Arthur Evans, Jr., CEO of the American Psychological Association

Leading in the B-Suite

Powerful conversations about life, race and leadership

Biweekly newsletter

"Don't Let People Put You In A Box That Fits Their Worldview"

Published on September 14, 2021

Adam Bryant

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

***Arthur Evans Jr.*, CEO of the American Psychological Association, 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?

Evans: I spent the first five years of my life in Japan, while my father was stationed there during his service in the Air Force. My family then came back to the United States to live on a military base on the east coast of Florida. My father moved around the country and overseas as he was stationed in different places, but he didn't want his family to have to move each time he got a new assignment. So he moved us off the base, and I grew up in a small community called Melbourne, Florida.

My mother was a schoolteacher who stressed the importance of getting a good education. My paternal grandmother also lived with us and was a huge influence on me and my siblings. My parents and grandmother modeled and stressed the importance of treating people well, a lesson that greatly influences my approach as a leader.

As a military family, we lived in a racially integrated world, but our home was in a segregated community, and I went to a segregated school for a few years. Living in these dual worlds benefitted me because, at an early age, I got used to negotiating multiple cultures. And that's what I've done throughout my career — I've become comfortable navigating sometimes very different worlds simultaneously.

When I was about 12 years old, my father brought home a psychology book. I remember just being fascinated with it. I thought it was about how to read people's minds. I didn't think about that early experience again until years later.

When I graduated from high school, I earned a scholarship to study music at community college — I played trumpet, but I figured out rather quickly that because I like to eat and sleep in a house, music was probably not a good career choice for me. There were people coming out of high school who were playing circles around me, so I realized I better find something else to do.

Just by happenstance, on the very last day of community college, I ran into my psychology teacher. I had just finished my second year, and I had changed to a general studies major. She asked me what I was going to do next. I had done well in my psychology courses, and I recalled my fascination with the topic when my dad brought home the psychology book, but I was concerned about how long it would take to get a doctorate in psychology. She convinced me that if that's where my passion was, that's what I should do. I never looked back.

Bryant: How has that training in psychology given you a lens for understanding issues of race?

Evans: I'm fascinated with how people think, why we do what we do, and I look at almost everything through the lens of being a psychologist. And issues of race are probably the most complicated thing that we deal with in our society.

Race is really a social construct. It's not biological. It was created to subjugate one group of people under another group of people. Because of that, from a psychological standpoint, racism plays out in a couple of important ways. One is what other groups think about you. The other is what you think about yourself.

Over time, many African Americans internalize some of the negative racial views of our group, and this can be an impediment. I grew up believing, as I think many African Americans do, that our group wasn't as smart as White people or other groups. You realize over time that that's not true, but these ideas are so ingrained in us that they can impact our confidence. The scariest aspect of this is that these ideas are not necessarily conscious – they are often unconscious.

In terms of how others think about African Americans, there are some interesting psychological studies in which people were shown words or images and asked to quickly respond to them. You can see a negative bias in the way that people respond to images of African Americans that is automatic and largely unconscious. And by the way, it's not only Whites that have this bias, but a certain percentage of African Americans also have this bias.

Many African American men
have this odd experience of

being highly salient and
invisible at the same time.

And there are many real-life examples of how this unconscious bias plays out in our daily lives. I’ve had the experience where I am standing in line, and someone will come and stand right in front of me as if I am not there. If you point this out to them, they will often say, “I didn’t see you.”

On the other hand, I’ve also had the experience where doors lock when my car pulls up next to another car at a traffic light. Many African American men have this odd experience of being highly salient and invisible at the same time.

And while these are relatively benign examples, these same biases play out in employment decisions, how children are evaluated in school, how people are treated in healthcare, how you are treated by law enforcement, etc. If we are going to get beyond these kinds of biases, we need to develop new ways of addressing racism in our society, beginning with a willingness to acknowledge its pervasiveness.

Morris: What is it about Black people that creates fear and nervousness for many others?

Evans: It goes back to why race was created to begin with—to empower one group over another. It is an effective way of keeping a group “in its place.” From the beginning of our history in America, African Americans have been associated, in subtle and sometimes not-so-subtle ways, with danger. It's done over and over through the media, movies, literature and even our educational system. So it shouldn't be a surprise that people tend to perceive African Americans in this way.

Bryant: Race remains an uncomfortable conversation in this country. What are your suggestions for how to have the conversation in a productive way?

Evans: I've been thinking about this a lot since George Floyd's death. I think we need more space and grace. If we are going to have real conversations about race, we have to create safe spaces to have conversations. It has to be safe for African Americans and other people of color, as well as for Whites. I think we underestimate how difficult it is for Whites to have open conversations about race.

I know there are people who will push back on this point, but I think we also have to have more grace when we engage in these conversations. The expectation that people are going to say everything the right way, that people aren't going to say things that are awkward or maybe even offensive, is just unrealistic.

If we're going to have conversations, we have to give people space to say things that may be awkwardly worded or things that we don't necessarily agree with, and that ought to be okay. Otherwise, we will never have a real conversation. It will be one group talking to itself.

Leaders must do a much better

job of contextualizing why this
is an important conversation.

I’ve been a part of a lot of conversations where there’s a whole swath of people who have opinions, but are thinking, “There’s no way I’m saying anything” for fear that they may say something wrong. So, the first thing is to make it safe to have these conversations.

