



**Leading in the B-Suite**

Powerful conversations about life, race and leadership

# "The Only Way Something Gets Better Is If You Get on the Other Side of it."

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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](#).]*

*The pandemic has created daily tests of resilience. As a senior executive at JPMorgan Chase during both 9/11 and the economic crash of 2008, [Ellen Murphy](#), now one of our managing directors at [The ExCo Group](#), learned powerful lessons about how leaders rise to the occasion in times of crisis. Highlights of our conversation below.*

**Q. You were in leadership roles after 9/11 and during the financial meltdown of 2008. I imagine you learned a lot about resilience during those crises.**

A. Yes, but for me, the most difficult experience for me happened a few decades ago, when my 28-year-old brother was killed in a plane crash. He was a pilot for Business Express, which was a Delta commuter airline. It was my brother and two other pilots — there were no passengers on the plane — and they went down eight miles off the coast of Block Island after the engine separated in flight because of faulty mounts. They searched for three weeks, and sadly, we never recovered our loved ones. The crash happened three days after Christmas in 1991. I was 31, and so at a young age, I learned what a crisis was. That was my personal tragedy.

So when 9/11 happened – I was supposed to be in downtown Manhattan that morning, but I had stayed in midtown for a conference call — I was so fortunate that this crisis was not my personal tragedy, and I was more concerned about others. I knew all my family was fine and my immediate friends were all fine, so on 9/12, I got on my normal 5:55 a.m. train from Connecticut and went into Manhattan. I think it was just me and the conductor. When I got to the city, it was eerily quiet. No people, no cars. There was nothing, and I started to think that it was probably a bad idea to come in.

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structure often just disappear."*

But those of us who made it into JPMorgan headquarters that day went into crisis mode. One of my early observations was that when a crisis occurs, hierarchy and the org structure often just disappear. There were people who didn't come in and couldn't come for a long time because it was their tragedy, but you also see leaders step up to fill the spaces that might not have normally been theirs. All those lines blur, but people started taking control amid all the uncertainty. For the entire week after Sept. 11, many people still worried there were going to be more attacks.

But the leaders who were effective in those moments gave us hope and also gave everybody work to do. We were putting teams together and we were having meetings every hour. When you're in crisis mode, you don't say, "We'll catch up at the end of the day." Sometimes we met

every half hour. There was a military precision to it, and we created milestones for making progress.

**Q. And then just seven years later, the financial crisis hit, and you lived through that as a senior executive at JPMorgan.**

A. I remember looking out my window, and Bear Stearns was next door to us. It was St. Patrick's Day that particular Monday, and the bands were all lined up, getting ready for their parade. At the same time, people were coming out of the Bear Stearns building in tears, carrying boxes with their things. It was just like the collision of two different worlds.

We had to go into crisis mode with that, too, because if you were in finance, the world was failing. Lehman was failing, and you felt the hole in your chest from everything going down. It was a bigger leadership moment for me, because I had 350 people working for me, compared to the team of ten I was managing when 9/11 happened.

**Q. What was your playbook?**

A. Some of it was my underlying playbook that I always used — motivate people, support them, give them honest feedback, give them clear direction. I did those more, but I also said to people that it's okay to breathe, it's okay to laugh, every now and then. I had to keep my eyes open as a leader and know when to back off and give them breathing space because they might have been understandably shutting down.

Even in a crisis when you're having SWAT team meetings every half hour, every hour, you have to have some level of recognition for people and what they're going through. You bring them snacks or whatever the moment allows for. And I always ensured that people understood what we were getting accomplished.

*"You have to give hope, but there's got to be some truth to it."*

There was a milestone list, and even if it was just small stuff, we would check things off. As the list grew shorter, the crisis felt more manageable. There was a progression of accomplishment that I think is important to show. Otherwise, people can start feeling hopeless and overwhelmed and that nothing is getting resolved. You have to give hope, but there's got to be some truth to it.

**Q. And so how did you balance the positive and the negative?**

A. After 9/11, those conversations might have included a little bit of "hope padding," because my ability to see through that was no greater than anybody else's. There's the general hope that you give to the whole team when you're giving the broader pep talk, but maybe there are some people who individually need more "hope padding" – not everybody's in the same place.

As a leader, you have to be able to recognize who needs more hope

padding so they can get back in the game. You have to be on the lookout for people who are checking out to some degree. They weren't able to complete what they were doing, or they weren't necessarily being part of the team. You could just see them diminishing emotionally compared to the others. Then it would be up to me to reach out to them to have a talk and say, what is it? Sometimes it was the work, and sometimes it was their own personal situation.

**Q. Having lived through those two crises, what feels different about this one?**

A. This is much more epic, I think. 9/11 was epic in and of itself. Obviously, we felt our pain here in New York City, and many people felt vulnerable because they figured that if it can happen to New York, it can happen anywhere. This pandemic is just more global. But looking ahead, a key question for leaders is going to be, what are the lessons learned from this and how do you make sure those lessons are implemented rather than just being put on the shelf?

**Q. Just going back to you personally, had you built up some resilience before that tragedy with your brother?**

A. I had a life of zero tragedy or hardship up until that moment with my brother. Nothing horrible had happened to me, and I had lived a very good, happy life with no strife. Was it the discipline of my upbringing and having the good fortune of having parents who helped prepare me for it? I would like to think so.

But after we heard the news that his plane went down, I had to live moment-to-moment, from breath-to-breath. The airline and the FAA were coming to us every two hours because there were boats looking for the wreckage and the pilots, and we had the press knocking on the door and there were updates on the TV. It was all so surreal.

That experience became my lens for every other challenge I've faced. My mindset is that the quicker I go through the bad stuff, the quicker I'll come out on the other side. Some people have more trouble facing things, but the only way something gets better is if you get on the other side of it, preferably relatively whole. If you get immobilized in the crisis, it's simply not going to get better.