



Leading in the B-Suite

Powerful conversations about life, race and leadership

Never Underestimate The Importance Of Developing Strong Relationships

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Bruce Chinn



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Bruce Chinn, CEO of Chevron Phillips Chemical, 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: What were important early influences for you?

Chinn: I am the second of four boys in my family, and my older brother is about seven years older than I am. He liked to boss us around a bit when we were young, as most big brothers like to do. He went on to serve in the Marines and is now a pastor.

In my freshman year of high school, my dad passed away. My older brother was already off to college at Prairie View A&M University, so my mother raised the three of us by herself, and I had to grow up quickly and assume some of the roles around the house, especially with her full-time job as a licensed vocational nurse. I had to look out for my two younger brothers.

I owe a lot to her in terms of watching her stay calm and collected in many challenging situations. I'm sure there were times when things were really tight for us, and she never shared that. She shouldered a lot when I was growing up.

I learned a lot from watching my dad, too. He was kind of quiet and didn't have a lot to say, but when he spoke, it was important for you to listen. After he graduated from Huston-Tillotson College, in Austin,

Texas, he started teaching and coaching in segregated schools down in southern Texas.

Then when desegregation happened, he lost his job, and so he had to reinvent himself. He got his licensed vocational nurse certification, and that's how he met my mom, because they were both working at the hospital. But he always had this love for teaching and he never lost that.

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And when there was a change in administration at the schools in Edna, Texas, he reached out to the new superintendent, who said to him, "I know who you are. If you want to teach, and if you get recertified, you've got a job." And so he did that. My dad was my sixth-grade geography teacher. It was an early lesson for me about the importance of perseverance, relationships and staying connected to people.

Another important influence from my parents was that they passed on their love of reading to me. I was introduced to the county library early on, and I would spend hours there in the summer. I'd check out five or six at a time, and I always turned them in at the end of the week because I'd read them all. I was a big Hardy Boys mystery fan.

Bryant: Were you in leadership roles early on?

Chinn: I was captain of my high school basketball team and I was involved in Student Council my junior and senior year. I was on our church administrative council, and I was also on our pastor-parish relations committee, which gave feedback to the pastor. I heard a lot and learned a lot in my young years.

Morris: What are the key lessons you learned early on in your career about how issues of race play out in Corporate America?

Chinn: As a young Black engineer, I did my best to assimilate. I stopped wearing gold chains — they were simple chains, not big ones — because people would sometimes make cracks about them. But after trying to fit other people’s version of me, I finally decided that that’s not who I can be. I can only be who I am.

Another early lesson came during a multicultural awareness workshop that DuPont held when I was a young manager there. There was a significant amount of storytelling about who we were, and I got strength from having the experience of being able to say, “Here’s who I am, here’s some of the stories that I’ve lived.”

And that approach is important to me today. It’s about listening to the lived experiences of people who are different from you and being able to share your stories. People must step up as leaders to facilitate those conversations. They have to create an environment where people are open to those discussions.

But the people in those conversations have to be ready to listen, to feel the emotions of folks who truly have had life experiences that are different from theirs. You then must build off those conversations to take real action in organizations around inclusion and equity.

Bryant: You play an outsized role in setting that tone now that you are the CEO. How do you approach that?

Chinn: I try to speak authentically, and I don't miss an opportunity to have a group explore topics a bit more deeply. For example, if we are discussing a particular individual or a job we're filling, I try to explore beyond just, "Here's how we've always viewed or approached it." I want to make sure we get beyond how we've always done things in the past.

I try not to lose that opportunity to talk about the importance of developing a pipeline and having a diverse team around you. I try to call it as I see it, and to be candid and to challenge when it's appropriate. This sets the right tone about expectations and lets people know that it's not just a one-time conversation. This is a conversation that we'll continue to have over time as we develop all people in our organization.

My approach is based in part on my experience early in my career of working with people who clearly were biased in judging me and my work, and who sent signals that they didn't want to work with me or work for me, based on their language and their body language.

Because of that, I can see when people are struggling with the idea of working with someone of a different race or gender. And I know I need to explore that, and to point out if certain language is used when they are talking about people who look different from them.

Morris: Your last name is a bit unusual for a Black person. I imagine that has led to some interesting moments when people meet you in person.

Chinn: People can look me up online and know what I look like. But there have been many times in my career when I've showed up in an organization and people haven't done their research. I'll walk into a room, maybe visiting a customer, and I've seen people make assumptions about whether I'm the boss. And usually, they assume I'm not.

People have said to me, "You're Bruce Chinn? You're not what we expected." And that always creates an opportunity to have a conversation about, "What did you expect?" And those discussions can take interesting turns. Some people aren't ready to have those discussions, but others are truly interested in understanding who I am when they see that I'm different from what they expected.

Bryant: After George Floyd's murder, many companies have made pronouncements and pledges to do more around racial equity. How do you react to those statements?

Chinn: I look at most of them with a jaundiced eye. What matters most

is what companies and leaders do, both inside and outside their organizations. I applaud those that have attempted, and continue to attempt, to have conversations about race, and that have taken concrete actions as part of their pledges.

Some people have asked me about what's important for winning this challenge of increasing representation of Black leaders in organizations. And my answer is that you have to be deliberate and authentic in your approach to developing Black talent. If you're not, people see through it. Your direct reports see through it, and the organization sees through it. And so you have to be deliberate about development of executives who just happen to be Black.

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It is important in large organizations that Black folks have sponsorship. It's important to acknowledge that sometimes it won't happen naturally. That's an important part of what leaders must do. And don't give folks easy assignments. You must keep the challenging assignments in front of all people, because without that stretch, growth and development doesn't happen.

You're not doing anybody any favors by saying, hey, I'm just going to give them this cushy job. It's not bad to have a cushy job every now and then. Everybody needs that occasionally during the marathon of a

career. But it is important that you're really developing people for the future and preparing them through challenging assignments to lead and do significant and great things in your organization.

Morris: And so where are you on the optimism-pessimism scale? Is there going to be lasting change? Is this a moment or movement?

Chinn: I'm uncertain but I'm hopeful. There are days when I feel encouraged, and then there are days when I'm very discouraged. You can imagine that for someone like me who entered the workforce in 1979 — and who participated early on in efforts like employee resource groups and other diversity and inclusion work — that it can get a little tiring that society is still struggling with some of this.

And so there are days where I struggle with how much energy I want to put into trying to help make progress, but then I recognize that my legacy will be based in part on my putting in the effort to create the right culture for all people.

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

Chinn: Be who you are. I've always told everyone to be a lifelong learner. Be curious about what you're involved in, and always bloom where you're planted. And never underestimate the importance of healthy relationships and playing well with others.

Be about excellence. Don't be about mediocrity. If that means you've

got to do a little bit of extra work to deliver that, then that's what is required. Set your standards high about what you would expect to deliver. Recognize that the double standard still exists. I don't care what anybody tells you, it does, and so you do have to work extra hard.

Morris: Is there any advice that you give today that is different from, say, 25 years ago?

Chinn: This notion of authenticity is a bigger part of my vocabulary today. Because when you're authentic with yourself and with others, you figure out pretty quickly whether the place you're working is an environment where you want to be or not. People always have choices, and there is a lot of emotional stress that comes with not being yourself at work.

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