



Deryl McKissack



**Leading in the B-Suite**

Powerful conversations about life, race and leadership

# "You Have To Define Yourself Because Other People Will Always Define You"

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***Deryl McKissack, president and chief executive officer of McKissack & McKissack, an architecture, engineering, and construction management firm, shared powerful lessons with me and Rhonda Morris, the CHRO of Chevron, for our interview series with prominent Black leaders. Subscribe [here](#) for all Leading in the B-Suite interviews.***

**Morris: Who were the biggest influences early on that who shaped who you are today as a leader?**

McKissack: I come from a family of very hardworking, driven people. I saw my parents and grandparents always striving to get better and move forward. I grew up in Nashville, and I went to an almost all-White school from kindergarten to the 12th grade. There were only six Black people in my class, and one of them was my twin sister.

Early on, you're not that aware of racism, but when I was about nine years old, my sister and I saw a cross being burned in the yard of my godfather, who was a civil rights leader.

My parents said that in everything you do, you have to be better. It wasn't pressure. I had a strong drive to be at the top of the class, and my sister and I did that all through school. When I entered the AEC (architecture, engineering and construction) industry — which is male-dominated, and where Black people are often still treated the same way as they were when I was growing up — that just fueled me to be stronger.

**Bryant: How have you dealt with the racism that you've experienced in your career?**

McKissack: I've had people say straight to my face, "I'm not dealing with Black people." And I've faced challenges where you never have a seat at the table or policies are written so that there is not a level playing field.

When I faced situations like that when I first started out, I used to be afraid, and I wouldn't say anything. I'd go home and feel very depressed. Then as I started getting more established, I said a lot of things and none of them were good.

Now I'm at a point where I am able to take those moments as a learning experience and let everybody know – Black, White, whatever you are – that there are enough micro-aggressions to go around for everybody. Even I have some blind spots and some biases. We all do. And so let's just talk about them and get it on the table.

*There are enough micro-aggressions to go around for everybody.*

I've had moments over drinks with White friends when I asked, "So what is your biggest fear about Black people?" or "What do you really feel about Black people?" I've heard some things that made me think that I didn't want to be friends with them anymore. But I opened the

door, and I need to understand their perspective. A lot of it is just perspective.

Of course, none of what they say is true. They can't put their finger on any of it, like they'll say, "I've heard Black people are just lazy." Then I'll say, "I work hard every day. You can't just say Black people are lazy. Are there some lazy Black people? Yeah, just like there are more White people on welfare than there are Black people. We've got lazy people all the way around. We have uneducated people all the way around. But some people are uneducated because they have no avenue to get educated."

I've decided to just have these conversations and to look at it as a learning experience. At the end of the day, we're all trying to get to where we need to go. America is behind competitively on a global scale. In order for us to really be competitive, we've got to all come together and work together, and we've got to raise everybody up in terms of education and economics. We've got to build up America.

**Morris: Where are you on the optimism-pessimism scale about whether this is real change happening around race in this country?**

McKissack: A lot of people are talking about it, but I want to see real movement. We've got to do something about the economic gap. I see corporate America having a lot of conversations, but I don't see more major contracts going to African American companies.

Yes, a lot of people of color have moved into board positions and new

executive roles, but it's the money that really matters at the end of the day. Let's level the playing field and make it fair for companies like mine to win work. I still don't see a major difference there.

We just need the client to say they want a Black firm on their project. We're not contractors. We do design services and project management. We're managing \$15 billion in projects right now across the country. Even so, I find that many companies will write requirements that are more specific to companies that our bigger than ours.

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When we walk in the room, either someone's going to say, "Oh, I'm so excited because it's a minority firm and we really want them to succeed, so let's see how we can help make that happen here," or they're saying, "Oh, a minority firm. Let's watch and see how they're going to mess up something."

Perspectives have to change. Even though we've done all these major projects on the National Mall in Washington D.C. — including the Lincoln and Jefferson Memorials, the Martin Luther King, Jr. Memorial and the museum of African American History and Culture— and we've worked for many of the Fortune 500 companies —MGM Resorts, Exelon, GEICO, United Health Services, BMO Harris and more — every time we go to a new company, it's like starting from scratch and

trying to make them trust us.

**Bryant: What were some of the discussions around the family dinner table when you were growing up about how to navigate the headwinds that you were inevitably going to face in your career as part of the family construction business?**

McKissack: My mom used to always tell me that being a woman was an advantage. So first of all, be a woman. Don't go into this male industry and act like a man because you can't win if you try to be like man. But you can win by being a woman in a man's business.

People will often want to discount what I'm saying because I'm female. Years ago, I could throw a stack of papers down on the table to establish my credentials, but I don't do that anymore. I just sort of let people get in their own way by asking them questions.

Several years ago, I was in L.A., trying to win a major contract. I was asked to meet one of the directors for the project. This guy was what I would call a dinosaur. When I walked in the room, he said, "How many words a day do women say?" And I said, "I don't know."

