



## Build A Network Of People Who Are Going To Hold You Accountable And Lift You Up

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**Troy LeMaile-Stovall**, chief executive of TEDCO, a Maryland-based state agency that supports technology companies, particularly early-stage and life sciences businesses, shared powerful lessons on building a supportive network, navigating bias, and mentoring with purpose in this Leading in the B-Suite interview with Rhonda Morris and The ExCo Group's Adam Bryant.

**Morris:** Can you share some important early influences for you that shaped who you are today?

**LeMaile-Stovall:** I grew up in Houston, in an area called South Park and Sunnyside. I also grew up Catholic, so being a Black Catholic kid in Texas was about as much of an outlier as you can be. But the church had a big influence on my life. I went to Catholic school and was an altar boy. I even wanted to be a priest.

My mom was also a huge influence. My parents got divorced when I was in the sixth grade. Back then, getting divorced in the Catholic church was tantamount to going to hell, so I figured that I was going to hell. I hid the fact that my parents were divorced from my best friends for over a year.

Then my sister had sickle cell—a horrific disease that affects the Black community. I probably spent more than a quarter of my life in a hospital waiting room because my sister was always in the

hospital. We were born a year and a day apart, but she was two grade levels behind me because she had to spend a whole year in the hospital.

Through everything, my mom would always say, “Troy, the Good Lord has put you on this planet for one reason and one reason only, and that is to make a difference in one person’s life. The challenge is you do not know when that one person is going to come into your life or what you’re going to do with them, so you have to make a difference in everyone’s life you touch.” Everything I’ve done has been to make that difference to somebody.

That was her version of the ‘Golden Rule.’ I recognize that my cup overfloweth, and when a cup overflows, it can do one of two things — it can go to the floor, or it can flow to somebody else’s cup. So, I take it upon myself to make sure it flows into somebody else’s cup, because of what my mom said.

**Bryant: Were you in leadership roles early on?**

**LeMaile-Stovall:** I went to a Catholic all-boys high school in Houston called St. Thomas High School. I was All-State in track and in cross country. I was the first Black person to finish as the number two salutatorian at my high school. I was also the first Black person to be elected student body president, and I got elected by the widest margin in the almost 100-year history of the school.

I’ll never forget the day after I got elected. The priests were the principals there, and I was close to most of the priests. After I was elected president, the principal called me down to his office because the tradition was that the new student body president always delivered the morning prayers the day after the election. He said to me, “Congratulations, but we’ve gotten a number of phone calls about your election from alums.”

He basically told me that I needed to step down because the alumni were upset that a Black kid had been elected president. I sat there, listened to him, and said, “Is there anything else we need to talk about?” He said, “No.” I said, “Can I say the morning prayer, sir?” He said, “You can.” I said, “Thank you very much.” I walked out, and we never had that conversation again.

**Morris:** What about early leadership lessons in your career?

**LeMaile-Stovall:** I was an engineering honors student at Southern Methodist University and did a co-op program. Then I got an amazing opportunity to be one of the first Black students to get a master’s degree in computer science at Stanford. After I graduated, I ended up going to work for Southwestern Bell to lead what at that time was the largest 911 installation in the country. I had over 100 police, fire, and ambulance units that I had to deal with.

During that time, I was 26 and had a crew of about eight people who had kids older than I was at the time. I was given an award for our performance, and then the company sent me to Sallisaw, Oklahoma, near the Arkansas border, where I had about a 1,000-square-mile territory.

No one would rent to me or let me buy a home, so I ended up commuting to Sallisaw from Oklahoma City, about a 90-minute drive each way. I was dating a young lady who was half Black, half White, though she could pass for being White. I had asked her to come out there to visit me, but that was a major-league mistake. I was called the n-word during that job more times than I had been called in my life.

You wouldn't believe the depth of poverty I saw in that part of Oklahoma. It was beyond anything I could imagine. These are mostly White people—many were using their dryers to stay warm in winter. I kept telling my boss, "I just don't think this is going to work." I had turned the team around. They had been the worst-performing team in the state by a long shot based on the different metrics we used. In six months, I turned them around, and we were the best-performing team in the state.

But it wasn't working. I was tired of the commute. When they finally gave me a new job, my crew of twelve White guys threw me a party. There was one guy in particular who I had fought with early on—he made me so mad that at one point I told him he had to read these two books on Malcolm X and Martin Luther King, even led the party. He and I became genuine friends.

What I learned is that so many of us, all of us, me included, form perceptions about people without getting to know the actual person. So much of what's happening in this country and the world is because people have formed perceptions about groups of people as opposed to individuals. When you get to know the person, that changes. That's what happened with that guy I had fought with on my team. Once we got past that, I found out how genuinely great a person he was, and he found out how great a person I was.

