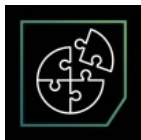




Freeman Hrabowski



### Leading in the B-Suite

Powerful conversations about life, race and leadership

# "Speak The Truth In A Way That Allows People To Hear What You Are Saying"

Published on July 27, 2021



Adam Bryant [in](#)

Managing Director at The ExCo Group (formerly Merryck & Co. Americas)

*Dr. Freeman Hrabowski, President of University of*

*Maryland, Baltimore County*, 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 some of the biggest influences early in your life that helped shape your values?**

Hrabowski: I grew up in the Deep South, and I remember sitting in the back of church when I was 12 and listening to a minister speak. I didn't want to be there, and my parents were placating me with the two things I loved the most — math and food. I was eating M&Ms, the good kind with peanuts, and I was doing algebra.

The minister was Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., and he said that if the children participate in this peaceful protest that was being planned, all of America will understand that even our young people know the difference between right and wrong, and that they will be able to get a better education.

And I was always wanting to know what was happening in White schools because their schools had more resources while we always got worn, hand-me-down books. I listened to what Dr. King said, and I did march. I was a child leader in the civil rights movement. I was accustomed to speaking in church. Dr. King's people had me speaking a lot. That experience was as empowering as any I've had because it taught me that even children can have some impact on their own lives.

We were arrested as part of that protest, and we spent five horrible days in jail. Dr. King came to us and said, “What you’re doing now will have an impact on children who have not yet been born.” My life has been focused on educating students of all types, but with a special interest in helping kids of color to succeed and to excel, particularly in science.

**Bryant: What were some of the big breaks earlier in your career?**

Hrabowski: I was fortunate that my parents were teachers, and so education was always the name of the game. My mother was an English teacher who became a math teacher, so I was the guinea pig in understanding the relationship between reading and thinking and solving math problems. If you can solve word problems by being able to read and think well, you can do chemistry or physics because those involve word problems, too.

One summer, they sent me to Springfield, Mass., to study, and the education was far more rigorous than what I had experienced before. All the other kids were White. The teachers wouldn’t talk to me and the other kids wouldn’t talk to me. When I raised my hand in class, even if nobody else had, the teacher would just look right through me every time. They were not mean; they just ignored me. Like Ralph Ellison’s *Invisible Man*.

Then in 11th grade, I participated in a National Science Foundation program at Tuskegee University for high-achieving kids. I was 13 years old, because I had skipped some grades, and all the other students were 16. They called the professor “Doc,” and I said, “He’s not a physician.”

They said, “No, he’s a PhD.” “What’s a PhD?” I said. And they explained, “Well, that’s the highest degree you can get.”

*“Good morning, Dr.  
Hrabowski.”*

So from age 13, I was going to do two things. I was going to become a math teacher like that professor, and I was going to have a PhD. Even at age 13, I would get up in the morning, and before I washed my face, I would look in the mirror and say, “Good morning, Dr. Hrabowski.” And I did that every day until I finished my doctorate when I was 24. I wanted to be someone who excited students about learning and who pushed them to be better than they ever thought they could be.

**Morris: Can we go back to that story about Springfield, when the other students and the teacher didn’t talk to you. How did you deal with that?**

Hrabowski: I had been fortunate to have older parents who had treated me as a thinking person from a young age, and I was a gregarious little chubby kid who got along with everybody. I was always younger than the other kids, because I had skipped grades, so I had to make up for it by making them laugh so they wouldn’t think I was just a little nerd. I was a nerd, but I was a funny nerd.

During that time in Springfield, I did call my parents and told them that nobody liked me there. And my mother said, “How is the education?” I

said, “It’s really good. It’s really hard, Mom. I’m loving it. I’m learning so much.” And then she said, “How many other Black children are in your class?” And I said none.

