



Leading in the B-Suite

Powerful conversations about life, race and leadership



Biweekly newsletter

"You Have To Be Clear About What You Are Looking For And Be Prepared"

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Richard Buery, CEO of the non-profit organization Robin Hood, 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 early influences that shaped who you are today?

Buery: My parents are immigrants from Panama. They both grew up in poverty there and came here to pursue the American dream. They are a powerful example of doing what it takes to live the life you want to live.

My father worked incredibly hard, and he had number of jobs at the same time, including working as a singer and a photographer. He was always active, always making, always building. He left it all on the field, both creatively and in terms of the effort he put in. I've learned some things from him.

I learned from my mother that educators can be superheroes. My mother taught Spanish and ESL at a New York City high school for almost 40 years. And because we lived in the neighborhood where she

taught, my whole childhood was a series of meeting people at the mall or the supermarket or at the barber shop who would stop her and say, “Oh, Mrs. Buery, thank you. You’re my favorite teacher.”

I once ran a red light in Brooklyn by mistake and was pulled over. I owned up to it right away, but the policeman let me go with a warning because his favorite teacher in high school, Mrs. Buery, had the same last name as me. It was my mom, of course. I saw the impact that you could have on people’s lives when you were living a life of service. She put so much effort into that job, including grading papers on the weekends.

Bryant: How did you end up working in the non-profit field?

Buery: Part of it is just role modeling. My parents were very active in the church, and my mother was a teacher, as I mentioned. So they role modeled service. I also grew up in East New York, which is a high-poverty community in eastern Brooklyn, but I went to Stuyvesant, a specialized high school. Not a lot of kids from East New York and Brownsville went to Stuyvesant.

It was a very jarring experience for me. I’d gone to good schools in Brooklyn. My middle school was an advanced school for gifted and talented Black and Latino students. But it became very clear that there was a whole different world of opportunity at Stuyvesant than there was for most of the kids in East New York.

The reason why I do this work is really anchored in that experience. I

knew I was getting this storied educational experience. Six people in my homeroom class went to Harvard. But I was still living in a place where fewer than 10 percent of the kids graduated from college. So there's an anger that comes from that, particularly when you understand the overlay of race and class that drive that difference.

There was not only anger, but also a sense of unearned privilege, recognizing every day that I was getting something that the other kids who were just like me in my neighborhood weren't getting. And it wasn't because I was better but because I was lucky. I was the exception.

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I was also lucky that I found an outlet when I was at Harvard for undergrad. A friend asked me to volunteer with her at a Harvard-sponsored after-school program in the housing projects in Roxbury, Mass., and I fell in love with it. I found purpose through that experience. I didn't have to just live with that privilege. I could utilize that privilege to try to give more children and more families the kind of opportunity that I had.

Morris: Were you in leadership roles as a kid?

Buery: No. I was a good student, but I wasn't a leader. That changed with my experience in the after-school program in Roxbury. When I

went back to college for my sophomore year and saw the kids in that after-school program again, they told me they had done nothing all summer. Most of them had just hung out and watched TV. It was the same for the kids I grew up with in East New York who were sort of systemically denied opportunities.

I decided to do something about it. We started a summer camp. I recruited friends, we raised money from local businesses, we got classroom space and the local public housing authority gave us an apartment for the summer. We took them camping, read books, explored Boston, and took them to New York and Washington D.C. We would go to museums and aquariums.

That's where I felt like a leader because I saw a problem and I could do something about it as a 17-year-old college student. And it met a need for me, because I was really struggling at the time. I was not a happy person. I was struggling with my identity and what felt like an unearned privilege.

I felt every day that I was this Black kid from Brooklyn in a place that I felt like I hadn't earned and where I wasn't supposed to be. I always felt like I was an "other." I didn't feel like I belonged. I found my purpose and passion through this outlet, through these kids, through that neighborhood. I didn't really feel at home anywhere else, but I felt at home doing this work in this place.

That program I started when I was in college still exists today. The kids who were in that program when I ran it are in their 40s now, and we

stay in touch. They're living good lives, and they sometimes tell me that our summer program was the reason they're living the life they have now.

