



**Leading in the B-Suite**

Powerful conversations about life, race and leadership



# We Deserve The Benefit Of The Doubt Just Like Everybody Else

Published on February 2, 2022



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***Gaurdie Banister, a veteran CEO and board director, 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 that made you who you are today?**

Banister: There are two groups of people who did that. I'll start with my mother and my father. My parents were born and raised in New Orleans, but they didn't want their children raised in the segregated South. My father got a call from an Air Force buddy in Casper, Wyoming, about taking a job there in 1956. And so he and my mom jumped on the train, with my 3-month-old sister, abandoned New Orleans and went to Casper in the middle of the winter in early 1957.

I was born in Casper in 1957. My parents helped set the foundation of a strong work ethic. They both worked multiple jobs. You can imagine Casper didn't have a whole lot of Black people. But my parents learned how to navigate and live in this predominantly White environment. They emphasized education with my sister and me as the ticket for success. So they encouraged us. If we brought home a C, that was bad news. We had to perform in school. It was never a question as to whether we were going to go to college.

People ask me sometimes if we were in a Black church in Casper. We started out in one, but my parents moved over to a White church, and

that's where we met a family who were also big influences in my life — Zack and Joann Brewer and their two kids, Scott and Becky. Zack and Joann became kind of my second parents.

I was active in the church. Zack was the sponsor of the Fellowship of Christian Athletes, and I was president of our high school chapter of the FCA when I was a senior. As a senior, I was selected the United States High School Christian Athlete of the Year. It was awarded to me by Tom Landry, who was the head football coach of the Dallas Cowboys. Archie Griffin, the only back-to-back Heisman Trophy winner, was selected as the college athlete of the year, and I got to room with him as a high school student through the Fellowship of Christian Athletes.

The Brewers welcomed me into their home, and they were just always so giving. They, along with my best friend since middle school, Chris Humberson, helped me be really comfortable in a predominantly White environment while being proud every day to be Black.

**Bryant: What was it like growing up in Casper?**

Banister: It wasn't as tumultuous as life would have been had we stayed in the South. There were no fire hoses or dogs. But there was an incident at the University of Wyoming called the Black 14 incident. My father was the president of the local NAACP chapter. In 1969, the University of Wyoming was one of the best football teams in America. When they were about to play BYU, the Black kids on the team wanted to wear armbands to protest the practices of the Mormon Church, because at the time BYU didn't allow Black people to be

priests. Before the kids could even get to the game, the coach kicked them off the team and created this big controversy.

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the roads because people were  
going to kill him.*

The Wyoming football program has never been the same. And just in the last few years, Wyoming has gone back and apologized to all the kids. But my father, as president of the NAACP chapter, backed up the kids, and we started getting hate mail and threatening phone calls at our house. The FBI told my dad to stay off the roads because people were going to kill him, but he didn't.

So while I had experiences of racism growing up in Casper, it wasn't as pronounced as it would have been had we been living in the South. I remember times when I was on the basketball team in high school, we would go to these other schools and I would be called the N-word. We were a state powerhouse, so we were pretty intimidating. I wasn't the only Black kid on the basketball team.

**Morris: How did you get out of Casper?**

Banister: I played high school basketball and I love math and science. My teachers told me that maybe I should be an engineer. And so I thought okay, I'll apply to engineering school. I was a national merit finalist, so I was bombarded with recruiting letters from colleges all

over the country. A buddy of mine in chemistry class got into the South Dakota School of Mines, and I figured that if he could get in, I could get in, too. So I applied, I was accepted, and decided to go there sight unseen. My parents drove me to Rapid City, dropped me off at the dorm, and there I was.

I didn't have any blatant racial incidents on campus. There were people who wanted to touch my hair or who had never been around a Black person before so I encountered all of that and other micro-aggressions. In 1980, I was the first African American to graduate from the South Dakota School of Mines and Technology.

**Bryant: As you were moving up in your career, what are some of the headwinds you encountered because of your race?**

Banister: I was often an "only." In my first six months at Shell, I was working in One Shell Square in New Orleans as an engineer. As I was walking around the hallways, a White guy walked up to me and asked me to carry the mail. He had absolutely no idea or belief that I could have been a Black engineer. And I told him, "I'm an engineer here. I'm not going to carry your mail." I was not sure whether I wanted to keep working at Shell, but after considering a job someplace else, I decided to stay.

There were other challenging moments, like when Shell assigned me to the worst part of the portfolio — the oldest drilling platforms in the shallow water — to update process and safety diagrams. The guys offshore were all shocked when I showed up. The Black guys were

delighted that there was a Black engineer. The White guys and all the people in leadership positions were shocked, too, and they assumed I wasn't competent because I'm Black. In the early going, it was a little tough in terms of getting people to tell me what I needed to know to do my job.

