Lori Dickerson Fouché

Leading in the B-Suite
Powerful conversations about life, race and leadership
🗓 Biweekly newsletter

"I've Always Taken The Harder Road And Pursued More Difficult Challenges"

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Adam Bryant in fluencer

Lori Dickerson Fouché, the former CEO of TIAA Financial Solutions, 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 influences for you early on in your life?

Fouché: My dad instilled in me the importance of hard work and being great. I can remember coming home with a C one quarter in seventh-grade science and having a very long conversation about mediocrity and being average. It was the only time we had to have that conversation, so mission accomplished. I also watched him experience some challenges at work and listened to the conversations he and mother had and how he handled those experiences.

From my mom, I learned that if you don't like your circumstances, do something about it. She is a warm, very gracious individual, and I also had a clear sense from her that "I don't want to hear you complain about this for very long." Her point was that if you don't like your circumstances, figure it out by either working harder or doing something completely differently. But wallowing was not acceptable.

That was also the message from one of my grandmothers — where there's a will, there's a way, and she did want to hear any excuses. My grandmother graduated from the University of Illinois. She was one of several siblings in a single-mother household — her father had passed away — and there was not a lot of money.

She sold dandelion greens that she would pick from the side of the road and sell to help her afford college. So she wasn't very understanding if things weren't working out the way you wanted them to because her mindset was, "I've been through worse than you, so you better figure out how to do it."

Bryant: If you look back on your career, what was the big break that set your career on this high trajectory?

Fouché: Life is a series of moments in time and some serendipity along the way. I've always taken the harder road and pursued more difficult challenges. Each of those experiences built on each other and helped teach me to think about things differently.

In terms of serendipity, I remember walking one evening between buildings at our office campus in California and running into the CEO. It was just the two of us, so I couldn't hide and act like I didn't see him or that he didn't see me.

A couple of years earlier, I had taken a personal-branding class. I found it challenging to speak about my accomplishments as I never wanted to be seen as bragging about myself, but the course taught me that when somebody asks how you are, you don't just say "fine." You say, "Here's what I'm working on." You need to think of it as telling a story, not bragging.

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So when the CEO asked me how I was doing, I told the CEO what I was doing, and he said, "I've been wanting to know what that project was all about. Why don't you stop by tomorrow? I've got some time. I would love to hear about it." And so I made an appointment and saw him. We had this wonderful conversation, and several years later, I ended up being CEO of Fireman's Fund Insurance Company.

I learned later that he had been one of my sponsors behind the scenes. I know that I had worked hard and achieved results, but that moment in time when I told him what I was working on led to more conversations, including finding out that we were both Star Trek fans. You can't let those serendipitous moments pass by.

Morris: What headwinds have you faced in your career because of race, and what tailwinds helped you overcome them?

Fouché: In terms of headwinds, there certainly have been a series of sleights and indignities that have come up repeatedly and forced me to have a tough skin. I can remember in the early days being told, "Oh, you're going to go far because you're a woman and you're Black." And I would say to them, "Well, no, I hope I go far because I'm really good at what

I do." I would never say to someone, "You're going to go really far because you're a White male."

There's also the notion of having to prove yourself over and over, even though your White colleagues don't have to clear those same hurdles. It didn't mean that those hurdles weren't relevant. They were. But the different standards were reminders of the need to demonstrate greater capability, being discounted or not being heard in a meeting and feeling that your voice doesn't always carry the same weight. For me, there's also the confluence of race and gender. So, it was sometimes hard to know when something was gender- versus race-related.

But the tailwind for me goes back to my upbringing, which is that it is what it is, so now what are you going to do about it? I spend a fair amount of time finding my way over, under or around challenges. I have also had wonderful sponsors, frequently unbeknownst to me at the time, who respected what I had accomplished and gave me the opportunity to do different things. And taking professional risks created opportunities for me, too.

Bryant: What's your advice to people about when to point out those slights and when to just move on?

Fouché: It's a great question and it is a bit of a conundrum because on the one hand we tell people to be authentic, be part of the solution, and that they should speak up. And then when they do, they are sometimes told they are too outspoken.

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when and how to use your voice.

