



Lenny Comma



### Leading in the B-Suite

Powerful conversations about life, race and leadership

📅 Biweekly newsletter

# "There Are No Better Tailwinds Than Results And Relationships"

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***Lenny Comma, the former chairman and CEO of Jack***

*in the Box restaurants who is now a mentor with [The ExCo Group](#), 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 early influences that really shaped who you are?

Comma: My parents are immigrants from Trinidad, and they came to New York when the city was growing in very ethnocentric ways. Every community was largely divided by nationality and race, so you had an Irish neighborhood, an Italian neighborhood, a Puerto Rican neighborhood, a Caribbean Islander neighborhood, and the list went on.

Because people were looking for their own communities as they immigrated to the US, they found support from those communities, but it also developed a deeper form of ethnocentrism, bordering on racism, as those communities never really took the opportunity to integrate with one another.

So I was raised in this house with immigrant parents who thought the streets were paved with gold and that you should just keep your nose to the grindstone — “As long as they sign your paycheck, you’re good.” That helped us not to allow our identities to be determined by what other people felt about us. That was a good thing.

The bad thing was that my parents were relatively neutral on racial issues. They didn't necessarily take a stand, although they did speak openly against the racism we were experiencing. I grew up in an all-Black neighborhood, with folks whose families had lived for multiple generations in this country, and their perspective was a little different than my parents. It was more about joining the movement.

And because I was influenced heavily by my peer group, I felt loyalty to the Black community and the need to raise my voice about things that I thought were unjust. I started experiencing those things mainly in my teenage years when I started playing sports, particularly those that didn't have a lot of Black players where I lived.

**Bryant: What were those experiences?**

Comma: The first time I experienced deep racism was when I joined my first soccer team at 11 years old. I'd been playing football and basketball before that, and in those sports, there were lots of Black folks. I was a good football player. I got a track and field scholarship that paid for half my tuition. Football was sort of my thing in public, but I loved playing soccer, and I didn't talk about it in my neighborhood because there was this sense that soccer was for White people.

But when I went into soccer, I was one of only two or three in all of Long Island who were Black players on the soccer teams at the time. When I walked onto a soccer field, I would have other players come up to me and say racist things to me. They were just regurgitating the same

language that they heard at home, and I was kind of floored by it and didn't even know what to say. It just made me very uncomfortable.

One of the lessons I learned was that performance is really going to trump many of those things, and so that's what I focused on. I could handle a soccer ball. And lessons from sports followed me into my career. Coaches, parents, and family friends were highly influential in my young life. I felt like I could be somebody. There was a strong sense of self and self-confidence, but at the same time, I had a lot of insecurities. I learned to mask them pretty well, and as I became an adult, I became more self-aware, and I was able to root some of those out.

My first coach was an Irish guy, and their family accepted me, and race was never brought up. He embraced me and encouraged me to pursue the sport, and in my first couple of practices, he realized I was aggressive and fast, and he showed me how to play defense and how to take the ball from people. Don't let them score – that was my mission.

And that led to another kind of racism. People would say, "You know, all those Black guys are fast. They're genetically predisposed to being able to move that quickly." And if I jumped really high and got a header, well, that's because Black people can jump.

**Morris: And yet you said that your parents didn't talk much about racism.**

Comma: I experienced racism, but in a different way. Not in the way

that I speak to my own children about it. My parents were more about, “Don’t let what other people think about you get in the way of who you believe you are or what you can achieve.”

With my three boys, I am far more deliberate about teaching them about the history of our country — why people feel the way they feel, how people are socialized, how it shows up in unconscious bias, and how you should understand or gain better awareness of how people may or may not see you in different situations. You also have to be aware that how you represent yourself, even though it shouldn’t be judged, is judged very harshly in this country.

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One of my boys told me recently that they discovered that one of the greatest hacks for a Black person in this country is to just wear a suit. My kids are performers — they have a band — and they were doing a photo shoot this weekend where they were all wearing suits. At one point, they went into a hotel, and they were surprised by how well they were treated, with people calling them “sir.”

There was another dimension around racism with my parents. Many Black Caribbean Islanders would rather not interact with Black Americans, and my parents were at least semi-guilty of that. And I say

“semi” because they had a lot of Black American friends, but when I brought home my Black American girlfriend — Alison, who’s now my wife (pictured below with Lenny) — that didn’t go over so well.

There’s a lot of ugliness within racism that is more complicated than we necessarily want to admit. I fell in love with a woman who is a darker-skinned Black woman, and when she first came home to meet my parents, that’s when some of these dynamics really came home for me. My mother is lighter-skinned, my dad’s darker-skinned, but it’s almost unacceptable for the woman to be darker-skinned than her husband. It’s just this weird, disgusting dynamic that all goes back to slavery.