*When you first join a company, your first couple years are absolutely critical.*

But I had a few things going for me. Because I went to South Dakota School of Mines, people didn't challenge my technical work. There were people from South Dakota Mines in very senior positions in Shell, so they couldn't argue with my technical background and degree. And I know how to get along with people, and I would go out on weekends and spend time offshore with the guys, just getting to know them and figuring out what problems they had. That was my ticket to success.

When you first join a company, your first couple years are absolutely critical. If you do great work in the first couple years, then you have a shot at moving up. I got all the operations guys behind me because I got stuff done for them. That's what really helped me move along, as well as my ability to communicate and get along with people.

**Morris: In those moments of headwinds that you encountered, how did you decide whether to act on them or to let them go?**

Banister: Inside the company, I didn't face much overt racism. It was more subtle. I'll give you one example that I faced with a supplier. I was a facilities engineer, and we were working on a big new offshore construction project, so all the suppliers were calling. Everybody wants to talk to you, take you out to lunch, do something with you. One of the big contractors had never invited me or the other Black project engineer to their suite in the Superdome to watch a Saints game.

But now they want me to come because they wanted to bid on the project. I remember looking at the guy and saying, "I just find it really interesting you guys want to bid on this project, but you've never invited me or Thaddeus before to come to your suite to watch a football game." I knew that the reason they hadn't invited us before was that we were Black. And so when the invitation came to go to their suite, I said no. That's a time when I took a stand.

**Bryant: Why is so hard for us to have conversations about race and racism in corporate America? And are there constructive ways to have them?**

Banister: I think it's a function of the environment. I went through three different times in my career where I was the guy who was helping to push the D&I objective in the company, participating in the tough conversations. People knew I would be straightforward. I had a diplomatic way of engaging and disarming people. In the post-George Floyd era, what I think has been really helpful is that I share my personal pain with people so that they can find a way to relate to it. And as I've tried to lead inclusion efforts, I've tried to simplify it and make

it more personal for people.

For example, last April, our daughter was visiting us from Cape Town, South Africa, at our home in Los Angeles. I was walking across the street from the Brentwood Country Club with my wife, who's Iranian, and our daughter, who's obviously mixed race. An elderly White woman rode by on a bicycle, looked back at us, flipped me off, and spat on the ground.

I shared that story with a group of people from all over the world during a party on New Year's Eve, and their mouths were hanging open, and saying, this still happens? We have to be willing to express the pain we've felt so that people can understand how deep this stuff actually is. We have to be willing to open ourselves up.

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A White guy who was at the party and heard me tell that story came up to me later and said, I want to meet you in the middle and talk and learn. But then he said, "You sound kind of angry." I said, "That's really interesting you would say that because what do you think my reaction should be after being exposed to this stuff every day?" And I added, "Oh, by the way, I'm not angry. I'm just frustrated. When I talk about this stuff, it means something, and I want you to relate to it. I don't want you to just dismiss it and say just get over it."



When it comes to these conversations as they're occurring now at the board level and in the C-suite, it's important that those of us who are at that level be sufficiently grounded and secure in who we are, and not go along just to get along. We're going to take a stand where we think it's important. And to me, once you have that foundation, you then have to be willing to demonstrate vulnerability, which is a fundamental leadership trait. That to me is how we engage and how we have these conversations.

I remember a time on the Tyson board where we had a conversation about DE&I. As we were talking about African Americans and progress in the company and society, I said, and this time I was literally in tears, that the problem in society is that Black people never get the benefit of the doubt. You're always happy to say, well, if so-and-so who's White does something and they don't perform, you're going to give them another chance. When it comes to Black people, that rarely happens. I've experienced this myself.

We have to be able to convince people that we deserve and we earn the benefit of the doubt just like anybody else. Just because we look like this doesn't mean we started out incompetent or whatever the narrative is that people have around who we are. We deserve the benefit of the doubt. And that to me is a critical element around this whole societal transformation. There are so many White people who have absolutely no idea how unconsciously they have these judgments about Black people, and it shows all the time. And they don't want to acknowledge it exists or how painful that is for us.

**Morris: If you were speaking to an audience of young Black professionals, sharing your best career and life advice to them, what would you say?**

Banister: The first thing I would share, with Black professionals or anyone, is that it's just really important for you to know who you are. You have to do an unvarnished, no-BS assessment of your strengths and weaknesses. These days, people of all colors live in a fantasy land about their skills and capabilities, and so having an objective assessment about what you're good at, what you're not good at, and who you are is really important. That serves as your foundation.

Then it's important for people to spend time reflecting on the kind of work that is fun and exciting for them. You want to get more energy from the work than what you put into it. So if you know your skills and capabilities, and you understand the work that excites you and gives you energy, then you just have to apply the Nike principle, which is just do it. If an opportunity comes up, you've got to do it. You shouldn't run away from something. You should always be running toward something.