



Gary S. May, chancellor of UC Davis



Leading in the B-Suite

Powerful conversations about life, race and leadership

"Diversity Is Everybody's Job. It's Not Just Up To The Chief Diversity Officer."

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Gary S. May, chancellor of UC Davis, 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: Who were important influences for you early on?

May: Certainly, my parents. My mom was a schoolteacher, my dad was a postal worker, so I had a fairly humble background, but they both had strong work ethics, valued education very highly and they instilled that in my sister and me.

My mom was among the first students to integrate the University of Missouri back in the '50s, so that gives you a sense of her perseverance. She had a lot of empathy, and was able to relate to other people and listen to them. She was very attentive to detail and organized, and those skills are still with me as a leader.

Dad was very demanding. He wanted us to do well, and he would incent me with a dollar for every "A" I got on my report card. I would buy comic books. That happened for a while until it got too expensive for him. And he instilled a sense of pride and confidence in me. Oftentimes, if you're a person of color, you might not be as self-assured as you should be, but my dad really taught me that I had ability and talent, and that I was as good as anyone else and that I could do anything I put my mind to.

Bryant: What was the biggest break that set you on your career path?

May: There were three inflection points that led me to where I am today. The first was a break that led me to engineering. There was a high school program called Develop Engineering Students that was set up for minority students in St. Louis, where I'm from.

There were about 30 of us, and it was sponsored by McDonnell Douglas Corporation. They would bring us in for the summer and we'd learn skills like drafting and soldering, and we'd take classes and shadow an engineer. I went on to study electrical engineering at Georgia Tech.

The next was a decision to go to graduate school and get my PhD at UC Berkeley. The third was becoming an engineering faculty member at Georgia Tech. That's where I met a key mentor in my life. Wayne Clough was the president of Georgia Tech. He hired me to be his chief of staff, a position he used as an apprenticeship for people he deemed to have high potential in academic leadership.

I learned a lot about what it means to be a leader of a campus beyond the classroom and

laboratory. I had to learn about athletics, dealing with the legislature, raising money, and how to model leadership and be a statesman. If I had to pick a reason why I'm a chancellor of a university now, that was a key experience.

Morris: Did you seek mentors out or did they seek you out? And were they generally Black or White?

May: I've had both in my career. When you're young, you don't really seek out mentors because maybe you're a bit shy and hesitant to approach these very impressive people around you. So at that point, it was more about people reaching out to me and asking if they could help and be a resource for me. As I moved further along in my career, I would seek out mentors.

And I've had both Black and White mentors. In school, I was doing well, taking aptitude tests, and people saw something in me that they thought could be nurtured, and they just took initiative to reach out. That happened with the program at McDonnell Douglas. A counselor told me about it, and the reason he did was because he saw some potential and thought I could be successful. I didn't know what an engineer was — there were no engineers in my family — so I never would have even thought about that if it weren't for that experience.

Bryant: What are some of the headwinds that you faced because of your race, and what are some of the tailwinds that help you navigate them?

May: I had the exact same microaggressions happen to me three times at three different levels of leadership. When I became chair of the School of Electrical Computer Engineering at Georgia Tech, I was the first African American to serve in that role.

There was a national meeting of people in that role, and people were introducing themselves. I said, "Gary May from Georgia Tech," and someone asked me, "What do you do at Georgia Tech?" It was a meeting of department heads, so it was clear that I had the same role as everyone else.

I would compartmentalize those moments and keep moving.

A similar thing happened at a dean's meeting, and again at a meeting of chancellors and presidents. I introduced myself, "Gary May from UC-Davis." And one of my counterparts asked what I did at UC-Davis. So these things persist. It's not so much a headwind in the sense that it's an obstacle, but it's psychologically draining and challenging.

But I learned perseverance and persistence from my mom. I didn't let it detract me from pursuing my goals and objectives. If the person I was dealing with had issues of bias and racism, that was their problem, not mine, unless they were somehow evaluating me or potentially blocking my path. So I would compartmentalize those moments and keep moving, although I may let them know that what they did was not okay.