When I saw it with my girlfriend, who became my wife, it had a profound impact on me, and I no longer was willing to accept the way people see the world. I felt like I needed to start saying something about it and making it clear how wrong it is and how wrongly programmed and socialized people had been.

**Bryant: So how do you do that? How and where do you talk about this?**

Comma: The question is almost how and where *don’t* I talk about it. If you want to stand in a pulpit and start shouting, most people who don’t believe what you believe or what you’re trying to share will just tune you out or they become your trolls. So I choose to form relationships with people who are not like me, and within our conversations, I will

share these thoughts. I think that's the better way to have influence.

For example, I will tell people to pay attention to the actors who are hired for commercials. Even today, you will see that there is a bias toward lighter-skinned Black people in commercials. You'll almost never see a darker-skinned Black woman, and in many commercials, you won't see a person of color unless their race is unclear. Are they Latina? Are they really fair-skinned Black? I don't know. So they start to gain a sensitivity around it, and they don't just walk through life blind to this very conscious bias that is forming an unconscious bias in others.

**Morris: How would you advise young Black professionals on the question of, "How much of my full self do I bring to work?"**

Comma: The first thing I would say is don't misinterpret the things you leave behind as strictly associated with your Blackness. Everybody shows up to work and leaves things behind because they simply aren't appropriate in a work environment.

Unfortunately for minorities, and sometimes for women, what we will feel is that we're having to leave so much of us behind that we wonder what's left. But you have to first understand that there's a pretty good chunk of all of us, no matter where you're from, that gets left behind when you enter the workplace because the workplace is a professional place that demands a certain type of behavior.

Then, after you've understood that there's this piece of it that's just

called professionalism, then you have to make a personal choice on the other parts of you that make it into the workspace, and my recommendation is to bring yourself to work. Beyond those professional filters, bring yourself to work because I personally believe that if you spend a lot of energy putting on a false face, you're actually not going to be capable of doing your best work.

And your best work will trump whatever benefits you think are going to come from that false face. So bring your best work, and the only way to do that is to bring your whole self, except for that one professional filter that we all must step through.

**Bryant: What was a big break that really set your career on a different trajectory?**

Comma: I had a great mentor at Mobil. His name was John Hornyak, and he was the kind of person who didn't look at his employees as a means to an end. He looked at them as valuable individuals who he should be investing in. And he taught me two things that I think put the second level of fuel in my career.

The first thing he taught me was that I need to know myself and love myself, and that I need to lean into my strengths and simply own and mitigate my weaknesses. A lot of people say that you're born with self-awareness or you're not. I don't believe that. I think that if you can get past your ego, you can become very self-aware.

Everybody else knows all the things that you need to know; they're just



afraid to tell you because you likely won't listen, or you've already given them some reasons to believe that you don't want to hear it. But if you're open to learning about yourself, people will share the types of things that help you become more and more self-aware. It's a never-ending process.

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The second thing he taught me was to shoot straight like an arrow. Coming out of New York, I was a bit of a fast talker, and thought I could talk my way through a lot of things. It wasn't that I was necessarily being unethical in any way, but I was being too much of a salesman. He coached me to not ever let anyone leave the conversation with anything other than the absolute truth, even if it hurts.

Because if you can behave like that, life will be so less complicated over time. And when things go wrong and people claim and say things about you, when the trolls come in, it'll almost be laughable because of the consistency associated with your character over time.

**Morris: What kind of headwinds did you face being a Black man in corporate America, and what tailwinds helped you navigate through them?**

Comma: The headwinds that I faced most often were unconscious bias,

or what people now call micro-aggressions. It's the scenario where you walk into a room and you don't feel welcome, and no one's really taking any time to make you feel welcome.

I had pretty thick skin coming from where I came from. Those things existed. I didn't feel like they were insurmountable. I almost looked at them as a challenge. But they were directly related to this other belief system that I have, which is that there are no better tailwinds than results and relationships.

I always made it a point, regardless of the environment that I was in, and regardless of how hostile I thought that environment was, to do some of the heavy lifting around embracing the people around me and trying to build relationships with them. So even if I didn't feel like I was welcome, I still went over and I shook those hands, and I asked people who they were and where they were from, and about their families and that sort of thing to get to know them.

It was refreshing for a lot of those folks because I think a lot of the reasons they didn't embrace me initially was just protective hesitation. Who's the Black guy? What's he all about? Does he have a chip on his shoulder? And then when I'm not behaving like that, we can actually have a conversation.

And when it comes time to judge performance, be as good as you possibly can be and try your best to be the best. You should never do that by stepping on anyone and ruining relationships, but if you can do it while also building relationships, that's more productive, and that's

the way I went about it. Go get the results, and go forge relationships, and then you will have the support you need in your career if you do those things.

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