It's striking that right balance between picking your shots and finding your way culturally. Every company is different in terms of the right places to have conversations and knowing when you really do have the ear of someone who's legitimately listening and willing to try and figure out how to help. And, how you say it is frequently as important as what you say.

I'm far more outspoken now than I was when I was coming up. And it's because I can and have the courage to do it. The positions that I'm in afford me that privilege to be able to speak up and so I do. As your career morphs, you have the opportunity to have a greater voice. Part of the maturation process is recognizing when and how to use your voice.

Morris: What are the reasons these discussions are so uncomfortable, and what can be done to bring the conversations front and center in a way that works?

Fouché: There aren't many emotional conversations in the workplace in the first place because they are difficult to have and they are subjective. For example, when we want to know what's going on with employee morale, some companies do surveys and maybe run some focus groups, but the hard emotional conversations are tough.

And, despite data demonstrating the power of diversity relative to results, conversations about racial issues are frequently emotional and subjective. In my experience, when an organization decides to focus, when it decides that it has a problem, you start seeing a

different level of conversation, analysis and execution.

People start asking, what does the data show? And what are the root causes of the issue? You start doing the analysis, and there's more of an effort to creatively problem-solve what needs to happen. You develop a plan, you set targets, and you execute.

But we don't take that approach, generally speaking, when it comes to dealing with diversity issues, in terms of understanding the problems like any other business issue. As a result, I tend to look out in the environment and see rudimentary analysis and a patchwork of activities, which is measured by incremental improvement and by activity — more activity being viewed as better, and yet we don't see the results in a material sort of way.

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Part of the challenge is that I'm not sure that everyone still believes that diversity matters. I don't think that everyone still, despite all the analysis, also understands that the situation for someone who's Black is different than someone who's Asian, is different than someone who's Latinx. Everyone brings their own experiences to the table. And so, like any good business problem, part of our challenge as leaders is to pull apart the data and figure out what we're going to do.

If we started with the data, we would at least make some progress that would allow us to get to the more emotional conversations. I had a business school professor who said that the soft stuff is the hard stuff. We're talking about soft stuff here that's really hard and yet really impactful. If we broke it down into a business problem the way we do anything else, I think we'd make a lot more progress.

Morris: How do we solve the problem if people are reluctant to share stories of their experiences? Otherwise, people will assume things are okay.

Fouché: Storytelling is really important. It can be hard for a White employee to hear the stories from their Black colleagues. It's also really hard for a person of color to tell their story and feel safe in that environment. People are often afraid to say the wrong thing. How we create that safe environment for people matters a great deal.

We tend to have conversations where you hear from one audience and they're preaching to the choir. There's something both cathartic and understanding and hopeful in that, but at some point, the pieces have to come together.

I'm a huge proponent of humanity in leadership. We all have needs. We all want to be seen. We all want to be heard. But we have to create the environments that say, "Hey, I want to get to know you. Tell me about growing up. What was it like to be you?" We have choices as leaders to start our conversations like that.

Bryant: What career mentoring advice do you give to senior Black professionals?

Fouché: Probably that what got you here might not get you to the next level. Many of us have worked hard and are great at what we do. But at some point, the balance between the currency you earned from what you have done starts to change over to the currency of relationships that you need to have.

How you engage and build relationships with the people around you, your peers as well as managing up, does matter. It shifts to becoming about what you are able to get done through influence. And you have to learn different parts of the business. Take the risk. Ask for it. And along the way, have a P&L, because being responsible for results matters.

Morris: And what do you say to younger people? Because I talk to a lot of them and I hear things like, "Well, I want your job in ten years. I want to do this, this, this and this to get to your job." And I just keep telling them that's not going to happen. How do you talk to them about the importance of serendipity that you mentioned earlier?

Fouché: With the younger generation, two things are happening. One, they absolutely want the roadmap to a specific job in ten years — "Tell me what to do." There are things that you need to do, but serendipity plays a role, and that's part of how you manage the relationships around you, and how you start taking advantage of different opportunities.

It goes back to the personal branding conversation. When someone asks you how you're doing, do you just say fine or do you give people information so that they think, this is someone I should look out for? You have to create some magic and that can be really hard to impart to a young person. You create opportunities for serendipity by taking risks, getting out of your comfort zone and challenging yourself. You want to make yourself the right person at the right time and place and be open to the conversations when opportunities come your way.