He said, "About 25,000." I said, "Okay, thanks." And he says, "Well, how many words a day do you think men say?" I said, "I don't know." He said, "Ten thousand." I said, "Good." And he said, "After we've been at work all day and talking to our colleagues, by the time we get home, we probably only have 1,000 words left to say, but women, they've been home goo-goo-ing and ga-ga-ing with their babies all day,

so by the time we get home, they still probably have about 20,000 more words to say. So lady, I just want to know from you, what do you have to say to me today?”

I said, “I have nothing to say,” and I just played our corporate video for him. When he asked me questions, I’d answer them, but I didn’t say anything else. And he started trying to drill me on engineering techniques after that. I’m an engineer but I pay other people to answer those detailed questions.

So I just started drilling him back with questions like, how do you deal with your stakeholders? Are your stakeholders happy on this job? Because I knew they weren’t. There are times when you’ve got to roll with the punches and then sometimes people cross the line a little too much, and you’ve got to say, hey, wait a minute now.

And a lot of times, if you’re Black and somebody likes you, they try to act like you’re not Black. They try to put you in a different category, like, “I’m not talking about you. I’m talking about them.” And I’ll say, “No, that’s me, too. We are the same. Maybe if you spent some time with them, you might like them, too. You can see I’ve got personality, I can have fun, I know what I’m talking about, and I’m still Black and a woman.”

**Morris: What was the big break that set you on a different trajectory in your career?**

McKissack: It was when I decided to start my own company. I decided

to leave the role I was in at the time. I could have gone back to the family business. I had a lot of job offers. But I said, I just want my own little red wagon. I don't have any dependents. It's just me.

I had this burning passion that just said you've got to do this, and if you're ever going to do it, you've got to do it now. I had never written a business plan. I read a book on how to write a business plan, and I also made a list of the 300 people I needed to tell that I was going to start a new business. By the time I got halfway through that list, I had so much work, I never got to the other 150.

I met every goal I wrote in that business plan way before I expected to. So you've got to have a plan, and it's good to think things through, but you've got to have a whole lot of passion. The main thing is having the passion behind that plan.

**Bryant: What career and life advice do you give to young Black professionals?**

McKissack: Know your facts and be confident in that. And it's not about being arrogant. It takes a large person to be humble, but they are confident in who they are, what they know, and what they can do. How are they really an asset to their clients? That's what we try to sell — we will be an asset on this project and let me tell you why. It's important to strategize on how you can be an asset on any project you're working on.

I also talk about the importance of persistence. You just cannot give up.



I have stared down the barrel of so many “no’s” and turned them into a “yes.” I had been in business for about six years when I first got my first line of credit. And that line of credit was only for \$25,000, and they practically wanted me to sign away my firstborn as part of all the paperwork.

When I finally got a sizable loan, they told me to bring my husband in the day I signed my papers. And I said, “Excuse me. He doesn’t have anything to do with this. His name’s not on it.” And they said, “Well, he’s an important businessman in the area, and we would just feel better if he sat in the room.” That’s what we deal with, but you have to be persistent. You can’t give up.

And I always say that you have to define yourself because other people will always define you when you walk into a room. You can feel people doing that, and you can’t let that affect your mindset. It’s so painful, and it also is paralyzing, and it can throw off your focus.

*Be clear about the three major things you’re going to do work toward your purpose.*

I talk a lot with young people these days about focus. There are so many distractions, and I tell them all the time, do you think that Steve Jobs was looking at all his Apple devices when he came up with Apple? No. He needed that private time alone to connect with the universe and himself, his ideas, and really think and be focused on what

he's trying to do. Mark Zuckerberg wasn't on Facebook when he started Facebook, either. So I spend a lot of time in the morning just thinking and reflecting.

I speak about purpose a lot. Find your purpose, understand your purpose, and be clear about the three major things you're going to do work toward your purpose. And don't be distracted by bad news or good news, or what's in the feed on your phone.

When you start looking at your phone, you can experience a hundred different emotions in five minutes based on what shows up. Somebody died. Another person is having a birthday or a baby. Someone lost their job. Another person got the promotion they wanted. The list goes on and on and on.

So I just don't even look at my phone in the morning. I just spend my time thinking about my focus for that day. What are the things that I need to accomplish? I am going to make sure that two or three things that are core to my purpose are covered that day.

**Morris: One last question for you, which may seem a bit odd. I've seen many pictures of you online and I noticed that your hair has changed over time. A lot of women, and not just Black women, straighten their hair. Can you share why you stopped?**

McKissack: One day, I woke up and said to myself that I want to be authentic. I want to jump in a pool and come out looking the same. With straightened hair, I felt restricted because I could not do that.

The older I get, the freer I feel. I can go outside in the rain, not have an umbrella, and my hair looks like this. It was a process and it took five years to get here. It is an ease of life, and it helps me feel more free.