

"I Can Be Outspoken To Challenge A System That's Extremely Unfair."

Published on November 10, 2020



Adam Bryant [in](#)

Managing Director at The ExCo Group (formerly Merryck & Co. Americas)

***Don Peebles**, chairman and CEO of The Peebles Corporation, a national real-estate investment and development company, shared powerful insights for the interview series that **Rhonda Morris**, the chief human resources officer of Chevron, and I are doing with Black leaders. The themes we explore include race in corporate America and what should be done to increase the ranks of Black executives in the C-Suite (thus the B-Suite name of our series). Honored to have Don's voice in the series.*

Morris: Who were the key influences earlier in your life that

shaped who you are today?

Peebles: The biggest influence was my mother. She had me when she was 19 years old, and my parents were divorced when I was five, so my mother was the primary breadwinner and the head of our household. She didn't go to college after high school, and she started off as a secretary and then got into real estate sales almost by accident.

She was buying a home for us in a subdivision in suburban Maryland, and during the closing she saw the line item for what the broker had made for not doing a lot of work, and she thought she could do that, as well. She went to night school to get her real estate sales license. Within a year, we moved to Detroit where one of her sisters lived and she started as a real estate agent. Within a couple of years, she started her own real estate brokerage.

After a successful four-year brokerage run, Detroit was in deep trouble economically in 1973, and we moved back to Washington D.C., and she was offered a job as a sales director – they hired her after a telephone interview — for a real-estate project. I saw discrimination for the first time. When she showed up, they saw she was Black, and they didn't give her the job, saying that the market and sales staff were not ready for a Black woman to be the sales director.

*It became my goal early on to
create more affirmative
environments of opportunity.*

She ended up getting a job at Fannie Mae as a secretary. While we were in Detroit, she took college courses and began to build her academic credentials. Somebody at Fannie Mae found out she had a real-estate background and they promoted her to an entry-level executive position. She eventually started her own real estate appraisal business.

The impact on me at an early age of seeing how women, especially Black women, are discriminated against on a constant basis, and the barriers that they have to overcome, made me want to work hard to protect myself and my mother and ultimately my own children from an experience like that. It became my goal early on to create more affirmative environments of opportunity.

Bryant: What was a key pivot point in your life that set your career on a different trajectory?

Peebles: I had a chance to spend my last two years of high school working on Capitol Hill as a page and an intern, and there I met many of the most transformational Black political leaders and worked for some of them, like John Conyers, Charlie Rangel, and Ron Dellums. They were big influences on me, as were Shirley Chisholm and Barbara Jordan.

I went to school on the top floor of the Library of Congress. I had classes from 6:00 until 10:30 in the morning, and then from 11:00 on, I worked at the United States Capitol. Part of my graduation ceremony was held in the Rose Garden with President Carter. It was an inspiring experience.

I went to Rutgers to study to be a doctor. After my freshman year, I changed my mind and I went back to Washington, D.C., and started selling real estate and I learned the appraisal business working for my mother. I had been involved in politics — I volunteered as a teenager to help Marion Barry's campaign for mayor of D.C. and then, after returning from Rutgers, I held two events for his re-election campaign.

I became one of the most powerful real estate players in Washington, D.C., in my twenties.

He had come out of the civil rights movement and was co-founder with John Lewis of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee. After Marion won re-election, I got a call asking me if I wanted to be a member of the real estate commission. So at 23, I was appointed to one of the most influential real estate boards in the city.

And then the following year, Barry appointed me chairperson and I ran that board for four years. I also built an appraisal business at the same time, and so that was my first big break. Because Barry gave me the opportunity, I became one of the most powerful real estate players in Washington, D.C., in my twenties.

Morris: What were some of the headwinds that you faced because of race and what were the tailwinds that helped you overcome them?

Peebles: Some of the White developers used the media as a weapon against me because there was this presumption that I didn't belong in my role. Nearly every major business person in the area had contributed to Marion Barry's campaign, and they certainly gave him more money than I could afford.

In some cases, they were losing deals to me, and so they figured that because Marion Barry and I were Black, and because I supported him and he mentored me, that something was wrong here. And I learned to count on the fact that the media would be an opponent of mine.

I had to change the rules. At that point, I was watching how Donald Trump was using the media as a fan club. He seemingly could do no wrong at the time, despite some of his business failings. As long as the media has this paternalistic view of how they're going to treat Black people, I was not going to fit their model. So from that point on, I pursued the media. "Hey, you want to look at my deal? Here you go." They stopped being so interested after that.

Morris: Were you angry about the way you were treated?

Peebles: I used it as a tool to fuel me more to win. I realized that certain people don't like me. When I'm out socially somewhere, and I see one of my peers in the industry, they sometimes will try to get away from me. I don't have any issue with them, but they had some issue with me.

