



Steve Stoute



## Leading in the B-Suite

Powerful conversations about life, race and leadership

# "This Becomes A Movement Only If Everybody Moves At The Same Time"

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***Steve Stoute**, the advertising and music industry*

entrepreneur who is the founder and CEO of **UnitedMasters** and **Translation**, 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 the biggest influences early in your life?**

Stoute: My values have been shaped by my parents. They're West Indian, and came to America in the early '70s. They are all about resourcefulness, work ethic, doing a good job, and not quitting. It started at home and I've been able to build on that foundation.

For my dad, it was never about how much money you made. It was more about ethics and principles. If you're going to do the job, do the job. Do the job like it was an opportunity, and whether it's plumbing or making a movie, treat it the same way. If you're going to rake the leaves, make sure you rake the entire yard and do a great job. And if you're going to make a movie, treat it the same way.

Those values are transferable to anything. When I got in the music business, and there was a lot of money being made, I never treated it any differently than if I were shoveling snow or raking the yard. And even though there was more money involved, I couldn't relax because of all of that. I don't even know how to do that. It's fundamental to who I am.

**Bryant: Other key lessons for you?**

Stoute: I learned something that very few people talk about. The most powerful drug, the most mind-altering drug by a long shot, is the power of rationalization. Whether it's alcohol or another drug, you put yourself in a state of mind so that you feel okay about what you're doing.

But the self-administered version of that — rationalization — goes really far, and you're coherent when you do it. So it has a long-lasting effect because you make decisions based on it that are forever decisions. One of the things that you shouldn't rationalize is when you start lying to yourself and you think that that's okay.

Once you start lying to yourself and the power of rationalization kicks in, that's the concoction that will put you on a mindless, long trail to nowhere. And that's another way of saying that if you're going to say something, really do it. Unfortunately, the most common downfall of people I see is the ability to lie to themselves and feel comfortable doing it.

**Morris: How does the conversation about race in this country look to you through the lens of rationalization?**

Stoute: Every time there's an issue in the Black community, you hear companies say, "We've got to do better. We will do better." But you said that last time, and now you're saying that again this time. I'm in the advertising and media business, and the shift now is that clients are saying that they want to see the businesses providing services to them with a certain number of diverse leaders. Otherwise we're not using

you. And that's a forcing function.

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Unfortunately, if it was just left to people's morals to make these decisions, they wouldn't be made, because I've found that nepotism actually looks like racism. They're similar, like cousins. You may not be racist, but if all you do is what's immediately comfortable to you, like hiring your best friend's son or just within your network, you end up with a bunch of people who look and act like you, and share your perspective.

That's how teams end up with all White people. And the same is true for teams of all Black people. The point is that you're not hiring outside your network. It feels like racism because people who are not part of that immediate network can't get in. And, unfortunately, most people's networks are not diverse.

**Bryant: What's happened with your business over the last year or so, with the heightened awareness of racial injustice?**

Stoute: As the leading African American in the advertising media business, my phone has been ringing a lot, with people saying, "We want to invest in the African American media space, but we don't know where to put our money. And I would say to them, "Well, you don't know where to put the money because you've been very successful at

putting many of those companies out of business. You didn't support them. You haven't helped them."

I've also been trying to make creative work that is popular and appeals to everybody in a thoughtful way. We did a piece for Beats by Dre called, "**You Love Me.**" And the spot really talks about the idea of, you love my culture, but do you love me? Do you love the human beings behind the culture? It forces a question that the African American community is asking.

When we put it out for Beats by Dre — and remember, you've got to get Apple's support on this, because they own Beats — White kids and Spanish kids and non-African Americans were reacting by saying, that's a really good question. It's easy to love LeBron James and Bubba Wallace and Naomi Osaka and Lil Baby. But when somebody who's not famous is dressed just like them, then there's a different reaction. So you ask that question in an attempt to move culture forward.

**Morris: One more question about your early years. Can you give us a sense of what you were like as a kid? Were you entrepreneurial?**

Stoute: Yes, but I didn't think of it as being entrepreneurial. It was about trying to help my family because I want to do my part and help make ends meet. People used the word "hustling," and that word is often associated with swindling, fast talker, no substance. I was a hustler, but I wasn't trying to fast-talk or swindle anybody.

