



Leading in the B-Suite

Powerful conversations about life, race and leadership

 Biweekly newsletter

If You Become Indispensable, Most People Won't Care What You Look Like

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Sharon Crane, president of Practising Law Institute (PLI), 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?

Crane: Both my parents were professionals, and they revered education. There was never any question that I would go to college, and probably on to graduate school. Also, it's still a mantra that Black parents say to their children that you have to work twice as hard to get half as much. You have to deal with the cards you're dealt and I thought, I can do that.

I've always had a very strong work ethic, and my family just made me believe that I could do what I wanted to do. So it was easy to build my confidence.

Bryant: Were you in leadership positions early on?

Crane: My parents told this story of when I was five years old in an after-school program. The people who ran the program would tell them, "Sharon is so good with the little kids." "What do you mean?" my parents asked. They said, "Oh, they listen to her and they do what she says."

I'm also tall, and I've never slouched. I don't know if that

automatically gives a certain air of confidence, but I remember in elementary school, if there was someone who had to make an announcement, people would say, “Let’s have Sharon do it.”

I was comfortable speaking in front of people. Part of it was that I was willing to do things that others didn’t want to do, and part of it was just making sure I had a well-rounded experience — not only to suit my interests, but also because I was preparing to go to college.

Morris: Any key lessons from your college years?

Crane: I went to Georgetown, which had a really diverse environment. I had a group of friends from different backgrounds. We had a Muslim girl, a Catholic girl from the Midwest who was a liberal and a Catholic Italian girl from the Northeast who was more conservative. There was another Black woman, and her parents were from Africa and South America. We had a Jewish girl from Georgia and a free-spirited Protestant from Seattle. We looked like a Benetton ad.

We would debate and talk about all the different topics of the day. We could get in some really heated arguments, but we all respected each other as women and respected each other’s opinions, and knew that we wanted the best for each other. I can’t help but notice that now it seems rare to see people, if their social media pages are any indication, who have a diverse group of friends. It’s sad how segregated we still are as a society.

Bryant: What headwinds have you faced in your career because of

your race?

Crane: I've had people speak over me, or repeat my ideas at meetings. You sit there and think, "Didn't I just say that?" There's also the dynamic of people discounting you and assuming that you don't belong in your role, or assuming that you got where you are because of some diversity initiative, or because you got a break. And I'm at a point now that if someone repeats my idea in a meeting, I will just say, "Thank you for agreeing with my idea." I definitely don't let those moments go by.

Being overlooked and underestimated can also be a positive, because then people are in for a surprise.

There was another moment when I went to an event and a person I met assumed that my white male subordinate was my boss. I was so surprised because they didn't even assume I was a colleague at the same level. They said, "You must be here for your boss." Luckily, I have a bit of a sense of humor about moments like that. Sometimes you just have to laugh it off, because if you don't you would just lose your mind. That being said, being overlooked and underestimated can also be a positive, because then people are in for a surprise.

Morris: Can you talk more about the tailwinds that help you not let those kinds of experiences wear on you?

Crane: I can get along with almost everybody, and I feel comfortable in uncomfortable spaces. So I don't let things get to me in that way. And the reason I say I can get along with everybody is because I'm curious about people. I can always find some way to relate to somebody.

And I'm more curious about people when they kind of act out. I'm honest and I'm pretty candid with them. I'll just be upfront with people about what they said or did. I've had some difficult conversations, and it makes me feel better just to get it off my chest. That's less frustrating than thinking to yourself, "I wish I had said this. I wish I had said that."

Bryant: Why is it so difficult to have conversations about race in this country?

Crane: Because it's a horrible conversation to have, for both sides. Racism is horrible. Slavery is horrible. People don't want to deal with things that don't have easy solutions. And everybody's busy. Everyone is focused on themselves, and if it's not really relating to them and impacting them, they don't want to deal with it.

I also think it's harder now, because so many people want to shorthand complex ideas to just a word or phrase. You can't talk about race and solve race problems by talking about who's woke, who's not, critical race theory, and cancelling people. People immediately shut down, because they don't want to hear it anymore. You lose an opportunity to have a conversation.

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I don't think you can solve things with just one word. People are so much more complex than that. The only way you're really going to solve any complicated problem is to give it time. You have to work on it and have conversations and disagreements and stay at the table, even when you're disagreeing.

I also think people have to be vulnerable and share their own experiences and be honest, even if it's uncomfortable. I don't have the energy to do that all the time. But in the wake of George Floyd and other incidents, I shared in a meeting what had happened to me recently. I was driving in my town and I accidentally cut someone off. I just didn't see the person. They started honking at me, which was understandable.

Then he started following me really close, and kept honking. I thought, "This guy is crazy." He kept honking and riding up behind me. He wouldn't stop and I finally pulled over, and he starts running toward my car screaming racial epithets. Luckily, he turned around, got back into his car, and sped off, still honking and yelling. My son was in the back seat, and I just tried to keep my composure because I didn't want him to be scared.

I didn't expect to tell this story at the meeting, but I wanted people to

understand what can happen because the only reason that people are going to really grapple with racism is if they hear about some of the horrible things that happen to people they know. Racism is not something that only happens to poor Black people in the South. It happens to all of us, including a Columbia law graduate like me. A lot of people told me it hit home for them. If people are willing to share vulnerable stories, that makes people want to help more than just batting around words.

Morris: Where are you on the optimism-pessimism scale about whether there is going to be real long-term change?

Crane: I'm neutral. Horrible things have been going on forever. People get excited to try to make change, and then they forget about it and go on to the next thing. So I don't think we're in a completely different spot than we've been before. I think it gets incrementally better. I don't see a huge shift happening any time soon.

Bryant: What is your best career and life advice for an audience of young Black professionals?

Crane: To get ahead, make yourself indispensable to someone. I've always worked really hard, and I realized that I needed to focus on making my boss' life easier. So take the assignments that come your way, do your best, and always ask, "What's on your plate? What else can I do for you?" Show interest in their life and their work, and try to figure out how you can help them.

Once you become indispensable, people for the most part don't care what you look like. They just know that you help them and that you make their life easier. Then they're naturally going to want you around and, hopefully, continue to help you. That doesn't happen all the time, but if you do that and someone shows interest in you, then listen to that person and take their help if they offer it.

A lot of people will say, "I want someone to be my mentor. Can you be my mentor?" But I feel like that never works. You need to build a relationship with someone, and then once you see someone take an interest in you because you've been indispensable to them, then you can start to do things that might turn them into a mentor or sponsor, like asking for feedback.

People often have difficulty providing feedback across differences, so that can be a headwind women and people of color face. To get around this, be proactive and ask, "How should I approach this? How can I be better?" When people start doing that, they feel connected to you and responsible for you and want you to do better.

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People often look for mentors or sponsors who look like them, and many times they're not going to be there. I want the most powerful

person who is interested in helping me to be my mentor or sponsor. I don't care what that person looks like. You can learn from anyone. I often think about a White female partner I worked with. She had short spiky blonde hair, and she always wore the brightest colors. One of the things I learned from her is that it can be good to stand out. People are going to notice you. That gives you an opportunity to shine.

So be prepared for those moments that no one will forget — that the only Black person in the room did this or the only woman in the room did that. So I try to take what could be a negative and turn it into a positive. If you're prepared and ready, no one is going to forget you because you stood out.

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