She said, “Well, how many Black kids do you think there are from Birmingham who are getting this quality of education?” I said, “I don’t think there are many.” And she said, “You know I love you, right? Well, I’m going to tell you something that’s going to sound a little tough. Son, suck it up. I did not send you there to be loved. I sent you there to see what the world was like and to be educated, and I’m so proud of you.”

I was stunned. Years later, my mother said she got off the phone and cried like a baby. She was so angry they were treating me like that, but she had to toughen me up. The world will not necessarily be fair, the world will not necessarily even like you, but just get that work done and you’ll be okay. It was a tough lesson to learn, but it was an important lesson.

**Bryant: What are some of the other headwinds that you’ve faced because of your race, and what are some of the tailwinds that helped you navigate them?**

Hrabowski: In grad school for math, I was the only Black student in the class and younger than the others, and usually the class was all White men and the professors were all White men, except for one White woman who was not tenured, and she was very supportive of me.

People didn't expect me to be in the classes, and it was devastating when a professor would come in and look right at me out of all the kids in the class and say, "You do know this is Algebraic Theory?" After it happened the first time, I learned to ask the question first, and say to the professor, "This is Algebraic Theory, right?" I did that in every class, and the White boys would kind of smirk. They understood what I was doing.

I would ask the professors questions in class about the math problems, such as, "You went from Step 3 to Step 10 without explaining it. I can get to Step 5, but how did you get the rest?" Every time, the professors would say, "Isn't it obvious?" That was the perfect line that I got all the time. Everybody else would smirk. None of the other students would ask questions.

*I needed help and sought it  
out. And it paid off.*

But I had been taught to ask questions, so I stopped asking them in class and went instead to the professors' offices. I did well. I got all As. Some of the White boys got C's, so they were acting like they knew the answers by not asking questions, but they really didn't know. I needed help and sought it out. And it paid off.

Even later, when I became a university president, Whites said I got the job because I was Black. Blacks said that I would just be in the job for a year so the school could say they had a Black president. This was the

larger community talking, because they were not accustomed to anybody being a Black president of a predominantly White institution, which UMBC was at the time.

When I went into certain situations, where they saw the name Hrabowski beforehand but had not seen my picture, they were expecting somebody Polish. And it would take some time for them to get beyond the shock because what they really wanted to ask was how I got that name [he is the great-great-grandson of a Polish-American slave owner]. But I've been in this role for 29 years now, so more people know who I am.

Most people will be fair, even when they have prejudices. I've been comfortable in pointing out the prejudices or the assumptions that people make because I'm Black, but most people will give you a chance. As I tell my students, they will at least listen when you talk, and if you can solve problems and you can think critically, most people eventually begin to respect you for your thinking.

**Morris: Did all those experiences make you angry?**

Hrabowski: My forebears went through so much more than I did, on so many levels. I'm standing on the shoulders of people who scrubbed floors and women who had to deal with all kinds of indignities so that I could be here today. I was very fortunate to be in an educated home at a time when things were really rough in one of the toughest cities in the country, and yet the Black community protected us in so many ways.

I did feel hatred. Being in jail as a child was an awful experience. When we were arrested, the police commissioner picked me up, spat in my face, and threw me into the police wagon. For years, I hated that man. When he died, my mother called me, and she was crying, and I said, “How could you cry for this man? He was awful to me.”

She said, “Freeman, I’m realizing he was somebody’s child, and what a shame he never had somebody to teach him love. What a shame he went through life hating people because of their race.” And somehow, she made me angry enough to cry. I said, “Why would you make me cry for this man?”

But it was a wonderful moment of catharsis for me that with all that hatred I felt, what did it teach me? People can be so cruel or so insensitive, but you have to ask why. And her point is we’re all products of our childhood experiences. Now, if we’re educated, we should be able to get beyond some of those childhood experiences.

I have found it much healthier to take that perspective than to allow myself to be defined by the cruelty of others or to be consumed by anger and hatred. That doesn’t mean I can’t say this is wrong. It doesn’t mean I won’t put my energy into making it better, but I want to be as healthy as possible and I want my students to be as healthy as possible.

