



Roy Weathers



Leading in the B-Suite

Powerful conversations about life, race and leadership

📧 Biweekly newsletter

"Lean Into The Sponsors And Mentors Who Have Your Best Interest At Heart"

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***Roy Weathers**, vice chair of PwC and the chief executive of **CEO Action for Racial Equity**, 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: Who were some of the biggest influences early in your life?

Weathers: Without a doubt, my parents. I lost my mom about five years ago, but I was reflecting the other day on how much of the way I view the world was shaped by my parents, including this notion that I am my brother's keeper in terms of caring for other people, making sure that you have empathy where needed and treating other human beings with dignity and respect.

I grew up in a small town, Blacksburg, South Carolina, with about 2,000 people. We used to refer to our stoplight as a caution light. I am the oldest of four — two boys, two girls. I'm first-generation college. My brother went on a basketball scholarship, and my two sisters both have PhDs, one in education and one in speech pathology.

That speaks volumes about our parents, who did not have a formal education. My father left high school to join the military, but my parents' perspective on education ran deep in our family. Their lack of education was not an excuse, a barrier, or a hindrance for what they expected of us.

Morris: Was the town you grew up in predominantly Black?

Weathers: No, it was not. If you close your eyes and imagine what a small, 2,000-person town in South Carolina that's not a predominantly place of color might entail, you would hit on most of what I grew up with and around. I saw things in my early years that taught me how people can form perspectives about me just by looking at me.

And at that point in time in the South, there would sometimes be a cross-burning somewhere in the town through a weekend. So you had a community of many people who cared for each other because it was a very small town, but there were others in the town who didn't share that perspective. That was just the time.

Bryant: What were your big breaks early on that set your career on a higher trajectory?

Weathers: It was well-intentioned, very supportive individuals who did not look like me, but they were determined to help me and make sure that I was successful. That meant tough feedback at times, but it also meant reassuring feedback at other times, and opportunity. I spent a number of years in PwC's Atlanta office, and then transferred to our New York office.

When I made partner, a very senior executive said to me, "You know this other executive is a huge fan of yours." And I paused, because that executive and I had barely spoken. And he said to me, "He is a huge advocate for you."

You always have to perform. But performing is not all of it. You need the support, you need the sponsorship, you need the opportunities.

Morris: Can you talk about the art of getting mentors and sponsors?

Weathers: You can ask someone to be a mentor, but sponsoring is a little different in that it's hard to ask someone to sponsor you. You're recognized and identified by someone who decides to take a deeper interest in your progress. And what I tell people all the time is that while you can't pick a sponsor, you can work on making yourself more sponsorable.

You have to appreciate that well-intended folks who can influence your career are always watching. That mentor, that sponsor who could really set you off on a great path could be right around the corner.

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and mentoring from a broad array of
individuals.*

Also, be open to who they are, where they come from, what they look like, what their background is and what their initial perspective might be. Growing up in an industry where there weren't a lot of people who looked like me, I had to get really comfortable taking advice and mentoring from a broad array of individuals.

So you can't be overly selective in who you want to be your mentor or your sponsor. You have to be open. Then once you have that relationship established, respect it. Make sure you're giving as much as you're getting.

Bryant: Where does your drive and your stamina come from?

Weathers: Watching my parents achieve what they did with as little as they had from an education perspective was instrumental in building a no-excuses respect for working hard. And I do feel responsible for making sure that we're moving in the right direction, whether it's in my personal or professional life.

I have this saying: "We are they." I know that that may not be grammatically correct, but when people say, "Somebody should figure out how to do this," or "We should go grow this business," I feel like "we" are "they." I always just instantly feel like I'm one of the people who should be doing that.

Morris: What headwinds have you faced in your career as a Black man, and what tailwinds helped you navigate through them?

Weathers: I run into people all the time who have different perspectives, but I focus on moving forward and having more of a mindset around how and why things occur. There have been client experiences when people made assumptions about my role that were incorrect. There's an eight-second clock that goes off in my head, and I need to make a connection and level-set on what's happening, including the fact that I'm leading the team.

I can tell right away if people are making some assumptions about me that are wrong, and I assume that they are well-intended and not well-informed. And there are times when I'm disappointed even after they're informed, because they are not as well-intended.

But that makes it not about me. It makes it about the situation. And my approach is to be careful about where I spend my energy. I have things to do. It helps me mentally. And candidly, those difficult situations often quickly correct themselves, with people going overboard to demonstrate that they are well-intended.

Bryant: You mentioned that eight-second clock in your head to make a connection.

Can you talk more about that?

Weathers: I assume I have about eight seconds to engage you in a way that connects us and puts you at ease with whatever the situation is, and to understand your perspective, what you're thinking, and what your expectations are. I know that sounds like a short period of time, but you'd be surprised how much you can gauge when you're really focused for the first eight seconds of some conversation.

