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**Leading in the B-Suite**

Powerful conversations about life, race and leadership

 Biweekly newsletter

# Real Listening is Not Hierarchical. You Never Know Who Has the Best Idea.

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*[Note: This article was published as part of our original*

*"Leadership Moments" series. The series has since been changed to "Leading in the B-Suite" for a new focus on conversations about race in corporate America. The first interview in that series is [here](#).]*

***Kathleen Dyer**, one of our mentors at **The ExCo Group**, has a long track record of building diverse teams. In our interview, she provides important reminders for all leaders about the importance of listening closely to everyone on your team for good ideas, and how to bring out the best contributions from everyone around the table.*

**Q. In your experience, what have you come to appreciate is the X factor that separates the very best leaders from everyone else?**

A. The one thing that stands out for me, because it worked for me my entire leadership career, is being willing to listen to others and having an open mind for learning new ways of doing things. Also, recognizing that real listening is not hierarchical. Sometimes the most junior person around the table has the best idea, and as a leader, you have to be able to say, "That's a good idea, let's go with it."

The other important thing is to recognize that everybody is watching you as the leader, and if you are not the catalyst for the new direction or for the change that the organization has decided to make, then you're a deterrent. You also have to really influence and leverage others across the organization to make things happen. To do that, you've got to build and develop those future leaders by giving them space for expression

and for taking smaller steps into bigger roles. It's also important to embrace a collaborative posture in order to foster a team approach to challenging and sometimes disruptive business environments.

**Q. What do you consider your most important leadership lessons?**

A. I have found through the years that I've been able to build, lead and direct very strong multi-ethnic and multi-disciplinary teams. I'm very good at that and have been recognized for that throughout my career. Part of the reasons is that I was born and raised in the US Virgin Islands, which is very multiracial, very multiethnic. If you grow up in that type of environment, it seems natural to you.

I'm very proud of the work that I've been able to do in terms of getting the right people to the table, and getting them focused on where we need to go, irrespective of ethnicity or race. I recognized the importance of this because of my demographics. Throughout my career I found that people in senior and executive leadership positions would sometimes make judgments about my capabilities based on my racial background.

I wanted to be sure that I didn't carry on that perspective and behavior. So for teams I'm leading, it doesn't matter what you look like or where you're from, so long as you are consistent with the values that we as an organization have and you have the skill set and capabilities and experiences we need.

**Q. What is your playbook for pulling together and driving a team?**

A. It goes back to what I said earlier about how, as a leader, you have to be willing to listen and be open to different ideas and different perspectives. Beyond that willingness to listen, it's about mentoring and coaching people who have high potential but may have some personal gaps in their development.

My first Master's degree was in education, and I started out my career as a teacher of emotionally disturbed children. That gave me insights into how to delve into that next psychological layer. I'm able to pull that out and provide some perspective on it to help shape my mentoring and coaching.

It's about being able to readily grasp insight into the individual and then help them to really move to the next level. That's not just only for their business mindset and business aspirations but also their personal and professional mindset and aspirations.

That whole psychological framework is something that got packaged with my second Master's degree, in information systems, which is very different, because with information and computer systems, everything is either a zero or one.

Combining a strong systems and logical background focused on business results with a strong behavioral and aspirational psychological framework have been really invaluable overtime — being able to systematically and logically look at things, and at the same time gain insight into the psychological and behavioral aspects of the human condition is quite useful and impactful.

**Q. What were some other important early influences for you?**

A. My family was a big one. My dad adored me. He was a very bright person and he saw me as bright, too. And when I was an older teenager and in my twenties my dad would often consult with me on important decisions that he was considering.

I grew up in a family environment where we would sit around the dinner table and everybody would have an opinion about something or other. The important thing was that you had an opportunity to express and test those opinions.

That family environment, with both my immediate family and my extended family, was a major factor in terms of my perspective on life and how I approach things. It put me in a space where I'm willing to accept people at face value because you never know what they have to share and what you can learn.

Another big lesson came early on in life. There was this guy when I was growing up who was the island drunk. He was drunk all the time, and he would be sleeping on the street. I remember one day being downtown and walking along with my mother, and my mother said, "You know, he wasn't always like that. I went to school with him. He was the brightest guy in our class."

It's something I would never forget. That really shaped my perspective in terms of how I look at people. It shaped my perspective that you just can't look at the external aspects of a person and make judgments about

who that person is. You have to be willing to look and listen a bit more closely.