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## Leading in the B-Suite

Powerful conversations about life, race and leadership

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# We Need Conversations To Help Make Things That Are Invisible More Visible

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Sean Decatur, president of Kenyon College



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***Sean Decatur, president of Kenyon College, shared powerful lessons with Rhonda Morris, the CHRO of Chevron, and me for our interview series with prominent Black leaders. Subscribe [here](#) for all Leading in the B-Suite interviews.***

**Morris: What were some important early influences for you that helped shape who you are today?**

Decatur: By far the most important influence in my life has been my mother. I grew up with her and my two older brothers. But my brothers were quite a bit older than me, and so for most of my years growing up, it was me and my mother at home. She was a teacher for many years in the Cleveland public schools and also was usually working at least one, sometimes two, other jobs.

My big lesson that I took from her is the importance of working hard, and that effort reaches far beyond what one might see as the normal limits of a job. I remember going with my mom on weekends or over the summer to decorate bulletin boards and to do activities to connect with her students outside of school. Supporting her students meant going above and beyond on a regular basis. That was something that I internalized very early on.

The other gift from my mom was a love of math and science. She was a math and science teacher, and she gave me math problems to keep me busy while she was making dinner. She also encouraged me to mix together things in the kitchen as my own sort of makeshift chemistry

set.

**Bryant: What kinds of things were you doing outside of class early on?**

Decatur: With my mother's help and support, I was able to go to a private college prep school from fifth grade through high school. That was a challenge for the family on multiple fronts, not the least of which was logistics. I was on public transportation about 90 minutes each way to get to school and home.

It was also a school that was not particularly racially or socioeconomically diverse, and so there were social challenges making the journey to a very different world in many ways. But some lessons from that experience include the importance of being able to navigate very different environments and feeling comfortable in places that on the surface would seem uninviting.

My main activity in high school was speech and debate. I loved engaging in research and animated discussion about important topics of the day. I was never particularly athletic but actually pretty competitive, and so speech and debate gave me a space in which I could put my competitive juices to work. That took me around the state to a range of different high schools and meeting lots of different folks. That was a transformative experience outside of the classroom.

**Morris: What were important early lessons for you as you evolved as a leader?**

Decatur: One thing that's still very odd about academic careers is that you spend most of your graduate work doing research and then you are thrown into a classroom at some point and you have to figure out how to teach on the fly. My first few classes were trial-by-fire experiences. The biggest mistake I made early on was thinking that a course was going to follow a strict script. But if I felt uncomfortable veering away from that detailed plan, that meant I was squeezing out any role for the students to shape their own experiences in the classroom. I was naïvely holding onto this notion that the world was going to follow whatever plan I had set out for it.

*My first few classes were trial-by-fire experiences.*

One thing about teaching is that you have to look at a group of people and sense when something is not going well. The thing that I learned from that experience is that you have to be flexible. That doesn't mean that there isn't a syllabus and direction for the course. But you can't think of the syllabus as an absolute rigid schedule or map or script of what's going to happen. That flexibility and responsiveness is important in terms of where students are and the larger context of the work and the world. This requires vulnerability from the teacher — or leader — and that can be difficult.

Opening things up so you're not totally sure what's coming next takes in some ways more preparation. It's harder work to keep something moving forward when you embrace flexibility and uncertainty. What I

learned through teaching translates to leading organizations. For any leadership position in a large organization, you have to have an idea of where you need to be at the end of the quarter. The pathway to get there is where you need to show dynamic flexibility and to be responsive to circumstances on the ground.

**Bryant: Can you talk about the headwinds that you've faced in your career as a Black man, and how you navigate them?**

Decatur: I think of my identity as a leader as being an identity that has multiple facets and perspectives, and race is one of them. I can't separate my racial identity and my identity as a Black male from the work that I do in any way. It's not a separation that I want to make, but inevitably, I'm going to be seen as a Black male.

There have been many moments in my career, when I was one of a few or the only African American in a particular context, where I have heard questions about my ability, or experienced micro-aggressions targeting my identity or the work that I'm doing. There has not been much diversity in the biophysics and biophysical chemistry community. And so at conferences, folks would sometimes come up to my students and make assumptions that the White students were the principal investigators on a research project, and that I was working for the students rather than the other way around. And there have been cases when people questioned whether my advancement was because of my abilities and objective accomplishments or because of race. Those things happened early in my career, and they still happen now in different forms.

The way to deal with those headwinds is to have a strong network of not just mentors but also supporters and friends and colleagues. I also learned to recognize that people's comments or actions often say more about the circumstances than the folks who are making the comments, and that they are not reflective of me. Instead, I've tried to use those opportunities to highlight and understand what types of change needs to happen in the world.

