



Leading in the B-Suite

Powerful conversations about life, race and leadership

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"I Fundamentally Believe That We Have More In Common Than Differences"

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Jennifer R. Jackson, Senior Vice President, Corporate Strategy, Development and Innovation at Walmart, 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 important influences that shaped who you are as a leader today?

Jackson: I was born in Philadelphia and grew up in the inner city, an all-Black neighborhood. Education was really important in our family, and my parents sent me to a series of Catholic schools that were all outside of my neighborhood. Even though we weren't Catholic, and we didn't have much money at the time, they were the best schools we could afford in the area and all the discretionary income went to sending me there. The first school I attended was very multicultural. In my class of 15 students, there were a couple of Asians, a few Blacks, an Indian. Unlike most of the people in my neighborhood, I was exposed to a lot of different cultures right off the bat.

When I was in high school, we moved from Philadelphia to Hershey, Pennsylvania, which was a predominately White suburban community. That was the first time I was the only person of color in my grade, and

one of only a handful in the entire school. I always tell people that it was my practice for corporate America. But I adapted quickly. There were some racially motivated incidents with students and teachers, but not too many.

I went to Yale for undergrad. It's a great school, and I also was looking for a place where there were a lot of international students and people from different religions and cultures. There wasn't a huge Black population there, but it was close to the overall demographic mix in the country. I studied engineering, in part because of a high school program I participated in at MIT, that aimed to get underrepresented minorities interested in science and engineering. I hadn't known any people in those disciplines. In the communities I grew up in, most Black people were in teaching, government or social work.

Bryant: Back to those incidents you mentioned from high school, how did you deal with them?

Jackson: Most of the time, the students would call me names that they thought would be insulting to me. I wouldn't respond. I didn't think much of the students who would do that. It really didn't matter. They weren't particularly smart, and they usually were not involved in the things that I cared about. So, fortunately for me, it was something that I could dismiss.

I could also tell that, for a lot of people, they had never interacted much with a Black person before me. A lot of their opinions were informed by television, and they were extreme. So you could tell they thought

that Black people maybe weren't that smart in general, but they saw me as an exception. I was probably more bothered by that than anything else they said, because I wanted them to know I wasn't an exception. I could tell from their comments that they thought that people who were different were generally lesser. I did experience one related racially motivated incident with a teacher in seventh grade, but I never shared that with my parents until I was in my 30s.

Morris: Why not?

Jackson: I probably compartmentalized it, but not in a way where I think I was irreparably harmed. It was what it was and, fortunately, it didn't represent that much of the time I spent at school. I was very academically driven and since none of the incidents impacted my educational trajectory, it really didn't bother me that much. Most of the people I interacted with were great.

Bryant: You got a Ph.D. in chemical engineering, and yet you went into business instead of academia or pursuing your speciality. What was the path there?

Jackson: At first, I thought I wanted to be a professor, to teach and do research. I ended up going into management consulting because I like to interact with people, and when I was doing research, I was alone in my office most of the day. I'm also a rather impatient person, and the timelines for research in academia are too long for me. But the process of getting my Ph.D. taught me that I could do anything I wanted.

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I sent my resume to McKinsey, and they wrote back about a summer internship. The rest is history. I really took advantage of that opportunity. Since then, I've switched jobs and industries a lot. I'm really motivated by learning and asking myself, "Can I figure out something new and excel at it?"

Morris: In all these different roles you've had, what are some of the headwinds you've faced because you're a Black woman? And what are some of the tailwinds that help you navigate through them?

Jackson: The biggest headwind has been being underestimated, and that's shown up in different ways. In general, if it didn't impact the opportunities I was given, then it wouldn't matter because I was just focused on overdelivering. But the underestimation also sometimes meant a reluctance to give me a big role or the next opportunity.

That underestimation also manifests itself in meetings sometimes. There have been times when I was running a project, and the leader would keep asking questions to one of my colleagues — which, by the way, made my colleague equally uncomfortable.

