



**Leading in the B-Suite**

Powerful conversations about life, race and leadership

📧 Biweekly newsletter

# "I Walk Into Rooms Expecting That People Want To Hear My Point Of View"

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***Lisa Osborne Ross, the U.S. chief executive of Edelman, 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 early influences that shaped who you are today?**

Ross: I was raised with love. I was raised with commitment, passion and understanding of the famous adage of “To whom much is given, much is required.” But my parents, two HBCU grads who met on campus at Howard University, believed that “to whom *anything* is given, much is required.” My father was a Montford Point Marine. He was there studying pharmacology on the GI bill. I have three older brothers. There was a clear expectation in our family to give back, and to do well and do good at the same time.

My mother and father poured everything they could into giving us the best education. They also did not burden me with the plight of being Black in America. They didn’t sit me down and say, “When you walk into a room, people are not going to like it. They are not going to expect you. They’re going to think less of you and you’re going to have to overcome that.” Instead, my parents taught me early on, “That room

belongs to you as much as it does belong to anybody else, so you walk in there and you do your thing.”

I get it because I have children of my own. My husband and I have had to prepare our children for the difficulties that they’ll face in life as a person of color in this country. But, in the same way my parents left me unencumbered, I too want to do the same for my children. I walk into rooms assuming I’m supposed to be there. I walk into rooms expecting that people want to hear my point of view. The expectation was that I would be prepared. I had to be strategic. I had to be mission- and purpose-driven, and I had to deliver an outcome. That’s how I was raised and it’s how I see the world today.

**Bryant: How have you dealt with the inevitable headwinds that you encounter as a Black woman?**

Ross: I grew up in Washington, D.C., which was Chocolate City at the time, and it was a bastion of Black excellence. I went to White private schools but I grew up in Black middle-class neighborhoods. I’m fortunate that I didn’t grow up in awe of White people. I didn’t grow up afraid of White people. They were just people like me. I didn’t grow up irate with White people. I grew up frustrated with White people, but not consistently furious every day, because that fury can get in your way. I’ve seen it take other people down.

As I got older, I came out of my bubble a bit and I saw the world in a different way. When I left Washington D.C. and went to Milwaukee, it was the first time I had been called the n-word, at least to my face.

Joining my sorority, Alpha Kappa Alpha, was pivotal for me. It made me so strong, so solid, that I had so much conviction in my fundamental belief that I am supposed to be where I am. And because of that belief, I have been able to handle those headwinds throughout my career.

**Morris: How do you decide when somebody crosses a line for you, and how do you handle that?**

Ross: When I feel it, I address it immediately. I am all about in-time feedback. If something happens, I don't hesitate to say, "Hey, let me talk to you about that exchange. This is what I felt. I don't know what you were trying to communicate, but this is what I heard. So, let's have a conversation about that."

You just settle it right then and there. If they were coming for me, they won't do it again. And if that wasn't their intention, you can say, "Look, we're good, but let's have the conversation about it." One of the biggest mistakes that we make in corporate America is that we don't talk to each other. We don't say, "That wasn't cool," or, "You really messed that up." Or, conversely, we also don't say enough, "You nailed that. You hit that out of the ballpark." I'm very comfortable receiving in-time feedback because it makes me better, and I seek to do the same for others.

**Bryant: Have you always been like that or was this an evolution?**

Ross: I was taught to express myself. I was taught to share and show

frustration and anger, but to resolve it. My platform is obviously bigger now, and I see it as my responsibility to use that platform to have these conversations and to make people more comfortable to be able to engage in a conversation. I am also comfortable in discomfort.

But there are moments we often face as Black executives. There is a restaurant in Washington, D.C., where I do a lot of my professional entertaining. This summer, I was there to host one of my clients, a senior Black executive at a Fortune 10 company, for a breakfast with reporters from several top-tier publications. The client and I were having tea in the private dining room, prepping for our meeting before the journalists arrived.

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conversations.*

One of the staff members kept walking back and forth in front of our door. Finally, she just could not help herself, and said, “Can I help you?” I said, “All good. Thanks.” She said, “This room is reserved.” I said, “For me. And please close the door when you leave.” My client said, “They never forget to tell us. They never forget to put us in our place.”

After the meeting, I asked to see the manager, and I explained the situation. He said, “Yeah, there was some confusion with the room.” I said, “But that’s not my problem. That’s your problem.” Then I added,

“This is what I’m going to do. I’m going to give you my card. I think you know who I am and what I do. I’m going to give you until the end of the day to fix this. If you don’t, I promise you I will never come back here, and I will share the incident with the other guests. So you decide how you want to handle it.” I got in my car and drove off, and within 35 minutes it was handled.

