



Leading in the B-Suite

Powerful conversations about life, race and leadership

 Biweekly newsletter

If You Use The Headwinds In The Right Way, They Can Propel You Even Higher

Published on June 2, 2022



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Kevin Warren, Commissioner of the Big Ten college football conference, 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: Tell us about some important early influences for you.

Warren: I was born in 1963, the youngest of seven kids, in Phoenix, Arizona, right in the middle of the Civil Rights movement. In terms of understanding what made me who I am today, we would have to go back one or two generations.

My grandmother on my mother's side was Romona Padilla, who was born in Guadalajara. She crossed the border and was a maid at the Army base at Fort Huachuca, Arizona, where she met my grandfather, Elliott Mosley. We would regularly spend weekends with her once she moved to the housing project in Phoenix, Arizona. Her neighbors spoke only Spanish, and that was the first time I realized that people are the same, and that you can communicate with other people even if you do not speak the same language.

Big Mama, as we called my grandmother, was one of my first heroes. She had a photographic memory and could do math in her head. I never met my grandfather. When my mother was in eighth grade, she came home from school and her father had left, and she never saw him again. I have a few holes in my heart. One of them is never getting a chance to

meet my grandfather. His leaving really sent my family into a downward spiral financially. That is why Big Mama continued to be a maid and lived in the housing projects in Phoenix, but she taught us so much about life, hard work, toughness, dedication, financial stewardship and how to love God.

On my father's side, my grandmother had a teaching certificate and went to Prairie View A&M University. She survived a fire in college by jumping out a window. Her husband was an entrepreneur and owned the first Black drug store in Phoenix. Our family story is that my grandfather had a physical altercation that caused my family to immediately leave Texas, or my grandfather could have been lynched. They left everything and moved to Phoenix. He was also a porter for many years at a Phoenix hotel. As a way to say thank you to my grandmother and grandfather, I leave a \$20 bill, sometimes more, on my hotel bed for the maid when I stay in a hotel.

Bryant: And your parents?

Warren: My mother was a brilliant woman, and the valedictorian of her high school class. But she had a lot of pain in her heart – she never really recovered when my grandfather left. She did not go back to college until she was 41 years old, just after she had me, and then earned her Master's degree and started working on her doctorate. Our kitchen table was like an office – she was always writing and working on research papers. I spent a lot of time in libraries with her. That is why I have a great love of reading and a great love of travel. She would ask me to spin the globe and put a finger on where it landed, so I

dreamed a lot about traveling.

My dad went to Phoenix College and Arizona State, and took a break between junior college and college to fight in WWII. He came back, finished college, had a great football career. I have the contract he signed with the Brooklyn Dodgers, which was a pro football team back then, hanging on my office wall at home.

He was voted one of the greatest 50 players in Arizona State football history. He went on to earn his masters and Ph.D. from Arizona State, and was an elementary school principal for many years. He ended up being vice-mayor of Phoenix in 1969, and was president of the Fiesta Bowl in 1981 — the first Black man to be vice mayor in Phoenix and a president of a major college bowl game. He was a stand-up guy, and never, ever complained. He taught us about life. He taught us about the Holocaust and the atrocities in Auschwitz and he taught us about slavery. I grew up in a household of educators who had been through a lot.

*I learned about the fragility of
life.*

My life took a turn shortly after we moved to Tempe, Arizona. I was 11 and a half years old, and I was riding my bike when a lady in the neighborhood accidentally drove up onto the curb and hit me. I flew 30 feet in the air, and somehow managed to survive. I was in traction for many weeks in the hospital, and in a body cast for many months after

my accident.

The people who looked at the accident site said, “There is no way this person should still be alive after an accident like that.” That is when I learned about the fragility of life. And that is why I am so passionate about making sure I take advantage of each and every day.

I ended up getting a settlement from the accident, and negotiated with my parents to allow me to use a portion of my settlement to build a pool in our backyard, because the doctor had told me that swimming would give me the best chance to get better. Six years later, I was able to play Division 1 basketball for the University of Pennsylvania.

Morris: All that time in a full body cast must have changed you in profound ways.

Warren: I have never had a pain like that before or since – not only the physical pain, which was so severe that I could feel it in my teeth, but also the mental pain. There were no cellphones or cable television back then, of course. During my recovery, I would just read and think and pray and cry and dream.

We had a neighbor, Mary Kay Matthews, who was paralyzed, and I remember one morning, at my lowest moments, when I heard her in her wheelchair in her driveway. I was in a tough, debilitating situation, and I really did not know if I would walk again, but I knew that if Mary Kay had had an opportunity to change places with me, she would do it in a minute. I heard birds singing outside my window and the sound

touched my soul. That is what made me realize that we need to count our blessings and have a heart of gratitude, and that everything is controlled by your mind. If you get your mind right, your body will follow and your life will follow.

