Leading in the B-Suite
Powerful conversations about life, race and leadership

"Wounds From The Truth Heal A Lot Faster Than Wounds From Lies"

Published on July 7, 2022

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Malcolm Mitchell, founder of the Share the Magic Foundation and a former wide receiver for the New England Patriots, 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?

Mitchell: I grew up in Valdosta in southern Georgia. We pride ourselves on a few things, particularly football. Our high school is consistently one of the winningest programs in the country. So it's pretty easy to understand how I gravitated to sports in that environment.

I have an older brother and a younger sister, and we didn't have a lot of financial resources. Some would consider the area where we grew up to be a poverty pocket or a book desert. But the love and attention that my mother gave us just overwhelmed the idea of poverty. I never really grew up thinking I was poor. I just thought there were some things you could have and some things you couldn't.

I grew up in a single parent household. My mother and grandmother were the foundations for my family. There were not a lot of present male figures, though I have some awesome uncles and cousins. All I really thought about was sports. I played because it brought a lot of joy to my family and friends and me. In my junior year, coaches started offering scholarships to play at universities, and that's when I realized

there might be a path for me to continue with sports.

Bryant: What were early lessons for you on what it took to compete at an elite level?

Mitchell: At a very early age, even in middle school, I understood that in order to be better at something, you had to work at it and practice. The second thing I learned very early was that in order to be better than someone else, you had to work harder than that person. Once I started progressing athletically, it became obvious. If I had spent the same amount of time doing the same thing as others, I would be just as good.

But if I ran, say, eleven laps instead of ten like everyone else, that will prepare me to have greater endurance than the next person. That intensifies as you move up in sports, because you realize that the more you advance, the more you end up in groups where people are likely to go the extra mile. So you have to find ways to separate yourself. It may be studying an extra hour, or watching film for an extra hour for the details that will give you that competitive advantage. I learned that early.

Morris: You've worked with so many different coaches in your football career. What sets the best leaders apart from others?

Mitchell: The best leaders immediately set clear expectations and establish accountability and responsibility based upon those expectations. That way, there is no confusion by anybody around

what's expected and required, and the standard of excellence is set and it's maintained throughout that person's leadership.

I saw that when I played with the Patriots under Bill Belichick. You knew what to expect, and you didn't have to guess what he thought of your performance. He didn't have to say a word. It was understood. That brought me comfort because I knew how to operate and I knew my results were based on my performance. I also knew how my performance impacted the team.

The best leaders immediately set clear expectations.

As a leader of my nonprofit organization, I try to establish that environment, too. If you understand your role and value to the team and you carry your weight, we all move forward. If you don't, well, now we have a fracture and let's try to work together to try to mend it. To me, Bill Belichick was the best display of leadership I have ever witnessed. Everybody knew their job. Everybody knew the rewards and consequences for doing or not doing your job to the standard that was set. I loved that environment.

Bryant: Tell us the story of how you went from the NFL to being the leader of Share the Magic Foundation.

Mitchell: When I was in Valdosta, football reigned supreme, and academic performance really wasn't considered a competitive

advantage. When you walked outside your front door, you didn't see doctors or lawyers or entrepreneurs. There were no tangible examples of literacy or math doing much of anything for you. The idea that education was of any benefit outside of allowing you to play sports didn't even register. School was just a necessary evil.

Once I got to college, then the world expanded and I began to see things from a different perspective. I began to learn more about different professions. I saw the value of an education, and the dedication that other students applied to their education. I'll never forget when I was in first-year English and we were getting back the reports we wrote. Teachers were passing out the papers with grades on them. One student got her grade and starting crying and ran out of the classroom. This was mind-blowing to me, because I was thinking, "What's the big deal? It's just a grade." I asked around and somebody said she was crying over her grade, which was an 89. That didn't make sense to me – I got a 71, and I was going to hang it on the refrigerator.

I realized it wasn't about the specific grade for her, but about the expectation she had set for herself. I became very curious about where I stood intellectually. Where was I positioned in this ecosystem of students? I knew it was low based on my reading proficiency at the time, and I wanted to do something about that. I was misreading labels at the grocery store and picking the wrong items. I had to keep pausing movies to read the captions. My reading levels were low and I identified the problem. Even that could not convince me, because while my reading levels were low, I still had athletic success. I was scoring touchdowns every Saturday for the University of Georgia. So I had this

push and pull of thinking, “Do I really need to pay attention to this?”

