



Crystal Ashby



Leading in the B-Suite

Powerful conversations about life, race and leadership

"You Have To Bet On Yourself And You Have To Listen To Your Own Voice"

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Adam Bryant [in](#) fluencer

***Crystal Ashby**, the former CEO of the Executive Leadership Council (ELC), 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).*

Morris: Tell us about your early years.

Ashby: I'm the first generation of my family to go to college and graduate school, and to join what we would call the "executive" ranks. My grandmother, who wanted to be a mathematician, probably would have been with the *Hidden Figures* women if she'd had that opportunity.

But my great-grandfather didn't believe in higher education for his daughters, so when she moved her young family to Michigan, she started by cleaning homes early on. She knew she wanted more, and became a registered nurse. She taught me to always believe in my dreams, and that education was really important. Every time she told the story about not fulfilling her dreams of becoming a mathematician, it created more of an incentive for me to achieve my goals.

My mother is my rock. She is stronger than any woman I know, but she's also incredibly gentle. After her divorce, my Mom raised me and my younger sister and brother. She never complained about it. She did everything she had to do, and just pushed us to be our best selves, even though we were challenging for her because all us are very different.

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

Ashby: It wasn't a break so much as it was a person. I met a man named Steve Winters, who hired me from a law firm to join his team at the Amoco Oil Company. He became my sponsor, unbeknownst to me. I believe he would sit in rooms and say, "She can do whatever it is we put in front of her." He was always my mentor, and I rarely make a big career decision without contacting him first, even now.

I also learned a lot from him about leadership. I'm a no-surprises kind of person. I also don't suffer fools lightly. But in trying to make sure I get the best out of my people, I think about the people who were able to get the best out of me, so I would go back to Steve, who was able to draw the best out of me. I used to watch how he led, particularly the way he showed concern for people in all situations.

Morris: Does Steve Winters happen to be Caucasian? And can you share more about key leadership lessons you've learned?

Ashby: Yes, he is Caucasian. And my next big break was a decision to accept an international assignment. I moved to London for a new role, and that was a turning point because it gave me a different perspective because it was BP's corporate headquarters.

I've learned that even though you may want to avoid conflict in a particular situation, you have to deal with it right away or else it will become a bigger problem later on. That's a lesson I've learned from situations in the past when the mess was bigger than it would have been if I'd dealt with it earlier.

And there are skills that I've learned from my training as a litigator. So I'm going to tackle the problems straight on. I once worked for someone who, when I put my 50-page document of discovery questions in front of him to review, he read the first two answers and picked the papers up and threw them in the air.

I watched the papers fall to the floor, and then I looked at him and I said, "I am happy to redo what needs to be done after you've read all 50 pages. I'll be in my office waiting for the document." He wasn't going to get away with treating me like that.

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I've had many moments like that. I once joined a 14-person leadership team, and they were almost all White men. I went to my first meeting with them, and they were not happy to have me. After I did my presentation, one of them said just loudly enough for me to hear,

“What’s a little Black girl from Detroit going to tell us about how to run your business?”

And I said, “I will be the person telling you when you’ve gotten too close to the edge and that you need to back it up. I will be the person who, if you step across the line, will be saying that now we have a problem and we have to fix it. I represent the company. I don’t represent you individually. And we all work for the company, so as long as you’re in your lane doing your job, I’ll be in my lane doing mine, and we’ll be fine.” I’ll never forget it.

In those days, I used to feel that before I went into a meeting, where I was usually the only Black person and the only woman in the room, that I would have to put on my armor to protect myself. But over time, I felt that I needed to do that less and less because I decided to be myself — this is how I’m going to show up and you can take it or leave it.

Bryant: Given some of the micro- and macro-aggressions you’ve faced in your career because of your gender and race, what keeps you moving forward and staying positive?

Ashby: It’s really simple — if I’m not doing it, who’s going to do it? I believe I can make a difference. And if I don’t believe that myself, then we’re going to be caught up in this situation forever. So I have to stay focused. That doesn’t mean it’s easy. And in the current environment, you have to have the conversations that need to be had. You have to figure out the best angle so you can reach the person and they can hear what you’re trying to say.

I sometimes think about what people in my family have gone through, and I thank them because I am really blessed with the life I have. These problems we are talking about have existed for 400 years. And when you reach a certain position, it’s not about having the seat. It’s what you do when you get in the seat. I have a responsibility, an obligation, and some accountability for making change happen. That is what drives me every day.

Morris: Why are conversations about race in America so hard, and what can be done to make them more constructive?

Ashby: They are hard because people aren’t clear about where everybody comes from on the issue. There’s really no transparency about how you feel about it. We have for years had this patina of political correctness that’s been sort of shellacked back and forth so that people don’t necessarily say what they really feel.

