



Sheila Talton, CEO of Gray Matter Analytics



Leading in the B-Suite

Powerful conversations about life, race and leadership

"We Need Bold Moves. It's Not Just About Hiring One Or Two People."

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Sheila Talton, CEO of Gray Matter Analytics, which provides

*data-driven insights to healthcare organizations, 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 the biggest early influences in your life that shaped your values?

Talton: It was my father and my grandmother. My father was one of the smartest men I've ever met. But he was a Black man in America in the '40s and '50s, and therefore his intellect did not propel him to where he could have been in his career.

My grandmother was also a big influence. She grew up in Alabama picking cotton. And when she was in her 40s, she got a law degree. From those two, I always believed that I could do anything, and my dad used to tell me that. He also used to tell me that the rules are what they are, and that I had to learn how to win by playing within the rules.

Bryant: Tell us about your college years.

Talton: I spent a lot of time protesting for civil rights. I went to college twice. The first time, I didn't think I was there to go to class. I thought I was there to protest. And after two years, I was asked to leave because my grades weren't good enough, and my father was really upset with

me.

I subsequently went back to college and graduated summa cum laude. But the first time, it was all about justice. I was very active in the civil rights movement in the '60s and '70s. And protest and justice are still big parts of me. I was very active in 2008, particularly during Obama's first presidential campaign. I went to four different cities, knocked on doors and worked the phone banks. Justice is part of my DNA.

Morris: Was there something that happened in your life that gave you that drive?

Talton: I remember being the only African American in my Brownie troop. I was never chosen for any of the leadership roles, and I often felt that I didn't get picked for certain things because of the color of my skin.

That was also true at different points in my career. Sometimes, my white male counterparts were selected over me, and it certainly wasn't because they were smarter. Some were, but some were not. Certainly they didn't work harder, because I'm a very hard worker. My father also told me that he was drafted to join the Army, but he wanted to join the Air Force. At that time, they didn't take Blacks in the Air Force. Those things stuck with me.

Bryant: What were the big breaks or moments that changed the trajectory of your career?

Talton: It truly was affirmative action. Back in the late '60s and early '70s, corporations did not just try to find one or two African Americans to hire; they hired hundreds of us when I was starting out. I went to NCR. Not everyone made it through the various training programs, of course, but if you hire hundreds, many will make it.

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doesn't matter.*

We're seeing a greater hiring push now, but not in the way it did back then. There are no laws now. I had been talking about this recently with other board directors, and the reality is that if you don't measure the progress or lack of progress, it doesn't matter.

The second thing is that once that door was opened for me, there were a number of White males who saw in me intelligence and a willingness to work hard, and they helped me, as well.

Morris: Why did you decide on tech as a career path?

Talton: I liked the subject in college and I did very well. But there also was such a shortage of talent. And I believed that if I was good at technology, the color of my skin and my gender would be less of a headwind. Coming out of college, I only interviewed with three companies — IBM, NCR and Burroughs — and I got two job offers, from NCR and Burroughs.

I've been in tech my entire career, but it is a male-dominated industry, and there are very few African Americans in tech. In the current environment, I won't call it an advantage, but I certainly get noticed and it's good for my company. And at this point in my career, I'm focused on being a role model. I'm looking for ways to help young African Americans who are interested in the technology industry.

Bryant: What kinds of headwinds have you faced in your career because of your race? And what were some of the tailwinds that helped you get through them?

Talton: One thing that has bothered me was that whatever I did, I was somehow representative of the entire Black race — except for those things that were positive and that they didn't expect a Black person to be able to do. But I knew that if I were ever to be late for a meeting or to miss a deadline, then I would have just represented the whole Black race.

But then people don't think that way in positive terms. Years ago, people used to say to me, "Well, yeah, but you're different." Really? And yet, with my White counterparts, if Tom or Sally fell short, well, that's just Tom and Sally. That has nothing to do with the rest of the White race. That has been frustrating.

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The tailwinds were that I didn't fear taking on tough assignments. I signed up for a lot of things that my colleagues wouldn't do. Maybe I didn't know any better, but I developed this reputation of "Sheila can get things done."

