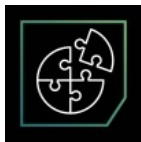




Harry Williams



Leading in the B-Suite

Powerful conversations about life, race and leadership

"When We Have A Level Playing Field, Then We Can Compete."

Published on January 26, 2021



Adam Bryant [in](#)

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

Harry L. Williams, CEO of the Thurgood Marshall

College Fund, which represents 47 Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) and Predominantly Black Institutions (PBIs) representing nearly 300,000 students, shared powerful stories and lessons with me and **Rhonda Morris**, the chief human resources officer of Chevron, for our interview series with Black leaders. The themes we explore include race in corporate America and how to increase the ranks of Black executives in the C-Suite (thus the B-Suite name of our series). Subscribe [here](#) for future interviews.

Morris: What were the biggest influences on you early in your life?

Williams: I'm originally from Greenville, North Carolina, where tobacco is king. I had the experience of working in the tobacco fields, and I knew then that there's got to be a better way to make a living. That was part of my motivation early on, and I became the first person in my family to go to college.

We had eight kids in our family, seven boys and one girl. I was the second-youngest, and my older brothers were all excited when I got a college scholarship to run track. They saw it as the whole family getting the scholarship, and everybody celebrated. So I felt that I couldn't let anybody down because so many people had encouraged me early on.

I never had anyone telling me that I couldn't do something. I've always had people in my life telling me "You can do this. You can do that." That puts some responsibility on you to achieve even greater success

than what people expect of you.

Bryant: How else did your parents influence you?

Williams: My mother and father both had a second-grade education. My mother worked in a tobacco plant. She would come home every day after work and smell like tobacco. I can still smell it now, but she never complained. She always made sure we had food, and she worked all the time. When she came home after work, she would wash up, and immediately start cooking and doing other things for the family without ever complaining.

My father was the same way. He was a janitor at the school, and had a side job cleaning offices. I would often go with him and help dump the trash and do other jobs. He taught me that when you commit to doing a job, you should always do it well. You bring dignity to the job by how you do the job.

*You bring dignity to the job by
how you do the job.*

And my dad would always say to me, “You’re going to be somebody one day.” You don’t think about it at the time, but he was planting positive thoughts in my head and creating opportunities for me to think big. The greatest thing about this country is that you can grow up in tough circumstances, but you can achieve more if you work hard and you commit yourself to dedication and excellence.

Morris: What was an important inflection point in your career early on?

Williams: My goal was to become a college president at a historically Black college or university. That became my goal when I had the privilege of working at North Carolina A&T State University as the director of undergraduate admissions.

One day, I was invited to the president's office to join a meeting. When I got there, I looked around the table. There was the dean of engineering. He was Black. There was the dean of business. He was Black. There was the dean of education. He was Black. There was the chancellor. He was Black. Everybody in the room was Black, and they were running this school. And I said to myself, "That's what I want to do."

What struck me was that they were doing it without anyone second-guessing them. Sometimes when you're among White people and you're the only Black person in the room, and you make a decision, someone might question a decision you just made. That person may not look like you, and they may have some biases that influence why they would question it.

*They recognized that you
earned the right to be in that
room.*

But in that space, that never happened because people value you for what you represented, and they recognized that you earned the right to be in that room. So when you were speaking, they listened to you.

When I returned to my office after that meeting, I took out a notecard, and wrote on it that in ten years I want to be a college president at a historically Black college or university. It was October 3, 2000. Ten years to the day later, I was sworn in as president of Delaware State University, a historically Black school. I've still got the card to prove it.

Bryant: What headwinds have you faced in your career because of race, and what tailwinds helped you get through them?

Williams: I worked for eight years as an associate vice chancellor at Appalachian State University, a largely White institution, and I realized that there was going to be a ceiling there in terms of how far I could go. People who didn't look like me would come in at the same level, and then they would be promoted. If I wanted to go higher, I was going to have to go elsewhere.

I wanted to be in a space where my skills would be recognized and appreciated. That's a whole different animal because there's pride associated with what you're bringing to the table, and you're not second-guessing yourself. You're not in this mode of double consciousness, of having to be aware of how you're supposed to adjust how you act with certain people.

In a community that is all Black, you can be yourself, and I made that

intentional decision to move in that direction. You can still achieve the same things that you want to achieve in life in terms of recognition and professional growth and development. And you can get it in an environment where the stress is not the same. It's almost like a family level of stress – you can say whatever you want to say and have tough conversations and then go share a meal together.