I appreciate that different people have different perspectives. Some people are more comfortable than others around Black people. In this country, there are still a lot of people who live their lives separately. I talk about cultural dexterity a lot. Stretch yourself, spend time in different places and meet people who are different than you in every possible way you can.

Morris: This question about knowing when and how to engage in moments of headwinds is difficult. What advice would you give to young Black professionals?

Weathers: You have to find your own comfort level, but here are a couple of factors that I consider. First of all, I am very focused on where I put my energy. And if someone is going to have a perspective about me that's not well-intended or well-informed, I have to decide whether to devote energy to that.

We all have our life "hard drives" that includes what our parents told us and what we tell ourselves. Am I going to engage and try to change someone's life hard drive? Because that's going to take some of my life hard drive to do that.

It's about opening up the conversation.

I'm big on relationships that allow for candid conversation. I try to have relationships where you can tell me what you think and I can tell you what I think. It's not about calling people out or trying to make them feel a particular way. It's about opening up the conversation, and being willing to share perspectives and explain what we think and mean.

There were times early in my career when I would get upset by certain situations. I once called up my executive coach to tell her about something that had upset me. And she said, "You know, I think you should just calm down. They're actually not thinking about you that much. You may be right about them, but people have lives, and they're not thinking about you that much." I trusted her and she knew me, and she had my best interest at heart. And it was such an important message.

Bryant: Can you share other thoughts on how to have constructive conversations about race?

Weathers: It's about being human. There are components of being human that make it challenging to talk about race, and there are components of being human that I believe can make it more comfortable to talk about race. It's about finding the human moments and caring.

And you have to avoid becoming paralyzed by the goal of being perfect. It doesn't matter which side of the conversation you're on. Last summer, after the killing of George Floyd, I got calls from people I hadn't talked to in a long time. My White friends were calling to check in. And with each one, I encouraged them not to just check in with me because they knew me. Make sure you take that caring nature to other folks of color who you may not know as well, and don't worry about being perfect.

We should be thoughtful, we should be attentive to the words we use and how we engage people. We shouldn't be careless or reckless, but this notion of being perfect stops us from talking. I believe that we're in a once-in-a-generation moment of caring, awareness, interest, and curiosity. I often ask people to engage and to be curious. Ask questions. Share your perspective. We're all human, so be human, and humans react to humanity from each other.

Work on increasing your personal culture dexterity.

And work on increasing your personal culture dexterity — your ability to relate and connect and be relatable to other people. Make it a thing that's worth perfecting, just like other parts of your life, because the ROI of learning more about individuals and increasing your comfort level is indescribable.

I spent two years as our Chief Diversity Officer, and I learned that most people rally around the topic of diversity from three perspectives: head, heart, wallet. It's either the head, as in, "What are the numbers? What are the metrics? What are we trying to do?" Or it's heart: "It's the right thing to do. Why do we need goals?" Or it's about the wallet: "It's important to my business and my brand."

And what I say to people is. just pick one. If you pick two or all three, that would be great. But start with one. There's work to do, so pick one and then let's get on with doing the work.

Morris: Can you share some of the background of the [CEO Action for Diversity and Inclusion](#) initiative?

Weathers: It started several years ago, when we were all forming a new leadership team at PwC. I was running our tax business in the US and Mexico, and Tim Ryan was our newly minted CEO. There were a number of shootings throughout Texas, and our employees' voices were growing louder about how we would engage.

From that, there were a number of conversations, and Tim led the way to forming CEO Action for Diversity and Inclusion. Early on, about 20 CEOs raised their hand, and many more said no. Today, there are nearly 2,000 CEOs in signatory organizations that have taken the pledge, which has three components — to share what you're doing, to provide a safe environment for your employees, and to have dialogues and provide training. The fourth one we've added is to have a plan and share it with your board.

Bryant: We've touched on some of this already, but what other career and life advice would you give to an audience of young Black professionals?

Weathers: Start to figure out what you're good at and make sure you're leaning into that. I would also say be open to what those sponsors believe would be great next steps for you. You cannot see everything that's around the corner. You cannot see all the things that an experienced executive in your organization has seen.

So at some point, you have to trust. At some point, you have to try. At some point, you have to appreciate that if you're just moving forward based on your own experience, it's going to be limited. So lean into the sponsors and mentors who have your best interest at heart.

And get comfortable being uncomfortable because when I look back over my career, I've been asked to do things that candidly no one else wanted to do. I was sometimes the last one standing after others were asked. But I grew from those projects. You put the things you do in your backpack of experience and they accumulate, so take advantage of those moments.

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