**Bryant: What’s your advice to young Black professionals who are learning to navigate those inevitable moments of micro-aggression. When and how should they engage on those?**



Hrabowski: Number one, learn how to observe human behavior, and understand what emotional intelligence means. Sometimes that wisdom means not always saying what you know or waiting until you understand a situation better. And something we say to our students all the time is to learn how to agree to disagree with civility.

My mother would sometimes quote Emily Dickinson's line to me: "Tell all the truth but tell it slant." If you push somebody into a corner by being direct with them, they're going to come back at you or shut down. So you have to always remember, what's your goal? What are you trying to achieve here?

*"Tell all the truth but tell it  
slant."*

First of all, you're trying to build a brand for yourself as somebody who knows how to work effectively in this environment. Second, you want to speak truth, but you want to know how to speak the truth in a way that allows people to hear what you are saying.

I recently had to point out to some officials at a university their abysmal performance when it came to students of color in science.

I said, "Now, I want you to know I'm not saying this as an angry Black man. I'm saying this as a mathematician looking at the data and because I care about you, but you need to know your performance in this area is really bad." Sometimes humor can cut the tension. And then

I said, “And we’ve got problems on my campus too.” It’s the manner as much as the matter that can lead to a successful outcome.

If you become angry and you just put it out there or you write something and you send it, you can’t take it back. Give yourself time to think through which approach will be most effective. There’s a difference between being right and being wise, and so you need to understand that gray area.

**Morris: What other career and life advice do you give to graduating students?**

Hrabowski: Believe in yourself first. Don’t let anyone else define who you are. Don’t get discouraged if people look at you as if they’re not sure whether you should be in the room. Don’t even get discouraged if people talk over you or don’t listen to your point of view. You’ve got to use your brain power to figure out when and how to make yourself effective in being heard.

And most important, don’t limit how far you can go. Keep your mind open to the possibilities. Connect to other people. Build a sense of community with some group that can give you support, and remember there are a lot of people in power – including White men and women – who can be helpful. Identify people who can be allies to the work we’re doing. We cannot do it by ourselves. Find the people who will elevate you.

***Be sure to subscribe [here](#) if you want to receive all our***

***future Leading in the B-Suite™ interviews. And check out our previous interviews with:***

- ***[Ryan Williams](#), co-founder and CEO of Cadre***
- ***[Debra Lee](#), the former CEO of BET Networks and partner of The Monarchs Collective***
- ***[Roy Weathers](#), vice chair of PwC and chief executive of CEO Action for Racial Equity***
- ***[Byron Auguste](#), CEO and co-founder of Opportunity@Work***
- ***[Barry Lawson Williams](#), board director***
- ***[Mahisha Dellinger](#), CEO of CURLS***
- ***[Eric Kelly](#), CEO of Overland Tandberg***
- ***[Michael Mathieu](#), CEO of Prox***
- ***[Crystal Ashby](#), former CEO of Executive Leadership Council***
- ***[Lori Dickerson Fouché](#), former CEO of TIAA Financial Solutions***
- ***[Gary S. May](#), Chancellor of UC Davis***

- ***Sheila Talton, CEO of Gray Matter Analytics***
- ***Harry L. Williams, CEO of the Thurgood Marshall College Fund***
- ***Jessie Woolley-Wilson, CEO of DreamBox Learning***
- ***Lisa Price, founder of Carol's Daughter***
- ***Lloyd Carney, former CEO of Brocade Communications***
- ***Don Peebles, CEO of The Peebles Corporation***
- ***Ron Williams, former CEO of Aetna***
- ***Ursula Burns, former CEO of Xerox***
- ***Robert L. Johnson, co-founder of BET***
- ***Melody Hobson, co-CEO of Ariel Investments***
- ***Ruth Simmons, president of Prairie View A&M University***
- ***Carlos Watson, CEO of OZY Media***