



Leading in the B-Suite

Powerful conversations about life, race and leadership

You Don't Need To Have a Title To Be A Leader, So Learn About Leadership

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Anton Vincent



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Anton Vincent, president of Mars Wrigley North America, 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 as a leader?

Vincent: I'm a proud Southerner. I was born in Jackson, Mississippi. I think I had the best parents in the world, and I'm the fifth of five boys. You can imagine living in the South in the '70s and '80s; there was a lot going on, and my parents were on the front end of a lot of that. My mother and father were also educators, and we had high standards in our home — high academic standards and expectations that we would just be good human beings.

They laid a good foundation of not only pushing us to do what they thought we were capable of, but also the responsibility that comes with that. From a very early age, I felt like I had a good grounding, I knew who I was, and I felt like I had a responsibility to do big things in life. I always had a natural energy to walk through those doors, create new doors, and pull other people through those doors.

Athletics were very important in my life all up through my early 20s. I was fortunate to go to a powerhouse high school. I had a legendary Hall of Fame basketball coach who set a high standard and was very influential to me and many of my teammates. He impacted our lives in

ways mostly off the court.

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He passed away recently, but he created a long-lasting community of multiple generations of athletes. He taught us how to be champions on the court and in life. So I had two aspirations early on. I wanted to be a professional athlete, and if that didn't work out, I wanted to be a stockbroker. We didn't grow up with a lot of wealth, and there wasn't a lot of wealth in our community, and so like most kids, you want what you never had.

I was a scholarship athlete when I played basketball in college. But by my junior year, I knew that the NBA was not going to come calling for Anton anytime soon, so I got very focused on making sure I made good grades. I was always interested in business.

Bryant: Why specifically was stockbroker on your aspiration list?

Vincent: The only stockbroker I knew was Garry Bridgeman, an African American gentleman who worked for Merrill Lynch in Jackson. He was just a very interesting guy and he was also visible in the community. I was brought up to be bold, and so when I was in high school, I wrote Garry a letter and told him that I wanted to learn about what he did, and maybe get an internship.

I didn't get the internship, but he did write me back. That said a lot about him and I learned that you can connect with people even when they are very distant from you in age and or their station in life. It always left an impression on me. About two years ago, Garry posted something on LinkedIn, and I reached out to him. I recounted the story to him, and he was very effusive about my success and my progress.

I still write to people who spark my interest, and I invite people to write to me. I know how inspiring people were to me, and if I can be that way for someone, I consider it a privilege.

Morris: What are some of the headwinds you've faced throughout your early life and your career because of your race, and how have you navigated through them?

Vincent: Jackson, Mississippi, has one of the highest concentrations of African Americans in the country. But our high school was one of the first schools to be integrated in Mississippi. And so my experience was always in an integrated setting. I can say that for the most part, at school anyway, I hardly ever had any racial issues. It was a great mixture of some tough Black neighborhoods backed up against some pretty wealthy White neighborhoods, and for some reason, we found a way to coexist at a hyper-sensitive time.

By the time I got to a corporate environment, I probably had a dated understanding around race and race in the workplace. I didn't come from a family whose mom and dad or cousins worked in corporate America. I felt like I had some intellectual capability to make it happen,

but I didn't have much ability to navigate those headwinds early on.

One experience with race, in particular, was after I had just been promoted to Director at General Mills, and I was able to start using a covered parking garage, which is a big deal in Minnesota, given the winter weather. Once there was a Caucasian woman probably 10 yards in front of me, who probably had not known who I was, and it was clear she felt threatened.

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She was grabbing her purse, and looking at me and wondering whether I belonged there. I was well into my career at this time, but it was hurtful in a lot of ways because I was thinking, "aren't we beyond this?" Other challenges include the insidiousness of low expectations, and not being heard when you're saying the exact same thing as a majority colleague.

I think things are better these days, but my sense is that you still have kids of color coming into organizations who are still wanting to be seen, wanting to be heard, wanting to be understood. I always tell people, particularly as African Americans, that we're still fighting for legitimacy — that I have the right to be here and I have the right to compete and I have the right to be considered for things. These are foundational things. This is not about being better than or being given

things undeservedly. We still fight some of these basic issues.

Bryant: We've talked to other leaders for this series who've shared with us their quick playbook for setting the tone when you first go into a meeting. Do you have a playbook?

