



Mahisha Dellinger, founder and CEO of CURLS



Leading in the B-Suite

Powerful conversations about life, race and leadership

📧 Biweekly newsletter

"How Do You Know Where You're Going If You Don't Have A Roadmap?"

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***Mahisha Dellinger**, founder and CEO of CURLS, a haircare company, shared powerful stories and lessons with me and **Rhonda Morris**, the chief human resources officer of Chevron, for our interview series with prominent Black leaders. Subscribe [here](#) for future Leading in the B-Suite interviews.*

Morris: What were the most important influences from earlier in your life that shaped who you are today?

Dellinger: My early influences, and the challenges that shaped me to be the gritty, determined woman I am, came from growing up in the projects. My childhood experiences gave me a thick skin and strength that enables me to get through what will make most people weak and buckle at the knees.

I was raised by my mother. My brother and I had different fathers. His father was a pimp. My father came from an affluent family, but in his eyes, my mother wasn't good enough for him, so they never married. I was a result of that love affair, but I spent most of my time with her.

In her home, we were food insecure, we lived in an area where the crack epidemic ran rampant, and there was gang activity. It was horrific. My brother was in a gang, and our house got shot up multiple times by a rival gang. My best friend's brother was murdered at 16, and I saw a lot of my brother's friends murdered.

I couldn't believe why my mom didn't get us out of there, we were in a circle of crime and fear. What gave me the strength to move forward was seeing my father every other weekend. He was college-educated, with a great career, and lived in a nice and safe neighborhood. We would frequent art museums, spoken-word events, concerts, dine at nice restaurants, and he would take me shopping every visit. I was in heaven.

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do one of two things for you.*

I immediately saw the direct correlation of how education affects your life. That gave me my direction. And while I was able to see two lifestyles, my brother only saw the one, and to this day, he's still in and out of jail, off and on drugs.

Growing up in such a tough environment can do one of two things for you. It can either make you stronger and force you to elevate and thrive or bring you down and keep you down. I decided to do what would be best for me and my family and my legacy and my children, and that was to stop the generational cycle of poverty.

It gave me the willpower to do so, so I'm very proud of my background now. I used to be ashamed of it because so many friends of mine come from nice two-parent homes, and they are all either Ivy League graduates or from top HBCU schools like Howard and Spelman. I'm the one girl in our group who has that jaded background, but I bring a little flavor to our group, and now we're all successful.

My role model of success early on, what I wanted to be and emulate, was the *Cosby Show*. That's why I have four kids. That sounds so silly, I know, but that picture of big, beautiful, happy family, where money wasn't a concern and there was just love and comfort, was my model of success.

And my gritty background really gave me the ability to push through all of the incredibly challenging, hard, disruptive times you face as an entrepreneur. I powered through all the no's. I don't "eat 'no' for breakfast," like Kamala Harris says. But I can digest it.

Morris: Where did you go to college?

Dellinger: I was slated to go to Spelman, however, I got pregnant before my departure, so I stayed home and attended CSU, Sacramento (California State University in Sacramento). I stayed with my mom because I needed her help with my baby, because my daughter's father

left me when I was six months pregnant. I went to night school for the first three years of her life while my mom looked after her when she got off work. Then I went back to school full-time.

Bryant: What was your big break and how did you end up starting your own business?

Dellinger: I love to tell this story because I am so happy how it ended. I got an opportunity to work for a technology company as an intern, and they kept me on after my internship was over and I worked part-time. I worked all day on Monday, Wednesday and Friday, and went to school full-time on Tuesday and Thursday.

I did such a great job that they kept me on full-time. They did not keep any other interns and after graduation they offered me two jobs. I worked for three amazing managers before I worked for someone who was horrific. It was the most trying, challenging, stressful time of my life. He put me on a corrective action plan, even though I knew I was performing well.

He would never look me in the eye or address me directly. I didn't know what I had done, and I had never experienced this before. I hadn't had any racist experiences to that day because I grew up and went to school in a mostly Black neighborhood.

So when I got to corporate America, I didn't expect anything different. I was the only woman of color in his group, and the way he dealt with me was very telling over time. He eventually got a promotion and moved away, and I got a new and much better manager.

That put a fire in me. That changed me.

But that experience made me so nervous because I learned that at any given moment, someone else could have my financial destiny, even temporarily, in the palm of their hands. That put a fire in me. That changed me.

