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**Leading in the B-Suite**

Powerful conversations about life, race and leadership

📧 Biweekly newsletter

## "Sometimes You've Got To Try To Turn The Headwind Into A Tailwind"

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***Byron Auguste**, CEO and co-founder of **Opportunity@Work**, a nonprofit social enterprise focused on expanding access to career opportunities, shared powerful 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 important early influences for you?**

Auguste: I was shaped by my immediate family, and I also have a very large extended family. Collectively, we cover the whole socioeconomic spectrum. There is a lot of love and looking out for each other. But I've also learned that while all the things that people say are true about what will help you succeed, like study hard and work hard, it's also true that there's a lot of unpredictability in life.

Some people subscribe to the idea that there's some unidimensional vector of merit, so that if something is wrong in your life, it's because you did something wrong. I have enough data points from my extended family to know that it's not that simple. There's a lot more to the story about how people end up where they are in life.

In terms of my immediate family, my mother was trained as an architectural draftsman. She was the first woman to graduate from her technical college, but when my younger brother was born, she became an insurance agent because it gave her more control over her schedule. She had a real client-service ethos that I learned from her.

My father was more of a dreamer and always wanted to try something new. In 1970, when he was working as a shipping clerk at a factory in Detroit, he saw an ad for learning COBOL. He had never worked in an office, but he quit his job and ultimately became a computer programmer. That was a big part of my family's trajectory in the middle class.

**Bryant: If you look back over the course of your career, what were some of your big breaks?**

Auguste: I'm not quite sure how to sort of make sense of the whole story because some of it was intentional, but you also discover things along the way by pursuing things that look interesting. When I took the PSAT, there was this little bubble that said Telluride Association.

I had no idea what that was, and there was no explanation of it. You could fill in the bubble or not. I filled it in. It turns out that if you got a certain score or higher on the PSAT and you filled in this bubble, that they invite you to apply to the summer program.

I applied, got in, and it was a six-week summer program after my junior year in high school. I met all these people from around the country, including people from the East Coast who were applying to many colleges that I knew nothing about. So I applied to colleges that I probably would not have applied to, and I ended up going to Yale.

Most of the other Black students at Yale were wondering, "Where are all the Black people?" But for me, coming from northeast Phoenix, I was like, "Wow, look at all the Black people." My high school had 2,600 students, and there were 23 Black kids. So Yale was a big step up in terms of diversity for me. I was always relatively comfortable in different social settings, with different mixes of people.

*You always have this second track in your head that's constantly calibrating what's going on from a racial lens.*

I went to Yale and I did economics and political science, and then ended up going to the UK to do my doctorate at Oxford. Through that, I did a bunch of work in the Caribbean Basin and the Ivory Coast in West Africa. Those two experiences had an impact on me, because you forget about being Black in those countries because everybody's Black.

I don't know if everybody experiences this the same way, but being Black in the United

States in professional environments, you always have this second track in your head that's constantly calibrating what's going on from a racial lens. But in those countries, that track went away after three or four weeks, and it was the most interesting thing because you realize that having to do that nonstop is a big cognitive load.

One thing that is underestimated is how much of a burden is on Black people to be constantly doing this in the workplace.

**Morris: Then you started a 20-year career at McKinsey. Tell us about that.**

Auguste: When I was at grad school for economics, a McKinsey recruiting brochure was put in my campus mailbox. I'd never heard of McKinsey. At the time they were conducting an experiment to see whether people without MBAs could succeed in business.

I was the ninth Black partner elected in McKinsey's history, but I was the first Black director, or senior partner. I set a personal goal to ensure that we'd have more Black directors. It was a 30-year period, from 1975 to 2005, between McKinsey naming the first Black partner and the first Black senior partner, or Director. Within three years after me being elected as the first Black Director, we had six Black Directors elected.

Of course there was an amazing talent pool of multifaceted leaders with deep expertise, but that had been true for years. What also mattered was to be part of the discussions about what opportunities our up-and-coming leaders were getting. I did that on a number of occasions. I didn't encounter a lot of resistance, but it was pretty clear that no one would necessarily have thought of certain people had I not been in the conversation.

I did not perceive any risk to myself in saying, "We should put this person in this role," because I knew they were great talents. Of course it might not have worked because it might not have worked with anyone. Sometimes you win, sometimes you lose. But I think there is sometimes a fear of, "What if the Black executive fails?" Well, everybody fails sometimes.

But what attribution do you have? When a White executive fails at something, they don't say, "Oh my God, White people. They're never going to be able to hack it." That would be a silly thing to think, but it's equally silly to think that about a Black executive. Think about how stupid that discussion is, but it happens all the time.