**Bryant:** Any thoughts on the DEI backlash that we are seeing right now?

**LeMaile-Stovall:** I think the DEI movement did everyone a disservice. The problem is actively using the term "DEI." We've got to start saying the words — diversity, equity, and inclusion, and stop minimizing it down to three letters. In the process, we've also minimized the word merit. We assumed everybody knew that this was about merit, and so we didn't say it.

By not saying it, we've allowed others to adopt the mantra that merit is not part of the conversation. Merit is the minimum requirement — it's the beginning and end of the conversation. Nobody talked about it at all, so now it's been turned on its head like it was not a factor at all, when in fact, you wouldn't be there otherwise. People are starting to realize that this whole conversation wasn't just about gender and race. It was about socioeconomics, regardless of skin color.

**Morris:** Can you talk about the headwinds you've faced in your life?

**LeMaile-Stovall:** I'll share a funny story. I drove from Chicago to Stanford University to start my master's degree there. I was driving with a friend who had a young man she was seeing who went to Berkeley. I had my old "hooptie" car. For folks who don't know the expression, hooptie is a real messed-up car — I used to say my hooptie went from zero to 60 in 2.5 days.

We were driving close to Denver late at night, and there was smoke coming from the car. My car broke down and I called AAA to tow us into Denver. The next day, I took it to a Toyota dealership, and they told me it's going to be \$5,000 to fix the car, which was maybe worth \$1,500 on a good day.

Turns out the sales guy at the dealership is a graduate of Southern Methodist University, where I had just finished my undergraduate degree. While at Stanford, I was going to be part of this Bell Labs program that was paying me 75 percent of my salary while I attended school. Bell Labs faxed over a letter confirming that I was part of this program, and I was able to get a new Toyota Camry.

So, we decided to head to Las Vegas on the way to California, and we're driving through Utah at 2 a.m. with a car full of stuff. We were speeding and got pulled over — not by one cop, not by two cops,

but three highway patrol police. I started explaining our story, but the cops were beginning to suspect that we had stolen the car.

This was pre-Internet, and because the car was so new, the paperwork hadn't been filed yet. They were probably going to take us to jail, but they were able to track down and wake up the guy who sold us the car. So, they gave us a speeding ticket, and we went on our way to Las Vegas. I have more stories like that.

**Bryant: You must get tired of dealing with the headwinds.**

**LeMaile Stovall:** I'm the first Black CEO at TEDCO. I was the first Black to lead my high school. I was one of the first Black students to get a master's degree at Stanford. I was one of the first Blacks to go through the leadership development program at Southwestern Bell. I'm tired of being the "first Black..." I'm tired of being a designation for me or for anybody. But my faith keeps me going. My friends keep me going.

I've been involved for decades with efforts to get more people of color and women into engineering and science fields. Years ago, I spoke to a group of deans and chancellors at engineering schools at HBCUs. They started off the meeting by sharing the numbers, which were getting worse. There were fewer Black students and fewer women going into STEM fields.

I literally walked out of the meeting and just left. I was so frustrated by the fact that all these efforts that I was involved with had been for naught because the numbers were getting worse. I had to talk to my friends about it, and one of my dearest friends, who knew my mom, said, "Troy, don't forget what your Mama told you. One person. And we know you've helped one." That's kept me going. It's about one. No matter how tired I get, it's about one.

**Morris:** Where are you on the optimism-pessimism scale about progress in this country?

**LeMaile-Stovall:** This is a time of reckoning. I hate that Kamala Harris lost because it would have been great to see a Black woman be the president. But in some ways, the country needs this reckoning, and we wouldn't have gone through this reckoning if she were the president. This is a reckoning that's hard, it's painful, and people's lives are getting upended. I'm sitting here in Maryland. It is brutal. We're on the front lines of this thing.

But there have been similar moments in history when people wondered whether they were going to get through this. I bet people asked that during the Civil War. And they asked it in the 1960s, when people were marching and getting killed. Black folks were brought over here. Nobody asked us. We were the original illegal immigrants. We weren't even legal. We've been through that. We have been through Jim Crow. We have been through "40 acres and a mule." We have been through the 60s. This, too, shall pass.

If nothing else, one thing we've got as Black folks is churches. We know how to build churches, and faith is going to carry us through this. I believe that. And I have to believe that for my children, who are in their twenties.

**Bryant: If you were speaking to an audience of young Black professionals, what career and life advice would you share with them?**

**LeMaile-Stovall:** I'll go back to the advice that my mother shared with me. If your cup overfloweth, make sure it's flowing into somebody else's cup. This journey can sometimes feel like it's a lonely one, and it can be, but you don't have to be alone.

You've got to learn how to build a network of people around you who are going to hold you accountable and lift you up. I tell my kids this. You will only rise to the highest level of the lowest level of people you keep around you. If you hang out with a bunch of thugs, you're going to be a great thug. But if you hang out with a bunch of millionaires, you're going to be a millionaire, as well.