Bryant: You stepped into your role as Big Ten commissioner just a couple of months before the pandemic started. What guided you as were leading the conference through the crisis?

Warren: A lot of people had never lived through a real crisis before. But after my accident, and spending months flat on my back, I had to rely on the fact that things were going to be okay, and that the way you get to be okay is that you have to survive that day, and make the very best decision that day based upon the information you have at the time, knowing that the decision may not be perfect.

The hotter things become, the calmer you need to be.

Many people were critical of me during that time, and many still are to this day about some of the decisions I made. But my parents always told me that the hotter things become, the calmer you need to be. I am proud of how the Big Ten worked through complex issues for our student-athletes who rely on us. The really strong leaders who I admire are the ones who, in a crisis, can not only be calm but can also operate in an environment of being uncomfortably comfortable.

Morris: Speaking of uncomfortable, what is your playbook for having conversations about race?

Warren: If I learned one lesson during the pandemic, it was the power of imperfection. I may not know how to start these conversations about race, but I know we need to have them. So many times, especially in corporate America, we have been so focused on perfection. But we live in a different world now. There is no perfection anymore. As long as you respect one another and you talk about these issues, then there is a chance to make progress.

Bryant: And where do you fall on the optimism-pessimism scale of whether, as a country, we are making progress on racial awareness and equity?

Warren: I am very optimistic, because sometimes the results of progress come following the kind of years we have just lived through. Things take time. I am glad now that we are talking about issues. We are starting to realize that, regardless of the color of our skin, if one of our brothers or sisters is struggling or in pain or suffering because of inequality, it impacts all of us. It impacts our children and our future generations.

One great and beautiful thing about sports is that it provides us with an opportunity to bring people together, regardless of your background, gender, sexual orientation, financial status, race or education. It allows people to come together. Sports mirrors so much about life and the ebbs and flows of emotion. When we look back in history, we will recognize

the power of sports and the impact that it helped us as a country to heal. And we are still healing right now.

I am optimistic about the future because of our young people. I look at our student athletes in the Big Ten Conference. Young people have a different view of life and race relations. Plus, they will speak their minds.

The most important thing is that we have to continually learn and grow, and we have to tell our stories. When people understand the sacrifice that individuals had to make to allow us to vote as people of color, as women, then it becomes less challenging to get people to register to vote. And there have been many elections that have come down to one vote that have really changed the trajectory of society.

We still do need to address the financial gap between races. We need to talk about people of color getting into more positions of power. It is a challenging world that we live in, but I am hopeful and I am optimistic that we are going to do the right things and get better just marginally each and every day.

Morris: What are some headwinds you've faced as a Black man?

Warren: There are daily headwinds. The only place I do not have headwinds is in my house. The moment I step outside the door, the headwinds are there, whether it is during the drive to work or the drive home or at work, they are there.

But you also learn that headwinds are part of a role like this. These jobs, these platforms, these opportunities, are not for everyone. I have the picture of the five previous commissioners on my wall. The Big Ten Conference started in 1896, and to think there are only five individuals who held this position before me, and there has never been a woman commissioner before, or a Black commissioner until me. If anyone thinks that you are going to have total support all the time in these kinds of jobs, you do not. That is why I said these jobs are not for everyone, and that is why it is important to be calm and to take the long approach.

*Surround yourself with really
good people.*

Someone asked me recently whether I was having fun. I responded that when you are in the middle of history, history is not fun. My parents would always tell me that, “Kevin, the words you should really take out of your vernacular are fair and fun.” Life is not fair. I have moments of joy, but the job is not fun. It is demanding. It is challenging. The headwinds are real.

So you surround yourself with really good people. You try to make progress each and every day. And you learn to ignore the noise. If you need to be liked and accepted, you will struggle in these jobs. But if you use the headwinds in the right way, like birds do or when planes are taking off, they can propel you even higher.

Bryant: If you were speaking to an audience of young Black professionals, what career and life advice would you share with them?

Warren: You have to live like today is your last day, but you have to operate and plan that you are going to live for 100-plus years. So you have to play the long game. I see so many young people make decisions based upon things that they see in front of them. I have seen people leave jobs for a \$5,000 raise. You should not make career decisions based on money alone. Always make your list of what is important to you. As you're making career decisions, money should be the last thing on the list.

The people you surround yourself with, from the person you marry to your friends to your business partners to your colleagues, will determine your elevation. You cannot be around people who, as my dad would call them, "walk across the grass," meaning they take shortcuts. Your inner circle is critically important. But the biggest thing is to just play the long game. Be where your feet are. The best way you get your next job is to be the best at your current job.

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