



Lloyd Carney



Leading in the B-Suite

Powerful conversations about life, race and leadership

"It's A Burden Of The World We Live In. You Have To Be 'Better Than.'"

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***Lloyd Carney**, a veteran technology executive and the former*

*CEO of Brocade Communications Systems, shared compelling insights with **Rhonda Morris**, the chief human resources officer of Chevron, and me for our interview series 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). Many memorable stories in this must-read interview.*

Morris: What were some of the biggest influences when you were growing up?

Carney: The most influential people in my life were my father and my grandfathers. My grandfather on my mother's side was an entrepreneur who started multiple businesses, and he taught me the basics of business, including how to trust people or not trust people. He owned a number of businesses, including a haberdashery and a hardware store. Every Saturday, all the money came in and all of it was counted and everybody had to take responsibility.

We measured the things that were important to us in the business. And throughout my career, I've had this mantra that if it's valuable to you and it's important to you, you should figure out a way to measure it. And there were managers who we trusted and we didn't have to measure certain things in their stores, but others we didn't trust as much, and we measured other things with them. People are different, and you have to interact differently with everyone.

My father taught me how to deal with adversity. He also was an

engineer, and he ran a business putting up electricity poles. He went bankrupt a couple of times and we had to deal with not having money in the house. I also saw the anguish he went through when he had to let people go. But I saw him rebound every time, and I learned from that.

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And my grandfather on my father's side taught me how to be a man. He owned a bar, and we often had dinner together on Sundays. I remember I was 12 years old and I walked in the bar, which was near his house, to meet him. He told me to go back out. And I went out. And I came back in. He told me to go out and come back in again. After doing that four times, I finally said, "Grandpa, what's going on?"

He said, "When you walk in this bar, I want you to walk in it like you own it. I want you to have your shoulders square, your head up high. I want you to look people in the eye and I want you to act like a man." From that day on, any room I walk into, I'm looking people in the eye and I have my shoulders squared back, and I'm confident.

Bryant: What about as you were starting out in your career. What was a key lesson from that time?

Carney: I learned one of the best lessons as a young engineer in my first co-op job out of school. Every student was assigned a manager, and as I was going over the list of software projects to work on, my

manager said, “How are you going to decide?” I said, “Well, I’m going to see one that I can do.”

And he said, “Here’s how I want you to decide. Pick the hardest one. If you pick an easy one and you do it, everyone’s going to expect that you can do it anyway. If you pick a hard one and you fail, everyone will think, well, that was a hard one. But if you pick a hard one and you do it, we’re going to think you’re a rock star. So pick the hardest one, and I’m going to help you make sure you get it done.” And that’s what I did. I picked the hardest path, and from then on, professionally I’ve always picked the hardest path.

Morris: What is your view about the notion that Black executives have to work twice as hard to be seen as good as anyone else?

Carney: It’s a burden of the world we live in. You have to be “better than.” I deliver that message to my three children. I wish you could be like everybody else, but you have to stand out. I wish it weren’t the case.

When I mentor young people of color, I tend to steer people toward the sciences because it’s objective. With a complex engineering problem, it’s either solved or it’s not solved. And so you take a lot of the subjective opinions out of the hands of people who could adversely impact you.

With that first co-op job, they didn’t even know I was Black. They came to the school and said, “Give us the four kids with the highest

grades,” and I was one of the four. They used to call me “4.0 Carney,” and I even made money on the side by helping kids with their math assignments. It always served me well to be prepared and to always put in the extra effort.

Bryant: Lloyd, I remember a vivid story from our conversation years ago about your grandfather’s “bucket test.” Can you share that?

Carney: Sometimes one of his employees would get too big for their britches, and they would be in his office asking for more money and arguing why they were so important to his businesses. And he’d have me go get a bucket of water and bring it in to the office — “Lloydy, bring the bucket,” he would say.

So I’d bring the bucket of water in, and he’d tell the guy, "Put your hand in that bucket. And when you take your hand out of the bucket, that’s the hole you’re going to leave when you leave here." He was cold-blooded.

Morris: And how has that affected the way you’ve built leadership teams over the years?

Carney: I’ve always felt that everyone’s replaceable. I’ve come across very few geniuses in my time. We’re all replaceable, and there’s a certain amount of humility required for anyone to be successful. I’ve always preached to my team that the team wins together.

I will never allow anyone on the team to hold us hostage. There is an efficiency penalty you pay for tolerating the jerk, because everyone around that person becomes inefficient. I've never seen an instance where things didn't improve after you let the jerk go.