You have to have conversations like that in the moment. The most important thing is how they will treat other people of color from that moment on. Unless we have a conversation about it, unless we talk about it, people will never learn.

**Morris: After the murder of George Floyd, so many companies made pledges and commitments to do more about racial inequality. What was your reaction?**

Ross: I will never forget those months. It was so difficult – the intensity of the responsibility I felt as the most senior person of color within my organization and at some level in my industry, the expectations of me for helping our clients, and the personal internal pain and struggles that I was going through.

But I’ll tell you who wins from that time. It’s not who made the biggest pledge. It’s not who put people of color on their board for the first time. It’s not those who either elevated the chief diversity officer within their organization or hired a CDO. The real progress was made with those leaders who went beyond putting Black Lives Matter or Equity Matters on their website. They put a bumper sticker on their car. They put a

sign on their lawn. They integrated their lives. They changed their personal behaviors.

Because this is not about your corporate statements. It is about who are you as an individual. Have you grown? Have you evolved? Are you willing to say and do things differently as an individual? Those are the people who get the gold stars — they were willing to stand up and do something and look inside. You can't be one person in your home and be somebody else at work.

I had so many people ask me, “What should I read?” My reply, “I’m not your magic Negro. Sorry, that’s not my role. I’m not going to tell you what to read. You figure that out on your own.” Again, the people who get the gold stars are the ones who have grown personally and on their own and continue to.

**Bryant: What have you found to be the best framework for starting uncomfortable conversations about race in this country?**

Ross: In a word, it’s grace. You can have that conversation when you are willing to give and receive grace. Part of the reason people are afraid to have that conversation is because they are inevitably going to say the wrong thing. They are going to say something that is offensive. I have. I do. People in some cases are afraid to even open their mouths because they worry that they’ll get canceled for saying the wrong thing.

There also needs to be a recognition that racism exists in all of us. As I mentioned, I grew up surrounded by Black excellence and attended

White schools. In my high school senior year, I was the class vice-president and on the Prom Court. I'm embarrassed to tell this story, but I had a professor at Marquette University — he was the only Black professor there at the time — and we were talking about racism during one of his classes. I raised my hand and said, naively, “Most of my Black friends don't like White people. What does that mean?”

In the kindest way, he looked at me and said, “It means nothing because everybody has bias. Everybody has somebody that they don't necessarily feel comfortable with or don't like for whatever reason. But White people in this country control everything. When you don't like them, you don't like them. But when they don't like you, you can't get a loan to buy a house or a car. You can't get into the school that you want. You can't get the job you want. You're not safe in your community.” It's a recognition that we all have biases, but what matters is who has influence and power to use that bias in harmful ways. It's the negative actions associated with bias that are the problem.

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needs to be bigger.*

Back to this idea of grace, there are situations when I'm in a room and I'm afraid I'm going to say the wrong thing. If I feel like that, I have to also give some grace to others who might be in the room and are afraid to say the wrong thing. What I mean by grace is allowing people to come to a place where they are, and if I say something, if I use the wrong word, don't cancel me. Call me out and tell me to address it.



And if you use the wrong word, I'm going to do the same thing and show you grace.

I think that's a large part of what's happening in our country on this issue. The single most powerful thing that we can do to address racism in this country is to tell history in a truthful, unvarnished, objective manner. Part of the reason that we are in such a bad place is that we don't know our history, because our history has been so corrupted.

If we knew the true experience of people of color in this country and had some honest discussion that was based in reality, we could get to a better place. But we're taught things that are not true, and so now we're spending all this time trying to undo that. Honest conversation and dialogue can get us to where we're supposed to be. But it is a journey and the strides need to be bigger.

**Morris: If you were speaking to an audience of young Black professionals, what career advice would you give them?**

Ross: In an open session, I would say do your best. Be smart. Be valuable. Know how to manage money. Make sure you run a P&L at some point. In a private session, I would say that if you have a chip on your shoulder, you've got to soften that chip a little bit. I'm not saying get rid of it because sometimes it fuels you, but you have to soften it. I would say don't take "be authentic" to the -nth degree. Be authentic, but you have to be professional within that authenticity. And I would say in both sessions have fun.

Richard Edelman once told me, “I want to see your light shine a little more.” People hardly ever say that to people of color and women. I’m a natural optimist, and I think these growing pains are very painful, but they will take us to the other side.