I was trying to shovel your snow. I would sing Christmas carols at your

door. I would rake your leaves. I was trying to help my mom and dad not have to buy me lunch or underwear. I wanted to be able to afford the cologne that I would buy for them every Christmas, which they at least said they liked. But I didn't know that that was being an entrepreneur. Those were the circumstances. I just thought that that was what you're supposed to do to help your parents.

**Bryant: You've worked in so many different fields and industries. Have you always been comfortable doing that?**

Stoute: That's hip-hop. Whether it's expanding into alcohol or clothing, that's what hip-hop taught everyone. There's no formal training involved. It's the audacity to believe that you can get it done, and then applying the principles of what makes something successful to the skill set you have.

One of the unintended effects of coming up in the hip-hop business was that not having a lot taught you to be resourceful. It was an art form that was being kicked to the curb. You think these guys wanted to use two turntables to make a beat? There were no resources. They didn't have a band.

*The problem becomes a  
superpower.*

So you start making mix tapes and doing other things to move forward because the front door is not available to you. And then the problem

becomes a superpower. I don't care what anybody puts in front of me. I've never seen a challenge and thought for a second "I can't do that." Whether I want to do it is the only decision. The thought of not being able to do it never even crosses my mind.

**Morris: What are the other headwinds you've faced, and what are some of the tailwinds that helped you navigate through them?**

Stoute: The headwinds have always been people questioning me. You didn't graduate from college. You don't have formal training in music or business. This type of music isn't meant to be mainstream; it's not going to get on the radio. What do you know about advertising? What do you know about technology in Silicon Valley? Those headwinds were the tailwinds, because they give me the fuel, which is all the tailwind I need to keep going. It gets me fired up.

**Bryant: What are your suggestions for how to have productive conversations about race within corporate America? Stating the obvious, it's an uncomfortable conversation for a lot of people.**

Stoute: You've got to have the uncomfortable conversation. The fact of the matter is that you inherited an uncomfortable topic. So if you don't want to have the uncomfortable conversation because you want to feel comfortable, then you're actually the getaway driver for the problem.

There has been a shift when it seemed like every week there was a video of a Black person getting shot. That's when White people started saying, "Wait a minute. I can't believe this." And then after it happened

the eleventh time, they said, "How did I never know this?"

But go back and listen to NWA's first album, when everybody thought they were so rude and saying things that got them censored. You'll know why Dr. Dre is Dr. Dre. You'll know why Ice Cube is Ice Cube. They were talking about it then, but everyone thought they were making it up. They weren't making it up. They were actual poets. It was truth to a beat. The news wasn't covering it, so they covered it.

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So thank you to all the poets, photographers, writers, and the people who were willing to have the uncomfortable conversation. It's because of you that we are even broaching this topic on a national level right now.

**Morris: One of the questions people are asking about this time is whether it's a movement or a moment. What are your thoughts?**

Stoute: This becomes a movement only if everybody moves at the same time. It has to be broad, including different industries seeing it as a priority. If it is just your company, it would just be a moment. If it's the whole thing, it would be a movement.

**Bryant: What is your career and life advice to young Black**



## **professionals?**

Stoute: Don't get discouraged. Don't let all the headwinds dampen your belief. The walls will come down. The walls will come down, especially with so many people fighting the fight by overdelivering and running and building good businesses. Going the other way is just not an option.

I would also share the same advice that I give to my son. When I first started the advertising business, A) I didn't know advertising, B) I was Black, and C) I wasn't going to do Black advertising. People told me that that was the completely wrong thing to do, and that companies weren't going to do business with African Americans outside of doing Black advertising.

So I was taking the hardest and longest path, but 15 years later, I lead the pack. And I'm proud of that. I lead by example, I want to do great work, and I want to leave the door open to help other people get on and get in the industry. You've got to do what you don't want to do to do what you do want to do. You've heard these things framed many different ways. This is just another version of it.

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