*In a community that is all
Black, you can be yourself.*

Being a part of HBCUs, which are set up specifically to help your race, is so rewarding and beneficial because you're helping to improve the lives of so many people. You're working at an institution that was created for you. It was made for you. Harvard wasn't made for me. Harvard was made for someone else. We can go to Harvard, but you're not going to get that same feeling when you go to Harvard if you're Black. But if you go to Howard, you know that spirit and that history is set up with people that looked like you, and you can be yourself in that environment.

Morris: You must find that many people have misconceptions about HBCUs.

Williams: One of the misconceptions I hear is that people automatically think that because you go to an HBCU, you're not that smart. There's a stigma attached to HBCU students that they just couldn't make it at other institutions, and an HBCU will bring you along. And that once

you get in there, you've got to take all these different kinds of developmental courses.

That's just not the case. Students who go to HBCUs are extremely smart, so I spend a lot of time tearing that perception down. Another misconception is that Black students who attend HBCUs do so because they're poor and really need financial help.

There are historical reasons of racism behind why an HBCU's finances may not be at the same level of an Ivy League school or a top-notch public school. We're always in catch-up mode. There's never been a level playing field, and yet there are expectations that they should be the same as other top schools. It's like trying to play baseball and everyone has gloves and bats but you. That's the struggle that our HBCUs face. When we have a level playing field, then we can compete.

One of the things that I like to share to give people a sense of HBCUs and their importance is how they have shaped this country and made it possible for us to have a professional community of teachers, doctors, engineers, pharmacists and other roles. These institutions were created to serve Blacks who did not have the opportunity to go to White institutions to get those degrees.

George Washington Carver, one of the greatest scientists to ever live and is considered the father of crop rotation, went to Tuskegee University. Kamala Harris, the first African American to be Vice President of the United States, went to Howard University, an HBCU.

Thurgood Marshall, the first Black Supreme Court Justice, got his law degree at Howard. Each of the women featured in the movie “Hidden Figures” attended an HBCU. These institutions are national treasures.

Morris: Another misconception I’ve heard many times is that some people may think that Black graduates from HBCUs may have trouble assimilating in a corporate environment that is mostly White. How do you address that in a constructive way?

Williams: Recognizing that some people may think that, one of the things we tell students is that you’ve got to understand corporate America. You’ve got to be willing to adapt to corporate America. Corporate America is not going to adapt to you. Part of that adaptation is having hard conversations with students and saying, “If you go for an interview at a big company, you’ve got to wear a suit and tie. You’re not going to wear jeans or use slang.” We give our students the playbook so they understand the game.

And we tell students that when they go to a company, they’re representing an HBCU. If the impression they leave is not good, they will paint all HBCUs like that. If they go in and don’t perform, then it could prohibit others from getting the same opportunity. It’s important to be very intentional about teaching what success is going to look like because those students will affect others who come after them.

Bryant: After the killing of George Floyd, many companies promised to give more money to HBCUs.

Williams: Because of this social unrest in our country, we have seen literally an explosion of corporations wanting to do something about it, and they are doubling down on their commitment to support HBCU students. Unfortunately, it took George Floyd's death to create this moment, but we have seen an amazing outreach from corporate partners that are recognizing that they have to do a better job of supporting Black Americans and helping to improve the wealth gap between Blacks and Whites in this country. It hasn't moved in 55 years.

Corporate America has an opportunity to impact that in a significant way, and they are making multi-year commitments to create sustainable change. It's starting at the top, too. You're not going to have everybody's heart and soul aligned with these efforts, but they're going to do it if it's important for the CEO and it's important for the company.

Morris: What other career advice do you share with students when they are graduating from HBCUs?

Williams: The big piece of advice I give students is that they have to recognize that when they enter the workforce, they don't know anything. They may be smart and talented, but they've still got to figure out the lay of the land and then connect with the right coach or mentor within the organization. And then when they get connected with that right person, they have to listen to what they have to say because they will help them navigate the minefields that they're going to walk into.

You've got to navigate the

company's culture.

You're going to need that coaching and guidance, and you're going to need people to clear the way for you. It's about having a positive attitude about the job, regardless of what the job might be. When you have the right attitude, people are going to want to be around you and they're going to want to support you, and that will make you feel good about what you're doing. The other advice is to be the first to say yes if there's an opportunity that comes your way.

And if you encounter headwinds because of your race, with people saying or doing things they shouldn't, you've got to put that emotion to the side and stay focused on the real reason you're there, which is to serve that company and to do what they've asked you to do because of the skills you bring to the table. And then once you navigate those challenges, then you can start making changes from within the company, but you can't do it right away.

You've got to navigate the company's culture and you've got to be adaptable within the culture. You can still be yourself, but you've got to do it in a way that's focused on the culture that exists. If you get caught up in that other stuff, that can be a distraction from your process of moving forward.