Bryant: What are some headwinds you've encountered over the course of your career because of your race and what were the tailwinds that helped you through them?

Carney: The first one is having to prove yourself every time. Whenever I'm meeting a group for the first time in corporate America, people assume I'm not as smart as I am. Or just they don't assume I'm the CEO. I used to bet my sales guys \$20 every time we would go into a meeting on the road that the customers were going to assume that the White guy is the CEO and I'm the sales guy. They stopped taking that bet because I won every time.

We would walk in the room and they would say to my White colleague, "Hey, Mr. Carney," and I would have to say, "I'm over here." Some of my guys would be embarrassed and feel so bad. But it didn't bother me. To be successful as a person of color in this country, you have to have a thick skin.

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There are so many slights every time you walk outside. If you took note of every slight and let it wear on you, you'd be a broken human being. The only person who has a bigger burden than me is a woman of color. So you have to just say it's not you. You can't make other people's problems your problems.

It actually worked out because sometimes the people we were meeting on those sales calls would be so embarrassed that I could ask them to sign anything. The \$10 million deal became a \$20 million deal. The 10 percent discount became no discount. You have to pick your battles. And picking a battle with someone who I need revenue from is not a smart thing.

Morris: Conversations about race are very uncomfortable for a lot of people. Why is that, and what can be done to have more constructive discussions?

Carney: The fundamental reason is we are a nation divided. We don't go to church together, we don't break bread together, we don't associate with each other. Most White people don't have Black friends. I can tell within five minutes when I meet a White person whether they are comfortable around Black people. And if they are, a lot of them are military brats because the military is probably the most integrated environment we have in this country.

And we train society to have negative connotations of people of color. The images you see tend not to be very positive, and it's everywhere. When you hear the news report that some guy robbed a bank, you know

a White guy did it. Because if a Black guy did it, the news would say that a Black man robbed the bank. When a White guy commits a crime, they don't use his skin color as an adjective. The first chance they get to tag the word Black to something negative, they're going to paint it Black as much as they can.

I had a discussion once with General Colin Powell, a great leader and a great mentor to me. I used to get perturbed because I was always being described as the "first Black" when I would move into a new role, like the first Black director at a company, or the first Black CEO of one of the largest software companies in the world. I didn't want to get involved in all these discussions about the Black experience.

But General Powell said to me, "Understand that if you did something bad, they're going to call you Black. You're doing something good. Please let them call you Black. Please let them know that Black people can do good things." And from then on, I'm a Black CEO, I'm a Black this, Black that. You can tag me Black any which way you want, because the difference between me and the other Black guy out there is the education that I was exposed to and the opportunities I was given.

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Every day we destroy lives without even knowing it because so many young Black people don't even dream of being what I've done or what

Rhonda has done. They don't even know it's an option. We limit them. It's a travesty for the country because we are a part of the human assets in this country, and we're doing a disservice to the country by not maximizing those assets.

But every day we do it. We disproportionately put our people of color in jail, and we give them the worst medical care and the worst education. It's an uncomfortable discussion, but people like me who are successful, we have to have it. Every chance I get, I correct people about their misperceptions.

If they say something that is not right, like about all the Blacks on welfare, I'll point out that there are more Whites who are on welfare. Or drugs — more White people do drugs than Black people. Those are the facts. The problem is we get incarcerated at ten times the rate for doing the same thing.

There are all these facts that you can use to help educate people in a non-threatening way. It's an uncomfortable conversation, but it comes back to the point that we don't break bread together. If you don't have Black friends, you don't have people to have the conversation with and to learn from. People need to reach out. There is a dearth of empathy in the society today that is shocking.

All the people who went out of their way to help me professionally were White. Where is that generation of Whites who are willing to help Black people like me? If the people who are in control aren't willing to help those not like themselves, it will never work because we cannot

pull ourselves up by our own bootstraps.

It doesn't work that way. We need help from others in order to be successful. And I was fortunate that I had White people who went out of their way to help me. And I made sure they knew I was someone worthy of their time and effort because I was working my tail off, and I was getting the job done.

Morris: I'd like to follow up on your point about having those conversations where you correct people on the facts. At what point in your career did you start doing that? Because sometimes people will make these incorrect statements and there's silence. Somebody has to have the courage to correct them.

Carney: It was after speaking with General Powell that I started to really lean into it. There was no downside for me. I was proven. If people didn't like what I was saying, tough. But when I mentor young people, I tell them not to be so outspoken because I've seen so many of them get their career sideways because they spoke out. Let those of us who've achieved a degree of success help pull you along and be more outspoken.

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