



Abe Ankumah



Leading in the B-Suite

Powerful conversations about life, race and leadership

Talking About Race Is Like Working A Muscle. You Can't Let It Atrophy.

Published on October 12, 2021



Adam Bryant [in](#)

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

Abe Ankumah, the former CEO of Nyansa (now part of VMWare), 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 all Leading in the B-Suite interviews.

Morris: Tell us about the early influences in your life that shaped who you are today?

Ankumah: I was born in Ghana and grew up there before I moved to the United States for college. My biggest influences were my parents. They were both entrepreneurs, and started and ran the first travel agency in Ghana. So I had a front row seat to entrepreneurship growing up.

Seeing the level of hard work and perseverance was very eye-opening. My parents were also just being good human beings — good, solid, decent, fair, and compassionate people, and I’ve tried to carry those qualities through in my own life as a person and as a leader.

Another big influence growing up was my elementary school principal. She was a very strong academic who believed in hard work and pushing oneself to learn new things. She would often repeat these lines from a Henry Wadsworth Longfellow poem: “The heights by great men reached and kept were not attained by sudden flight, but they, while their companions slept, were toiling upward in the night.” That always stayed with me, even when I went to high school and college.

I then went to an all-boys boarding school in Ghana, which required me to move about two to three hours from home when I was 15. The other boys looked like me and were equally ambitious. It's one of the leading high schools in the country, and it's produced a number of famous leaders, including Kofi Annan, the former UN Secretary General.

Bryant: What brought you to the United States?

Ankumah: I graduated from high school as one of the top two students in the country. I had a strong background in math and science, and I was very curious about computers even though I had never touched or used one. I read books about the founding of Intel, and Microsoft was the dominant company at the time. Technology companies were super-fascinating to me.

When I graduated from high school, the universities in Ghana were on strike, and so the notion of starting college right away there wasn't even possible. I would have to wait. Because of the success I had in high school, I applied to other colleges, and got into Caltech.

Morris: Was there a bit of a culture shock for you?

Ankumah: I had traveled quite a bit growing up because of my parents' business. But growing up in Ghana, I didn't even think about race because everyone looked like me. Now the corollary to race in a place like Ghana is ethnicity, where you have people who look very similar but speak very different languages. Then when I came to Caltech, there were maybe two or three other Black students in my freshman class of

200 people. I became more conscious about race.

Having grown up in an environment where race wasn't really an overt topic, it took me a while to start to appreciate or recognize some of the subtle dimensions of race. And they are more about micro-aggressions than the occasional overt racism.

Bryant: What are some examples?

Ankumah: When I became an entrepreneur myself and I was fundraising for Nyansa, I would meet with VC firms along with my two co-founders, who are Indian and Chinese. We would sit down, and the VC partner in the room sometimes would start addressing one of my co-founders because they just assumed I wasn't the CEO.

In another VC pitch, the fact that I grew up in Ghana came up. And the partner said, "Wow, you're really far away from home." I don't think that's something the VC would have said to a White entrepreneur from Australia. But I've also had a ton of sponsors who have really invested a lot of energy and provided support for me. And now I'm trying to pay that forward.

Morris: So how did you handle those moments of micro-aggression?

Ankumah: Early on in my career, I would either ignore them or try and make some kind of a joke. Now I'm probably a bit more direct, and I speak up a lot more. It also depends on the nature of the relationship I

have with the particular individual.

If I know that person pretty well, I might pull them aside and say, “Look, this is how what you said made me feel. This is why someone else who looks like me and talks like me might feel.” The point is to help people be conscious about it.

The way I think about topics like race is that it’s like working a muscle. You can’t let a muscle atrophy and just think you are going to succeed in a sport. It starts by creating a safe space to talk about them and safe spaces where micro-aggressions can be called out. And calling these things out is not the exclusive responsibility of Black folks.

Bryant: Why is it so hard to have these uncomfortable conversations about race, especially in business environments?