Morris: If you were speaking to a group of young Black professionals who were experiencing similar headwinds, what would you advise them? How do you pick your battles on whether to address them directly?

May: When you're dealing with peers, you certainly can address them head on right away. There's no reason to shy away from that. I didn't always have the assertiveness that I do now to bring these things to people's attention. Maybe with supervisors there is a different calculation, but I'm the boss now, so I can address them immediately.

You can't let them fester because it's going to have a negative impact on your psyche and even physical welfare if you let things build up. You've got to have some way to let it out. The best way is to have a support group, whether it's a therapist or friends and family, to let you talk about the issues until you get to the point where you can deal with them directly.

Bryant: Why is it so hard for us to have conversations about race in this country, and what are your suggestions on how to have them constructively?

May: These conversations are hard because everyone is afraid of what people will think when they express themselves. They're not sure if they're saying the right thing or saying it

in the right way, or whether it will be heard in the way they want it to be heard. So you have to get past the fear of how you're being judged and just be yourself and share what's on your mind.

It's also about empathy. You have to be able to put yourself in the other person's place and talk about things in a way that you think would resonate with them. And you have to be able to share aspects of yourself that are not obvious and may put you in a position of vulnerability.

It's when people get outside their bubble that things become less comfortable.

A lot of the problems we're seeing, particularly over the last year, are the result of our inability to have these difficult conversations, except inside our respective bubbles with people who are just like us, and then the conversation isn't difficult at all. It's when people get outside their bubble that things become less comfortable. If we're not able to get past this hesitation to talk, we may have problems making progress.

Morris: And so where are you on the optimism-pessimism scale about whether things are going to change long-term?

May: I tend to be optimistic, but not necessarily in the short-term. To quote Dr. King, the arc of the moral universe is long but bends toward justice. We are eventually going to get there, but it's going to take a while. Human nature is the most difficult thing to change, especially when people don't believe they need to change.

It takes some reflection, it takes some experience, it takes some humility, and those things are hard to come by, especially in groups. I do believe that, at our core, human beings all want basically the same things. We want to be secure, to have a roof over our head, food on the table, we want to have families and be happy with family and friends. We want to have opportunities to be successful in our careers.

And if we recognize at our core that not only do we want the same things, but that we're all

essentially identical in terms of our genetic makeup, then some of these other differences become smaller.

Bryant: What are you seeing in students today that gives you optimism about long-term change?

May: I'm not going to say there aren't racists in this next generation because there are, but by and large they've grown up in a world that's been a little bit different from the one that I grew up in, and that my parents grew up in. My parents grew up in the Jim Crow era and had to sit in the back of the bus. I don't know what that's like.

And now if I think about my own kids, throughout grade school and high school and even most of college, their friends were from all backgrounds— not just race but sexual orientation, national origin and in other ways. It wasn't unusual for them. The more we progress through time, the more optimistic I am that it's going to get better for those reasons.

Morris: What mentoring advice do you give to young Black professionals?

May: The first is to be a mentor, and have a mentor. Establish a network. Don't depend only on yourself to be successful. You've got to get out of your comfort zone, and get involved with professional societies and organizations that require you to interact with new people and build those skills.

Human interaction is so important, and sometimes it's difficult. Sometimes things don't work out the way you want them to work out, but overall, the learning and development that occurs from working with other people is critical.

Bryant: If you were speaking to a group of Fortune 500 CEOs, what message would you convey to them about diversity?

May: After George Floyd was killed, almost every company, every university, every CEO announced that "We're not like this, and we're going to do better." Those are wonderful statements and I'm glad you said them, but let's see a picture of your board and your

executive leadership team. Let me see how you are manifesting the words in the statement you just wrote.

So my message to CEOs is that you've got to build a team that has the values you're trying to espouse or develop. No one's going to believe anything you say if you're not modeling the behavior you're trying to propagate.

Commitment has to permeate from the top all the way down through the organization. Diversity is everybody's job. It's not just up to the chief diversity officer. You have to recognize and reward the behavior you want to encourage. And then you've got to have a long-term view because it's not going to happen overnight. You've got to be patient and be persistent.