Another important issue, particularly for leaders, is that we have to tie these conversations to the mission of the organization and make their relevance to the organization clear. There is no corporation or organization in America where issues of race are not relevant, so every leader should be able to make the case for its importance as an area of focus. I think it’s a mistake when people say we should talk about these issues just because it’s a good thing to do.

In my case, I like to talk about these issues as a hard-nosed CEO and make clear that the reason that we’re talking about this is that we can’t accomplish our mission if we don’t truly understand and address issues around race. We’re not going to have the kind of productivity and proficiency we need from our staff. We’re not going to be able to do the impactful work in our society that we need to do.

And we’re not going to be able to create a pipeline of people coming into our field that have the diverse set of experiences and perspectives that are needed to advance psychological science. For example, science advances when we have people who are thinking about issues from different perspectives, and we have competing ideas to explore.

So leaders must do a much better job of contextualizing why this is an important conversation by tying it to the mission of their organization. One business that gets this intuitively is car dealerships. Have you ever noticed how diverse their salespeople are? They understand that if they want to sell cars to whoever walks through the door, they must have people on staff that can relate to the full range of people in their community. They understand that having a diverse group of salespeople is directly related to their success.

Leaders must also ensure accountability around racial issues. Sometimes this means tying these issues to compensation and to rewards. We can talk about these issues all we want, but if important metrics don’t improve and there are no consequences for not making progress, then nothing’s going to change. It must be integrated into the fabric of the organization and infused into the organizational culture.

Morris: What’s happening now with mental health of Black Americans?

Evans: African Americans are dealing with a lot of challenges. Even before the pandemic, African Americans typically had higher stress levels than the rest of the population. The pandemic, the resulting economic downturn, and the concerns about racial justice that emerged during the summer only exacerbated these stress levels.

We are now seeing the impact of stress related to the pandemic, not just in African Americans, but in all groups in the form of unwanted weight gain, disturbances in sleep patterns, increased alcohol use as a coping mechanism, and higher overdose deaths. These issues are associated with both physical and mental health problems. This highlights why it is so important for us to pay attention to our mental health.

Bryant: Back to you personally, where does your drive come from?

Evans: A lot of my drive comes from my roots. My parents are from the South – my mother was from Alabama, and my father was from South Carolina. One thing about Black Southern culture is that it puts a lot of emphasis on people and respecting the inherent dignity in everyone.

Black Southern culture also emphasizes gratitude. I live my life from the perspective of "to whom much is given, much is required." Even when I was a poor graduate student, I still felt like I had a better set of circumstances than many other people. I therefore am driven by a sense of obligation to help improve the lives of others. That's just been with me from the beginning of my career.

Morris: Many parents in earlier generations, mine included, refused to talk to their children about the racism they experienced, because they didn't want us to know about the challenges they faced. I struggle with whether that is a good thing or a bad thing. Your thoughts?

Evans: This is one of the hardest things for parents of children of color to manage. The reality is that intergenerational trauma is real. We know that trauma gets passed down through generations, and not talking about that trauma doesn't negate it.

It's unrealistic to think that by not talking about racism, our offspring are going to be in a better position to deal with it when it occurs. I understand parents not wanting their children to be overly sensitive and perhaps use racism as an excuse.

The reality is that intergenerational trauma is real.

But at the same time, we're leaving our children somewhat vulnerable if we send them out into the world and don't help them understand the realities of what they will face and arm them with tools and strategies to deal with those realities.

I come down on the side of believing that we need to educate our children and at the same time, send a clear message that these are things that they can overcome. If you're an African American man of my age, there is a good chance that you've had a bad encounter with law enforcement.

I've been patted down, I've been followed, and my car has been searched for no good reason. It's better to talk about these experiences with our children at the appropriate age and give them strategies to deal with these situations if they encounter them in their own lives.

Bryant: What career and life advice do you share with young Black professionals?

Evans: Don’t let people put you in a box. It’s probably one of the most important lessons that has helped me during my career. I’ve always felt comfortable moving between different worlds and not necessarily fitting the stereotypes for my age, gender, or race.

One of the things that happens with people in general, but especially for Black professionals, is that people will try to put you in a box that fits their worldview. So, if you are one of only a few people of color in your organization, there may be an expectation that “You’re going to be our person who talks about diversity issues,” for example.

I stopped doing “diversity trainings” for this very reason — it limits how people see you and your perceived areas of expertise. Instead, I would give talks on healthcare financing or organizational change management and then incorporate diversity issues within these topics. I was able to keep my commitment to the issues without limiting how I was perceived in my field. Additionally, I wanted to make the business case for the importance of these issues, something that is often not emphasized enough.

The other thing that I tell students and early career professionals is to get a broad range of experience early in your work life. This has helped me throughout my career. As a leader, it has been important to be able to speak comfortably to different audiences and deal with a broad range of issues.

On a typical day, I might be testifying before members of Congress, speaking to a group of people with the lived experience of a mental health challenge, delivering an academic lecture to a group of scientists, translating a research study to members of the press, or trying to inspire a group of grass roots community organizers on social media. Having a variety of work experiences helps navigate the multitude of issues you have to deal with as a leader and ultimately gives you more career options.

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:

- ***Lenny Comma, former CEO of Jack in the Box restaurants***
- ***Steve Stoute, founder and CEO of UnitedMasters and Translation***
- ***Dr. Freeman Hrabowski, president of University of Maryland, Baltimore County***
- ***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**
- ***Mellody Hobson*, co-CEO of Ariel Investments**
- ***Ruth Simmons,* president of Prairie View A&M University**
- ***Carlos Watson,* CEO of OZY Media**