**Morris: Speaking of which, can you share the backstory of the powerful article you wrote this spring, “[The Cost of Leading While Black](#),” that was published in the Chronicle of Higher Education?**

Decatur: The desire to write that piece came from realizing that there wasn't a good place to talk about this kind of experience. When other members of our campus community are subjected to some sort of attack and abuse, there are ways and places that the institution tries to address and talk about it. That often falls on leadership to make a statement that the behavior is unacceptable and inappropriate.

In positions of leadership, often there isn't really a means of talking about the type of things might happen to leaders who find themselves on the receiving end of those attacks and abuse. Many of my friends and colleagues who are in leadership positions have had similar things happen to them. We're quietly supportive of each other, but that support is often invisible to the larger world.

*We have to find ways to make*

*this a larger public  
conversation.*

I wanted to publicly acknowledge that this not only happened to me but that I know this happens to many others. The only way that we might have a chance at larger, broader change is if we're not just quietly absorbing it and talking amongst ourselves. We have to find ways to make this a larger public conversation but without making it a direct response to the folks who made the racist comments to begin with. We need to start conversations that are not meant to prompt any specific type of action but to help make things that are often invisible more visible.

**Bryant: Do you have suggestions on how best to structure difficult conversations about race?**

Decatur: I certainly have not found any magic answers. But I do think that we hold ourselves back by focusing particularly on Black-White issues, even though racial issues and issues of equity and diversity are much more complicated than a simple divide defined as Black or White.

There are moments when, especially for African Americans who are in leadership or on a path toward leadership, they are hesitant to bring up a topic that could be polarizing or where you don't know what the response is going to be. And I think that for many of my White friends and colleagues, there can be a fear of not wanting to be seen as clueless

or ignorant about an issue So, in a sense, it's not just that the conversations make us uncomfortable, but people can enter into the conversations feeling that they have potentially a lot to lose by saying the wrong thing or saying something that's going to offend the other side.

I find that what makes having these candid conversations possible is to establish up front ground rules and a mutual understanding and trust that there isn't going to be permanent offense taken on either side. I would not recommend jumping into the deep end of difficult discussions right away, but to spend time on building a sense of relationship, connection and trust that allows folks to let their guards down.

**Morris: Over the last couple years, there have been so many articles and conversations about race in this country. Are there any aspects of those conversation that feel like an off-key note for you, or that people don't fully understand?**

Decatur: What is perhaps most difficult for folks to understand is that no one has either the answers or a position of ethical or moral clarity. We all carry a set of biases and ways of looking at the world that are formed by how we've grown up and the environments in which we've grown up and the time in which we've grown up. Those carry with them assumptions about other people that are really at the core of what we're talking about.

*We all carry a set of biases and*



## *ways of looking at the world.*

Sometimes there can be a sense of expectation that people of color have better answers or are in a better position to go into these conversations because of their experiences. I'm certain that I carry my own collection of difficult and somewhat problematic ways of looking at the world that need to be as unpacked just like everyone else. That weighs on me the way that I know it weighs on some of my White friends and colleagues.

Having the context where we're willing to all be vulnerable and unpack that is the ultimate goal. That's not a single set of conversations or a single action or training that can happen. It's really a long-term commitment to building a set of relationships that are rooted in trust and openness. That can then allow a process of unpacking our own perceptions, biases, and assumptions about the world.

**Bryant: Where are you on the optimism-pessimism scale about whether things will get better in terms of race in this country?**

Decatur: I tend more toward the optimistic. Working on a campus, I spend a lot of time around young people and I am optimistic about the ways that they already look at the world and engage in the world that are different than our generation, and that gives me hope.

And when I think about things in a larger historical trajectory, things are better than they were 50 years ago to 100 years ago. There are clearly points of progress and improvement over time. That doesn't

mean that it is always moving in the same direction or that it's progress for everyone or that it's a linear relationship with time. But I think that, overall, that leads to a sense of optimism for me because I do think there's a longer trajectory there.

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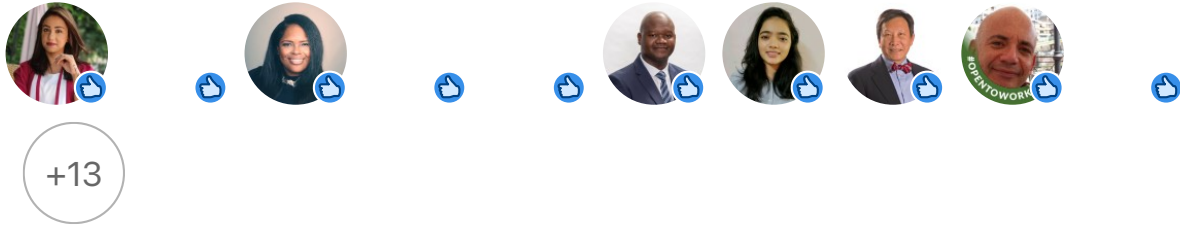
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