I had to do something else a little more flexible, so I went to work in sales for a big pharmaceutical company. I was diligent with my time, and I would come home after my meetings with doctors to work on CURLS. I then got laid off with a severance package because they had too many salespeople, but it wound up being a blessing I was able to invest that money in the business.

The idea originally came to me when my then-fiancé, who's my husband now, took me to Santa Barbara for my birthday. We were at dinner overlooking the ocean, and I remember looking at some ideas that I had printed out on a piece of paper, and we came up with the plan together. He said, "Mahisha, you're always mixing all these oils and blending stuff at home. Why don't you do something in haircare?"

We launched April 2, 2002, e-commerce only. Flipped the switch on, and I had eight orders

that day. I was so happy. That's how it started.

Morris: What headwinds did you face because of race after you launched CURLS, and what tailwinds helped you navigate them?

Dellinger: I faced a lot of skepticism from retailers. They didn't see the value of my products to their customers. I was stunned but I didn't stop. Then I met a woman named Linda Sullivan from Target, a blonde, blue-eyed buyer who saw the value of my products. She's the one who created the first "textured category" in retail with four brands that included CURLS, as well as Miss Jessie's, Shea Moisture and J Carter.

She gave us a trial in 100 stores to see how we would do. Went from 100 to 300 to 600 to 900 stores to nationwide. And along the way, other retailers started to take notice and to call us because they saw that this was booming. That's how this natural category started, with Linda finding us "underground brands," and taking a chance on us.

Bryant: Race is an uncomfortable conversation in corporate America. Why is that and what are your thoughts on how to have more productive discussions?

Dellinger: We have to first be honest and put it all on the table. I don't think everyone is willing to have a conversation. I'm so sick of hearing, "Why don't you all get over it, people?" How can we get over it if it's not over? How can we get over something that's still happening?

I also sometimes hear, "Stop complaining. Stop playing the victim card, stop playing the race card." My answer to that is, I'm not playing the race card because I've taken the lemons I was handed in life and made the best-tasting lemonade money, so I'm not wallowing in anything. But I hear that a lot, and it discredits what is actually happening. We can't move on until we acknowledge the fact that it's still a problem.

Morris: You talked a lot about grit and how that was a big motivator for you in working hard to change your environment. Your kids are not having that same experience, so how do you build grit and determination in them?

Dellinger: It's a good question. Two of my kids are just naturally driven, and the youngest says, "I'm taking over CURLS." And she's serious about it. That's how I actually can coax her to do something. If she doesn't want to read a book, I'll say, "You can't take over CURLS if you don't read a lot." Then she'll go read.

But they're not given everything. We make sure that they work for it. My oldest, the 27-year-old, works for me, and I give her the hardest time out of everyone. In any given staff meeting, I might call her out, and she sometimes doesn't like it. She's been fired three times.

She's back, and doing much better now, but I challenge her and I let her know that she needs

to understand that this is the real world and you need to bring your A game at all times, and don't give me halfway because I'm your mother. So I'm able to kind of mold her at work.

My youngest has the entrepreneurial spirit. When COVID happened, and I couldn't get the green juices that I usually drink. So she started making them with our fruit press, and she said, "Okay, you used to pay \$8 for the juices, but you're going to pay me \$10 because you can't get them anymore." And if I didn't pay her by that Monday, she would give me an invoice. I realized she's got it.

Bryant: What advice do you give to young people now, especially aspiring entrepreneurs?

Dellinger: I've been sharing a lot of advice over the years, including on my show at OWN, *Mind Your Business with Mahisha*, and the Black Girls Making Millions Academy that I started to help women build successful businesses.

First, don't go it alone. Create your tribe. Do not try to be that rock star and go it alone and have that badge of honor. Get a good circle of people around you. Then make sure you have the resources in your circle. Do your due diligence. Don't just launch your product because you think it's cute to have an eyelash business. I'm sick of seeing eyelash businesses pop up every day. They're not unique.

Figure out what you can do to be different in your category. Figure out how you can excel. Understand the market inside and out because 80 percent of new businesses will fail by Year 5, so do everything in your power to make sure you're not part of the 80 percent. And you have to have a business plan. Failing to plan is planning to fail, so how do you know where you're going if you don't have a roadmap?

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