Around then, I saw an interview with Jay-Z, and he was talking about a book he had written. Same with Curtis Jackson, or 50 Cent as most people know him, and others, as well. Everybody was saying that reading helped them progress in their career. I started looking at people like Warren Buffett. He reads every day and reading gives him the knowledge to make the decisions he makes. Frederick Douglass said that reading set him free.

People who read have a better chance of being financially stable.

I wanted to be smarter, and to be empowered to make good decisions. People who read have a better chance of being financially stable than those who don’t, and if you grow up in poverty the only thing you want is never to return to that life. I struggled to become a better reader. It took me about two years. I tore my ACL in college and that put me out for a year, and that’s when I started reading to learn. Being a reader is the only thing that gives me the tools to perform at a very high level for a long period of time.

My mom had told me that being the best football player and being the best person are two different things. And once I began to understand the value of literacy, I began to chase the idea of being the best me, not just the best football player. That forced me to look at the world

differently and then make different choices.

Morris: When did you start planning this new chapter of your career after football?

Mitchell: I never planned it. Once I became an avid reader, it became very important to me to share this message. I had this ah-ha moment — you can read your way to a better future, you can read yourself out of the mentality of poverty. That's what happened to me. I began to think much differently once I started reading. My behavior changed. My approach to situations changed. Everything about me evolved.

So many of my friends were spending time in jail. So many of my friends didn't graduate from high school. If we would have understood the power of literacy much sooner in life, we could have made different choices, which would have changed the trajectory of our lives. So it became very important to me to send this message: "You need to do this because it works. This is the real deal. It takes a little while, but it works."

So I started writing picture books to inspire kids to read. From there, it evolved organically into Share the Magic Foundation. The initial intent was just to write a book. Then a teacher called me saying, "Would you share your book with our students?" Then they had a sponsor who wanted to purchase books for each student in the school. That's when the model of the foundation was created, through a teacher asking me to come read to their students.

Bryant: Race remains an uncomfortable conversation in this country. What is your suggestion on the most constructive way to have those discussions?

Mitchell: Acknowledge the brutal facts. Let's start there. Let's not hypothesize. Let's not use theories. Let's just start with the facts. I think if we start there, then by the time we get to the present then everyone is more likely to say, "Okay. I understand." But we don't start with the facts. Slavery existed. That's a fact. There's evidence that proves that. There are consequences from that, and certain mentalities evolved from that. Those thoughts still exist in some people's minds today. That's a fact.

Embrace the brutal facts. Let's just put the truth on the table.

And if you think about literacy, it's a fact that at some point in time certain people weren't allowed to read, and they were actually punished if they attempted to read. And today, certain communities are still not getting adequate resources. If you add up the facts, the conclusion should not be mind-blowing. It's not surprising that the lowest performing students are the ones who were cut off from access to reading for the longest period of time.

It's going to be really hard to push past any race-related conversation if you don't embrace the brutal facts. Until you do that, it's as if you and I were in a partnership and you lied to me about something, and we

never talked about it and we tried to continue the partnership. Well, now we have a fracture. We have something that's going to never allow us to fully mend what took place until I come to you and say, "You lied to me and let's talk about it." That's what I mean by embrace the brutal facts. Let's just put the truth on the table about how we got to where we are today and then maybe go from there. Because here's what my mom taught me: Wounds from the truth heal a lot faster than wounds from lies.

Morris: What advice do you give to younger Black students beyond teaching them about the power of reading?

Mitchell: The messages that I send to them is to always challenge your own perspective and stay open-minded and pay attention. It sounds so simple, but if you pay attention, you can avoid a lot of mistakes and take advantage of opportunities. I also talk to them about ignoring the noise on social media. The only thing that people care about once you step into your career is the intellect you bring to the table to help solve a problem.

But high schoolers are still picking on each other for being smart and calling each other nerds because somebody reads. I talk a lot about breaking those false narratives, so they can make the choices that will really lead them down the path they want. I remember saying to one class, "Raise your hand if you want to be financially stable." Everybody put their hand in the air. Then I said, "How many of you like to read?" Only three people raised their hand. Then I said, "Well, let's talk about this."