Vincent: When you hear the name Anton Vincent, you're not necessarily expecting a 6'5", 225-pound Black man. I get looks that make it clear what people are thinking — "this is different than I was expecting." But I have learned to use that to my advantage. When it's clear that I am not the person that someone expected, I use the leverage that people have just given me because they underestimated me or assumed a stereotype. I try to flip that to a positive.

I've also learned to be very aware of the tone I am trying to set. If I'm sensing negative stereotypes in the room, how do I make sure I give people a different sense of what's possible in a Black package? That's important to me. Now maybe I shouldn't carry that weight, but that is a part of my process when I'm walking into certain environments.

And not only am I 6'5", but I also talk fast, and I talk with my hands. And so if you imagine all that energy coming at you at once, you might have one or two reactions — wow, this guy is powerful and exciting, or wow, this guy is just scary. And I've seen both. That's who I am and that's how I operated, but then I went through a period of thinking, how do I thread the needle? How do I present my authentic energy, and have that be as uplifting as possible, without making people feel threatened?

Morris: Conversations about race can be uncomfortable for a lot of people. How do we make them constructive?

Vincent: I make sure I give people grace up front that these are going to be not only difficult but uncomfortable, too. Sometimes it's uncomfortable among Black people because we don't all have the same experience. We might share a culture, but that doesn't mean the experience was the same.

So I tell people to understand that there's no perfect way to have a conversation about race, and that the most important thing is that we actually have the conversation. It's not the perfection of the conversation; it's the fact that we're having it and we have our hearts and our minds open enough to be honest and transparent with one another.

I always leave those conversations learning more or getting more insight, regardless of who it's with. We need to have the conversations not just when something like the murder of George Floyd happens, because it will happen again. How do we take the moment and make it a transformational moment rather than a moment of shock and awe for the entire world, but then we move on a year later?

Bryant: And are you more optimistic or pessimistic about change?

Vincent: I think it is a moment for us to truly have conversation and ask ourselves, is this who we want to be? That's my provocative question to everyone, regardless of race or creed. Because we have the power to

change it, and it's really not a Black issue. It is a societal issue. So we all need to be vested in making sure that we can have great human relations because that's the only thing that's going to ensure that our species is around for some time.

Because if I hate you, or at the very least if I'm indifferent to you and your plight, it's going to impact all of us at some point. That is the moment, and that moment is every day. We don't need a George Floyd to have that moment and do something. So I tend to look at it on a much broader scale.

Yes, it's about race. It's historical and endemic in nature, certainly in the United States. But it's also about something broader than that. We have to figure this out. We all have to have an understanding about how we want to comport ourselves as human beings, because the world will only become more diverse. That train is not going backward.

Morris: What career and life advice do you share with young Black professionals?

Vincent: One thing that I really had to get a grasp on when I moved into corporate America was the concept of feedback. At first, I took it very personally. If there was anything negative, my perception was, I just don't think you like me or I don't think you get me.

I didn't think there were racial motivations. But it was hurtful and painful. I had to grow to understand that feedback was a gift to help make me great. I honestly don't think I understood that until much later

in my career. And even when I get challenges and feedback today, it takes me about 48 hours to calm down, and then I can deal with it in a very balanced way. So my advice is to value feedback very early in your career.

You've got to be good at your craft in a very consistent way.

The second thing I say all the time is not to confuse mastery of your craft with leadership. In my experience, those can be two different things. You don't need to have a title to be seen as a leader. A lot of kids today think they can be CEO tomorrow. There's no logic to it, but there's beauty in the expectation they can go be a CEO tomorrow. And if that is your aspiration, then learn what leadership is about. Your job is to make things happen regardless of circumstances. If you're fortunate enough to succeed, then your responsibility is to make things better because now you have power.

Finally, learn what makes you special. Learn how to bring those things to the forefront in the environment that you're in. You've got to be good at your craft in a very consistent way, so people know that you have the stuff, but really start to learn about leadership.

You've got to learn how to tap into what makes you unique. I challenge kids with one simple question — what makes you special? And if you don't know the answer, you need to figure that out. I find that many kids of color are not processing on that level. They're trying to survive

corporate America, but they're not trying to thrive in corporate America. Those are two very different mindsets. So I try to get younger talent to focus on really understanding what makes them special. Once they figure that out, and bring it with full authenticity, they can be unstoppable.

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