Perhaps it's because I spoke out about the discriminatory behavior in our industry. But I'm going to speak about it more. I'm going to win

more. They'll be less happy, but I don't care. I'm working for a greater purpose, to provide opportunities to people who have not gotten a fair share of opportunities.

*I'm going to speak about it
more. I'm going to win more.*

And I can be outspoken to challenge a system that's extremely unfair, and systemically so. White entrepreneurs, especially in real estate, which is an industry with extremely low educational and intellectual barriers to entry, can bat .250 to .350 and be worth hundreds of millions of dollars. A Black person batting .250 to .350 will not get out of the gate, period. That's the double standard, and I find that offensive and un-American. It's absurd when our country says that we've got a meritocracy, and that everyone has the same opportunities.

Bryant: Race in America is still an uncomfortable topic for many people. What are your suggestions on how to change the narrative?

Peebles: Unfortunately, change doesn't come without confrontation. If anything showed us that, it was the civil rights movements of the 1960s. When television footage showed the conduct of the police to the rest of America, the nation was embarrassed and it made people outraged. The same thing is happening now after everyone saw the full video of the killing of George Floyd.

But we still have absurdly broad wealth and income disparities between

Blacks and Whites. People see that and live that every day and they've had it. Then you add the fact that this wonderful capitalist democracy that we all celebrate across the globe was built with free labor by people who were kidnapped from their home country and brought here.

Our ancestors spent 246 years of slavery building this country and they were precluded from learning to read or advance ourselves at all academically or intellectually. And then 100 years followed that of extreme oppression and segregation and abuse. Then we had 50 years of a kind of second-class citizenship. And the results and statistics show it. I think that this conflict is going to continue until there are major structural changes.

*This conflict is going to
continue until there are major
structural changes.*

The solution is simple — that all these corporations, especially banks and private equity funds and so forth, ought to do business with Black people just like they do business with White people. They should say that they are going to deploy their capital in ways that reflect our country's demographics. And it's important to note that a lot of the money that they are investing comes from public employee and union pension systems whose ranks are disproportionately filled with minorities and women.

Morris: And what do you think needs to be done to increase the

representation of Black executives in the C-suite?

Peebles: It starts off with where you recruit from and what is considered a premier college and university. Why aren't Harvard and Morehouse considered equivalent? Race. They're both established institutions with a long history and some impressive alumni. But if companies are recruiting only from Ivy League schools, then people of color are considered outliers. The system is not geared to help them get them into these roles.

Companies have to broaden their search and look for the most talented people in different schools. But when it comes to economics, most people don't want to share opportunities. They don't want to share their money. Most people who are running these corporations and managing these firms have convinced themselves that they got to where they are on the merits and that they are the most competent.

Bryant: After the killing of George Floyd, there were so many announcements from companies about commitments and pledges and listening tours. What was your reaction to them?

Peebles: Too little, too late, and it's the same old paternalistic view, with problems that are being dealt with in a philanthropic way. Even when there's an opportunity to make money and build some wealth in the Black community, that's taken away and given to not-for-profits because of an attitude that we're not going to help you learn how to fish to feed yourself. Instead, we're just going to give you a little bit of fish, and by the way, whatever you get, you had better be happy with it,

because we're giving this to you.

The country is 13 percent African American. Banks should make it their goal to give 13 percent of their real estate loans to Black developers and asset managers. But companies say that they want to work with "the most qualified." Really? How do you define that? Because some people had a big head start, we'll never catch them.

*Businesses should deploy their
resources in an equitable
manner.*

Businesses should deploy their resources in an equitable manner, but that's not what I'm seeing right now. There's no real meaningful desire to change things. They just want it to go away. But the reality is it's not going away, and that's what scares people.

Morris: What advice would you give to early career young Black professionals, and is it the same now as it would have been ten or fifteen years ago?

Peebles: More of our young people need to go into the business world. They need to understand what they're up against, but also recognize that we are in this moment that reminds me of 1968. That time created a period of opportunity and we're in that zone again where Black Americans are more powerful. We are more engaged politically, and our country has evolved to where the line is not drawn so starkly

between Black and White.

So I would tell young people that this is a time of transformation. They've got to do their part, and I would encourage young people to challenge my generation to get engaged and to help them change America for the better. Let's deal with this injustice decisively this time. There's tremendous opportunity out there and there's going to be greater pressure. It's telling when you see who's protesting. It's not just young people and it's not just Black people. It's really our time for change.

Be sure to subscribe [here](#) if you want to receive all our future Leading in the B-Suite™ interviews! And check out our previous interviews with:

- ***[Carlos Watson](#), CEO of OZY Media***
- ***[Ruth Simmons](#), president of Prairie View A&M University***
- ***[Mellody Hobson](#), co-CEO of Ariel Investments***
- ***[Robert L. Johnson](#), co-founder of BET***
- ***[Ursula Burns](#), former CEO of Xerox***
- ***[Ron Williams](#), former CEO of Aetna***