**Bryant: Where does your drive come from?**

Auguste: Curiosity is as much of a driver as anything else, and I also like things to work. It's disappointing and somewhat irritating when things don't work. We have a lot of systems that really don't work very well. The problem I'm working on right now stems from the fact that there is so much talent and potential that comes in many different forms, but in the business world, we've narrowed the pool of people who we allow to contribute at a certain level to

those who earn bachelor's degrees. But that's an accomplishment that typically takes \$60,000 and many years of your life.

There's a lot of people who try to get a degree, but they run out of money or their family needs them. There's just so many things that happen. And so companies are screening out all these people before they assess their skills. And since most people learn their skills by working, the skills gap becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy.

*The skills gap becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy.*

Racism runs pretty deep in human experience, and that's hard to fix, but the skills gap doesn't seem like it should be so hard to fix. I find that working together to solve common problems tends to be a good way to build relationships and to build trust. I know Black people are just as talented as White people, and that Black people would therefore do far better in a system that's equitable, different from the one we have now.

The flip side of racism, and the ways in which it limits Black people's progression, is that there's quite a talent arbitrage opportunity. For me, if I see a Black person doing a job in an environment that's not that generally accommodating to Black people — and if you think about the constraints and obstacles Black people face — I would assume, until proven otherwise, that they're likely better than average at reading the room and communicating.

**Morris: What are some headwinds you've faced in your career because you are Black, and what are some of the tailwinds that helped you navigate them?**

Auguste: Sometimes you've got to try to turn the headwind into a tailwind. One example is that I've been pretty consistently underestimated coming into new situations. If you internalize that, that's very damaging. But if you don't internalize that, and if you just notice it kind of as a fact, then you can do something with it.

When I joined McKinsey, I didn't have an MBA. There was definitely a fair amount of skepticism about me. On my first project, the partner absolutely did not want me on the team. But what was hilarious about it was that the problem we were working on was like a super-simplified version of one chapter in my PhD dissertation.

So I could do my job and the manager's job in half the time. After a couple of moments like that, all of a sudden I had a reputation as a person who could do all these different things.

One piece of advice I would always give my Black colleagues at McKinsey, and I think this is true for anyone who's a little bit underrepresented and kind of underrated, is to speak up. It's generally good advice, but here's a specific reason. If a White guy from Harvard Business School was quiet throughout a whole meeting, the talk in the hall afterward would

be about how “thoughtful” he is. But if it’s a Black woman who’s quiet, then people will wonder if she’s following the discussion.

The fact is you’re going to be noticed. You’re not going to be able to hide. So you have to put your best foot forward. I would speak up very early at a meeting, because it doesn’t get easier as time goes on. You’ve got to establish your presence.

**Bryant: What should companies be doing to move the needle on diversity?**

Auguste: The most important thing is to examine your business processes with respect to race, as in the core work that people actually do with respect to your customers, with respect to your internal advancement, with respect to your contractors and vendors.

What does your supply chain look like? And if your supply chain has very few businesses owned by people of color, and you’re doing very little to develop that in your supply chain, why not? I would spend the time going out of your way to build a more diverse supplier base.

I’m not against having conversations about race in the workplace, but if you want to actually change something, you better make time to do the work to change it. It’s better for the work on racial equity to be embedded in your business where people are spending 98 percent of their time rather than just being set aside for the 2 percent of professional development. I’m not against consciousness raising, but I’m strongly biased toward embedding it in a change in practices.

*Are we trying to fix Black people or are we  
trying to fix the system?*

If you see a system that’s generating hugely unequal outcomes for Black people and White people, the first question you’ve got to ask yourself is, do you think there’s something wrong with Black people, or do you think there’s something wrong with your system? Because it’s clearly one or the other. So let’s start with where you are on that. Are we trying to fix Black people or are we trying to fix the system? That’s question number one.

I will put that question out there rather than leaving it buried. Because if you think there’s something wrong with Black people, then I’m not going to be doing that work with you, because that’s not the premise I’m working from. But if you think, well, I guess there must be something wrong with the system, then I’m ready to work with you.

**Morris: What is your best career and life advice for young and mid-career Black professionals?**

Auguste: You should think about mentorship as a two-way street, because a mentor-protégé

relationship is more symbiotic. Mentors need protégés just like protégés need mentors. When a mentor provides smart advice, the protégé should go back to the mentor to say, this is what I tried and this is what I learned, thank you. That's very satisfying to the mentor, and so if you work on being a good protégé, you usually can get a lot of mentors.

Some of the people who helped me the most as mentors were Black administrative assistants. I didn't know anything about how McKinsey worked. They knew everything and went out of their way to look out for me and coach me.

The other thing that I mentioned earlier is to have confidence in yourself and what you can offer. How institutions or people respond to you is one thing, and you can think about that and notice it and tweak it and try to make it work better.

But what you have to offer is a different thing, and be clear about the distinction. There's so much to do in the world. If the place you're working is really frustrating and you don't think you can be your best self, you should, like LeBron, take your talents somewhere else and find a better place to contribute.

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