But because of all the events over the last year, including the impact of Covid-19 on the Black community, and the murder of George Floyd, that politically correct patina has been blown up and now everybody is facing and dealing with the implications of it.

The conversations are difficult because some people don’t know where they stand on the issue. The conversations are difficult because there are some people who stand very firmly in one place that is contrary to where other people stand. There are some people who are uncomfortable about the implications of starting to actually deal with the issues, because they may end up having less than they have now as a result of that change.

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up.*

There's also a problem around people having a sense of ownership. We see it when it comes to CEO seats and other C-suite roles. White men have owned those seats for a long time, but the problem is that they don't own them. Everybody should have equal access to the opportunity to sit in those C-suite seats.

The things that have happened over time to prevent that equal opportunity makes the conversation uncomfortable. Nobody wants to hear the reality of what it's like to be the only Black person sitting in a meeting or to have to deal with a situation like an Amy Cooper in a corporate environment. Nobody wants to deal with what that really means because it means you have to be vulnerable.

It means you have to take ownership. It means you have to admit that something is really wrong, and right now all of this is wrong. If you believe that all of us should have equal opportunity, then there are a lot of Black people who deserve the right to be included and considered for positions based on merit who aren't being considered right now.

We talk about diversity and inclusion. This is cultural change. This is systemic change. This is eradication of things that prevent organizations from being as financially successful as they can be, and not just a good place for everybody at work. Until people get comfortable with being uncomfortable, the change isn't going to happen and be sustainable and consistent.

The reality is that you're going to take two steps forward, one step back. And the question then is, do you recognize the one step back? And then do you stay the course and take four more steps forward? You do not erase 400 years by 30 days, 60 days, 90 days because it's too easy to slide back into old habits of behavior.

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honest with themselves.*

And it also means that CEOs and other senior executives have to be honest with themselves about where they stand on the issue. They have to reflect on their own thought processes because how they show up impacts the way the rest of the organization is going to respond to this.

There has to be honesty and transparency at the top of the house. What gets measured is what gets done. You have to put a plan in place, and you have to lean into that plan and you have to continue to lean when a crisis occurs. Diversity and inclusion, as we all know, falls off the table if an organization is in crisis. Instead, they should recognize that the very thing they're not fostering is probably the thing that's going to help them be successful and fix the situation.

Bryant: What have you seen organizations do differently that you think will be effective?

Ashby: Smart companies have realized that you don't stop the conversations. The conversations continue because the reality is that what you hear in that first conversation

probably is not going as deep as what you really need to know.

It's about putting real guardrails in place, and putting real strategic plans in place. And the CEO has to own the plan and make sure it is cascaded to their C-suite executives and down through the organization. It's not a three-, six-, or nine-month plan. It is a plan in perpetuity. The board is aware of the plan, has signed off on it, and is engaged in its success.

You have to make sure your diverse talent is getting exposure to different assignments so they are fleshing out their capabilities, including getting P&L responsibilities that are so important to get in the running to become a CEO.

Otherwise, that investment you made on the front end to bring in talent will result in them walking out the door at some point. It's about having what I call a Black talent protocol — what's the plan to get this group of people exposure to developmental opportunities? What's the plan to give them a mentor? Who is sponsoring them?

I'm not asking you to put people in these seats that aren't qualified. I'm asking you to make sure they are qualified. I'm asking you to create the right opportunities. I'm asking you to get out of everybody's way so that they can do their jobs.

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The data is there. Black women are the most educated people out there. Black talent will over-perform every time. What's blocking it is people who don't want to give up these seats. There has to be some acknowledgement and some honest conversation around what you are afraid of.

These C-suite seats are not owned by anybody. They are there for the taking by the qualified. But how you get considered to be qualified is what has to change. It requires intentionality.

Morris: What is your career advice to young Black professionals, particularly about navigating the headwinds that they inevitably face?

Ashby: First of all, it is exhausting if you're living in that reality. But at a certain point you have to get to a place where you know what your skills are, what your strengths are, what you're capable of, and you can only show up as yourself, and that's what you have to do every day.

Part of what sometimes doesn't help us is that we don't necessarily toot our own horn. A young person may be doing amazing things, and their head is down, getting the work done. But they're not also saying, "This is what I'm capable of because these are the things I've done." They aren't sharing who they are in terms of what they have done for the organization because that's not how they were raised.

We need to learn to help them talk about it differently. When you're performing well, it's very hard for someone to not listen to you. And so use your voice to say, "This is what I've done, this is what I'm capable of, and this is what I brought to the organization. And most

importantly, these are the things I want to do.”

It’s always been performance first. You’ve got to perform. But mentorship, and more importantly, sponsorship, are required to show people how to speak differently about their experience and expectations, and how to set the table to have the right conversation. You have to bet on yourself and you have to listen to your own voice, and you have to hear yourself and you have to learn to trust yourself.