I have also been at key meetings where I was mistaken for the wait staff. I believe I handled those situations with grace, but it's just

another thing on my mind. I have to push it out. And it just takes away from me being most effective in the moment of whatever I'm trying to do.

The tailwinds include the solid education that my family helped provide for me. And my grandmother is an important role model. She was born in 1918, went to college, and eventually got a Master's and Ph.D. while she was raising five daughters by herself. She had multiple careers, and ultimately realized her dream of becoming an ordained minister when she was 81. So, part of that tailwind was that I could tell myself, "if she was able to do all that, this is nothing."

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Another tailwind was that I was always able to find peer mentors to talk things through. Sometimes it was another Black colleague, and sometimes it was a White colleague, but the common thread is the person got me and the situation I was facing. Some people who initially underestimated me became some of my biggest advocates and sponsors. I don't need people to treat me better than anyone else. I just don't want them to treat me worse than anyone else.

I've even gotten comfortable enough where I have shared with people who later became advocates for me about earlier moments when I believe they didn't give me certain opportunities. I don't believe they did that intentionally, but I needed them to know how some of their

decisions actually show up to other people. It wasn't just Black people who noticed it. People in the dominant group were also thinking, "Hmm, this doesn't really make sense." It's important to provide that feedback to people who may not recognize the impact of their choices.

Bryant: How did you work up the courage to have those conversations?

Jackson: I gained the courage because, over time, I became very aware of what I am really good at. And if the worst-case scenario happened and I had to leave, I knew I could get a great role at another company. So I wasn't afraid of the repercussions.

In one case, I knew I would hurt the feelings of one leader I talked to about this. But I felt that was one of the ways I could give back. We always talk about standing on others' shoulders, so I asked myself, "What ways can I give back?" Because he might be making similar decisions about other people, and not just me. I wanted him to think about the impact of his decisions. It's one of my proudest career moments.

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differences.*

We have to have these conversations, even if they're uncomfortable. We're all human, and I fundamentally believe that we have more in

common than differences. The biggest opportunity for empathy comes when people can see parts of you in themselves. I have to be willing to share personal stories, especially with people who may have had a lot of interactions with me and know me but do not know some of the experiences I have had.

Often when we have conversations about race, a lot of the discussion is unfortunately steeped in everything that's wrong. Bad things do happen disproportionately to Black people. But I try to add encouragement and suggestions of what we can do differently or how we can think differently to drive positive change.

There are many points of pride that I have as a Black woman, and for all the hardships, I wouldn't trade it for anything. It makes me who I am. I love who I am, even with some of what I put up with sometimes.

Morris: Imagine an audience of young Black professionals. What is your best career and life advice for them?

Jackson: The best advice I share is to know you belong. I say that because often there are some extra roads and barriers and biases. Fortunately, people are still able to succeed. Sometimes it may feel harder. Sometimes that's real, sometimes it's perceived. But in any case, when somebody has a role, a position, an opportunity, a seat at the table, a lot of the challenges I see is that they start asking themselves, "Do I deserve it?"

We should not be questioning ourselves about whether we belong there,

belong in this role, belong at the table, belong as a recipient of an opportunity. I know I belong, and that's what I tell myself if I have moments of insecurity and doubt.

The other advice I share is that I do believe feedback is a gift and it helps us. That can be challenging sometimes, because when there are differences, sometimes the feedback isn't as constructive and direct, even though that's what helps people grow the most. But I also heard some advice from a mentor, who is a White male. He said to remember that feedback is just as much, if not more, about the person giving it than the person it's being given to.

That's really helpful to remember when you're getting feedback. Because if you take everything at face value, you may over-correct. It may make you not authentically you. The advice may be through the lens of what they think is right and what good looks like, and sometimes it's stylistic and has nothing to do with you. It's about their experience. So it's not that you should throw away feedback, but you should curate it and keep in mind where it is coming from.

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