignment that I received that Monday, ready to go.

As fate and luck would have it, that role was working with these emerging market companies that included Walmart and Sam's Club and Costco, and none of the big supermarket retailers there were predominant in those days. So you can imagine how the story played out. It looked at first like I'd missed out on the big job, and that I was being banished to the worst possible opportunity.

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again and again and again.*

But I dug in and learned about these emerging retailers, and it worked out that they were growing to become the dominant part of the marketplace, and the rest is history. Of the six people that ended up in those larger roles, most of them ultimately ended up reporting to me within the next four or five years.

But this also speaks to what Black executives often face, where you have to prove yourself again and again and again. Over my entire career, I've never been promoted on potential. I've never had anybody come to me and say, "Well, James, you did a great job at X, and we can envision you doing Y." For my first appointment as Vice President, I was already running 70 to 80 percent of the business, so there was no risk in promoting me.

But the bigger lesson for me is about not giving up too soon. I've watched lots of people move from company to company, job to job, too soon. You need resilience to really fight through what might seem like a challenge but that could end up being a big opportunity.

Bryant: Can you talk a little bit more about other headwinds you've faced in your career because of your race?

White: There are unseen challenges that you're not aware of. I can remember another occasion at Purina when I was in a sales support role, which was a grooming assignment to go into a regional management assignment. I remember one of the leaders saying, "Well, James, we don't know enough about you." And I'd been in the assignment for 13 months, doing what I thought was a stellar job.

I assumed that if I'm showing up every day and doing a great job, then you're getting to know me. But golf was a large part of how people socialized outside of the office, and I'm not a golfer. Company rituals can end up being barriers to people who come from different backgrounds.

Morris: Why is it so hard to talk about and address issues of race and racism in corporate America?

White: I actually think it's improved tremendously. We're having conversations openly now that we couldn't have had even a decade ago in corporate America. The issue of race can be polarizing for people in corporate America. But a couple things have changed. The racial reckoning has really changed the discussion.

I'm about to publish a book, "[Anti-Racist Leadership](#)," that I wrote with my daughter Krista. She crafted the first paragraph of the book, which I want to read to you: "This book is not apolitical. This book is explicitly anti-racist, pro-black, pro-LGBTQ, and feminist. This book takes the stance that black lives matter, that LGBTQ rights are human rights, that people of all abilities deserve respect and access, and that people of all genders have the right to sovereignty over their bodies and identities. This book acknowledges that capitalism is built on a foundation of systemic racism and that, to have a truly diverse, equitable, and inclusive work environment, we must acknowledge the historic and present injustices faced by marginalized people."

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The point is that's probably not a way I would have started a book prior to 2020. My daughter was insistent that it's no longer time to split things down the middle, and that we need to call things what they are if we're going to ever make progress. Another change is that younger employees are demanding that leaders get this, and they are making career choices based on which companies do or don't. I think leaders are going to disadvantage themselves if they don't pay attention to this work.

If I think about my work as a board director, everybody is focused on ESG these days, particularly the S, the social part, of ESG. There's no way to avoid addressing those issues today. And the best companies are building capabilities and processes around that work.

Bryant: What career and life advice do you share with young Black professionals?

White: You've got to be a lifelong learner. You've got to invest in building capabilities. One of the things I learned early on is that if you pick any topic and study it for five years intently, you can make it an area of expertise for yourself.

Sales and communication skills end up being foundational for everyone, no matter what discipline you work in, because you're going

to have to be able to communicate ideas, either internally to teams and parts of the organization, or externally to customers and potential partners.

And I don't think there's ever been a better time to be Black in corporate America. There is more access to opportunities, and I would just encourage people to make sure you find companies that share your values. I'd look critically at the representation from the boardroom to the C-suite, because I think that's a good indication of how you might experience the company.

And maybe the final piece of advice is to really find your passion, because when you can play to your passion in a corporate environment, you're going to accelerate your odds of being successful. And I would encourage people to take a few more risks than I was afforded to find the right overlap between their passions and the opportunities.