Bryant: What are the headwinds that you've encountered in your career because of your race, and what are the tailwinds that helped you get through them?

Buery: To this day, at my ever-advancing age, the imposter syndrome has always been very real to me. It's a constant feeling. I felt it most acutely when I was working as a deputy mayor in New York City. We would be in meetings, and people would go quiet, and I'd realize that they're waiting for me to give an answer. I would be thinking, why are you all looking at me?

So the headwinds for me have often been the headwinds of internalized racism, the headwinds from a country that tells you every day that because you look this way and because you're from a certain place, you're not as much or as worthwhile as some others.

One of the reasons why prejudice is so insidious is because it's so easy to listen to it and start to believe it. You start to listen to what people are saying about you. And I've often felt like that was the strongest headwind is my own lack of confidence, my own feeling like I didn't belong.

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It's probably impossible to be a person of color in this country and not encounter prejudice. But sometimes I do feel like the biggest obstacles I face are from allowing the world to make me question myself, rather than my conscious awareness that someone is stopping me from doing something.

My tailwinds are my mentors who tell me to stop being stupid when I feel like I can't do something. And some of my mentors are peers, and some are more advanced in their careers. I've had, and still have, a lot of mentors because early in my career, I would literally just cold-call people to ask them for their help. When you reach out to people, nine out of ten of them will return the call or email. People respond.

Morris: Once they responded, how did you ask them for help?

Buery: It's important to ask them real questions to get their advice on something concrete. Sometimes people reach out to me, and they're asking made-up questions because they're looking for an excuse for the conversation. I had real questions, because I didn't know how to do certain things. You have to be clear about what you're looking for and to be prepared so that you make the most of the time you have with someone.

If you ask someone to be your mentor, that can sound overwhelming,

like asking them to marry you. Instead, I would ask people after that first conversation if I could reach out to them in a few months if I have more questions. Again, most people said yes.

Bryant: Many people find it difficult to have conversations about race in this country. Why is that?

Buery: One reason is that we're still living with antiquated notions of racism. The primary image of racism for a lot of people is police dogs attacking peaceful protesters in Birmingham. And so if you start talking about race or saying that an institution is racist, nobody wants to see themselves that way or to be thought of that way. The truth is that few people are that way.

Part of the problem is that we don't have a shared understanding of what we mean by racism. Racism for me is less about your personal beliefs. It is about the system that you engage in and benefit from and perpetrate — despite the impact that those systems have on some people, and despite the fact that some people disproportionately benefit from those systems or are harmed by them.

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You don't have to be a bad person to participate in the systems. I know I participate in sexist systems. That doesn't mean I'm a bad person. I'm

a man who benefits from gender in a way that I regularly don't recognize, and that people have to point out to me sometimes.

So we have to be clear about the challenge, and crawl before we walk or run in those conversations. I try to talk about the meanings of words and not assume that everyone shares the same meanings and understandings.

I veer toward pragmatic optimism and that means I am not surprised when racial progress leads to racial entrenchment, given the intensity and chameleon-like persistence of racism and oppression in this country. You don't stop fighting. My optimism is not a fanciful optimism. It's a grounded optimism.

Morris: You've talked about the importance of mentoring, but what is some other career and life advice that you typically share with young Black professionals?

Buery: The most important aspects of a job are your boss and your colleagues. That's because your day-to-day joy and your ability to learn and grow as a professional are going to be determined by who's managing you and who your closest colleagues are.

And this may sound like a cliché, but with everything I've done that's been worthwhile, there's always been reasons not to do it. I was a lawyer early on, and then decided to start youth mentoring programs. I wasn't sure if it was going to be successful, and if I wasn't successful, I didn't know what I was going to do.

Meanwhile, all my friends were pursuing these clear paths in law, business and academia. When I was asked to join the de Blasio administration as deputy mayor in New York, I said no three times before I said yes.

The point is to ignore the fear. You can listen to the fear, but don't let the fear stop you. Take the chance. I would not have had the opportunities I've had if I had not taken chances. My final advice is to aim for the big problems. I don't think you're any more likely to fail than if you went after smaller problems, but the successes are much more powerful and impactful.