Ankumah: Sometimes people struggle to have the race conversation out of fear of offending or not knowing the right thing to say. I’ve had my most effective conversations about race when I’m talking about my life outside of work.

For example, my wife and I have two kids — a son who’s eleven and a daughter who’s nine. We think a lot about which summer camp we’re going to send our kids to because we don’t want them to have some discriminatory racial encounter. Are they going to get bullied? Our kids stand up for themselves, but we still spend a lot of time on that decision.

We recently sent them to summer camp, and one of the campers said something to my daughter about the color of her skin. And my daughter, bless her heart, said, “That is racist.” And this girl basically said, “Well, tough, I don’t care. My mom doesn’t care. We’re from South Africa.” That was more of an exception in terms of racial experiences that our children have faced. But sharing this with my coworkers and our friends started an interesting discussion about race.

It's really about sharing the entirety of an experience.

It’s really about sharing the entirety of an experience without saying, “Let’s talk about race.” When I’m driving and a cop is driving behind me, I make sure I mind my Ps and Qs. I’m not going to do something that will get me pulled over. And I shared that with my team at work last year during the George Floyd protests.

I had people come up to me after that and say, “Wow, I would never have thought that you, Abe, as a CEO and with your background, even had to think about that.” And I said, “It affects everyone. It doesn’t matter how big your wallet is. It doesn’t matter where you went to school or what your title is.”

Morris: We’ve interviewed other Black leaders who advise young students to go into fields like technology where results are less subjective. And yet, Silicon Valley still isn’t very diverse.

Ankumah: One of the reasons I went into tech is that I felt it would be a very objective industry. In a lot of ways, especially early in one's career, it can be fairly objective. But the further you advance in the industry, the more you discover that there are dimensions of it that aren't, whether it's fundraising, or seeking sponsorship and promotions at a large company. Tech has a lot more of a meritocracy than other industries, but the further up you go, the shades of gray certainly come to light.

But there were also some cases where my background was also helpful. One of my investors, after we had made a lot of progress building our company, confided in me that one of the reasons he invested in us early on was that, given all the adversity we had faced to get to that point, it showed so much character. But he's probably more the exception than the rule.

Bryant: Where are you on the optimism-pessimism scale about the prospect of real and lasting change?

Ankumah: I'm an eternal optimist. I always see the best in people and assume good intentions. But while people are well-intentioned, I feel that, when all the George Floyd protests were happening last year, many companies and CEOs stood up and said that we've got to do something about race and diversity and inclusion.

A lot of it came from the right place but, in many cases, I think people felt compelled to say something even though they really hadn't deeply thought about what it meant to actually do something about it. I feel

like some companies started DEI initiatives for a participation trophy. They did it because they said it's the right thing to do. And that's a start, but there's still a lot of work to be done.

There's still a lot of work to be done.

One of my concerns last year was that all these statements will ultimately make people feel like they've done what they need to do. It's similar to when Obama became president. Many folks had this feeling that, okay, we now have our first Black president. Check, we're done. Race issues are solved.

In a similar vein, the way corporations responded to the George Floyd protests may have given them permission to think, hey, we've done something about it. But we're only scratching the surface. That said, people did actually start talking more meaningfully about race than I have personally experienced since moving here about 20 years ago.

Morris: If you were to speak to a graduating class of Black college students, what career and life advice would you share with them?

Ankumah: Three things. Developing a sense of curiosity and an interest in being a lifelong learner is going to be pretty critical. It has served me well. And that goes hand-in-hand with being prepared. Opportunity really does favor the prepared mind.

I think you should take preparation to a fault. It's like the warmup before an athletic meet, with that level of preparation, constant training, and preparing across dimensions, so that you're thinking about your career as not just transactional but something you build over time.

Because another dimension of preparation is about forming lifelong relationships — not because you're looking for something from someone specifically, but because it's an opportunity to learn and build connections. After all, you never know what's going to come from those relationships.

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:

- ***Quintin Primo III, CEO of Capri Investment Group***
- ***Arthur Evans Jr., CEO of the American Psychological Association***
- ***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***