Another one is that I'm a lifelong learner, so I often also plunge into things that I don't know much about and spend a lot of time learning about them. I'm fortunate in that I don't need a lot of sleep, and I invest a lot of time in being prepared and learning. Those are the two main tailwinds — my work habits and being a lifelong learner.

Morris: Can you share an example of when you took a job that nobody else wanted?

Talton: I took an assignment to go to China for Cisco Systems. We were investing roughly \$1 billion in China, and my job was to go and help build the public-private partnership with the Chinese government. You can imagine that I was the only one who looked like me all of those meetings, but that also was an advantage for me in certain ways. For one, the Chinese trusted me more than they did my White male counterparts.

Another reason is that if you're used to being the only Black person in the room and listening before speaking, that approach goes over very well in the Chinese culture. I had a lot of success. I'm still in touch to this day with a lot of the people I worked with in China. After that I decided to do a similar job in South America.

Bryant: Why are discussions of race so uncomfortable in corporate America, and how can we have them in a more constructive way?

Talton: The people who are uncomfortable in these conversations are mostly White Americans, not those of us who are Black. We've always had the discussion among ourselves. I think the one way to have this conversation so that it's not uncomfortable is to acknowledge the reality of White privilege. You don't have to feel guilty about the fact that you were born White, but it is a reality of life in this country.

Once people acknowledge that fact of life, then you can have a discussion about what that behavior looks like, and then start to call out White counterparts when you are witnessing decisions that are maybe unjust and unfair. That's really important because this is not something that we as Black Americans can do by ourselves, and nor should we because we're all Americans. It is really for the benefit of our country.

When I was in China, and seeing thousands and thousands of people going to work every day, it hit me one morning that our country cannot afford to not have everyone contributing to our society from an economic and brainpower perspective, because we can't compete with a country like China just based on population numbers. It truly is the right thing to do for America — to make sure that all of us get to use whatever particular gifts we've been given.

Morris: What does corporate America need to do differently now to change the imbalance of races in the executive pipeline?

Talton: We need to hire hundreds at all levels, and we need to measure the exposure of executives to new roles. How many times has someone been moved to a new role where they are learning something new about different aspects of the company? That is how people are groomed. That's one thing that I want boards to start to measure — how much exposure and opportunity we are giving to Black and Brown people in our companies.

If companies don't do that, they will have a retention issue. Because if you're not going to give those opportunities, then the employees who are smart and ambitious are going to get calls from headhunters and take those calls.

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In the conversations I'm having, people are receptive to those ideas. Here's why: Everyone I'm talking to acknowledges that what we've been doing for the last 20 years is not working. We need bold moves. It's not just about hiring one or two people here or there. It's also important for the younger generation, because when they are looking at different companies for possible jobs, they're looking at whether the C-Suite is diverse.

Bryant: Are you feeling more pessimistic or optimistic about whether things are going to change?

Talton: I'm very optimistic, and mainly because of the number of White people who are engaged in the conversation, and they are comfortable being uncomfortable. I've been asked by so many White men, "Sheila, what do we need to do differently?" I've never been asked that question so often before.

I do think that people are much more engaged, and I think it's because of the social and economic disparities. And this pandemic is going to make them worse because people are working differently, and that's affecting jobs in transportation, hospitality and commercial real estate.

Morris: What career advice do you share with young Black professionals?

Talton: I have two pieces of advice. One is to be a lifelong learner. That means that if you don't have the opportunities to learn where you are — where you're doing all the teaching and not learning — then it's time to seek out other opportunities.

And you can make your own opportunities within your current company. Sometimes young people say to me that they want to get to the next level, but that they don't have the experience. And I often tell them there is no shortage of things that need to be done. I call it "filling in the white space," and go do it until somebody tells you to stop.

In every organization, there are things that nobody's doing and that need to get done. That creates an opportunity for you to learn and it also creates an opportunity for exposure because you will meet people,

and they will hear that you volunteered to help.

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