



Leading in the B-Suite

Powerful conversations about life, race and leadership

📧 Biweekly newsletter



Porter Braswell

# "You Have To Be Authentic, And You Have To Be Comfortable In Your Skin"



Adam Bryant [in](#)

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*Porter Braswell, co-founder and chairman of [Jopwell](#), a career advancement platform for Black, Latinx, and Native American students and professionals, 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?

**Braswell:** I'm originally from New Jersey. I grew up in a family where we were expected to be "successful," and I put air quotes around that. You have to be a doctor. You have to be

a lawyer. You can go into finance. And those were basically the choices.

My dad is from the south Bronx, the first person in his family to go to college, and through a swimming scholarship he became the second Black graduate of Columbia Grammar Prep School, then attended Syracuse on a swimming scholarship, and following undergrad he enrolled at Rutgers Newark Law School. He became a general counsel and then a state judge in New Jersey. My mom was a fourth-grade teacher in East Orange.

So academics and having a strong perspective, with lively arguments around the kitchen table, were the ingredients of how I grow up. There was an expectation of excellence, and we grew up in a very competitive household. My sister was the captain of the women's varsity golf team at Rutgers. Sports taught us important lessons in life.

I went to Lawrenceville for high school. At the time, Morgan Stanley was offering a diversity internship program. Sam Washington, a senior member of the school's administration team, suggested I apply, and I got lucky, and started working there during my junior and senior years in high school. I went on to Yale, played basketball — fully recognizing I wasn't going to the NBA — and spent three summers interning at Goldman Sachs. When I graduated, I started my career there, buying and selling currencies on the foreign-exchange desk.

**Bryant: How did you go from Goldman Sachs to starting Jopwell?**

Braswell: I remember feeling very fortunate and privileged, but after my first year there, one of my cousins, Leonard Joyner, passed away. He had a tragic accident. He was hiking out West and fell off a mountain. He was part of the FDNY paramedic group, and they gave him a hero's salute. They basically shut down half of the Upper West Side, with motorcades and all the fire departments and paramedics coming from all different parts of New York.

I remember thinking about the impact he had on the world at such a young age, and back at my foreign exchange desk, I asked myself, "What am I doing? Am I really meant to buy

and sell currencies? Is that the impact I'm supposed to have on this world?"

That started this whole journey for me of going through the mental exercise of "resting in peace." It's an expression you hear often when people die, of course, but actually thinking about, "Would you rest in peace?" haunted me for a long time. I finally decided that I would not rest in peace, because I felt like there was more that I should be doing.

I was asked one too many times to recruit others who looked like me.

I realized that what I'm passionate about is connecting people operating in different worlds and creating diversity recruiting opportunities. Corporations are terrible at this. I was asked one too many times to recruit others who looked like me.

I figured there had to be a more scalable and effective way to go about it. And I didn't understand why there were only nonprofits in this space. So I decided to build a for-profit diversity recruiting company, so companies could no longer say they can't find the talent.

I think I'm uniquely capable of building that business. I told my parents and they said, "This is the worst decision in your life. You're going to fail. You've never built a business. You've never done recruiting." Probably the hardest thing I've ever had to tell my parents was, "I know you love me, but you're wrong." Fast-forward, and it was the right decision.

**Morris: And did your parents acknowledge that you were right?**

Braswell: I was in Martha's Vineyard two summers ago, sitting on the deck with my parents. I said to my dad, "I now understand why you pushed back on me. It was your own insecurity. You were giving me advice as if you were giving yourself advice. But what you didn't realize is that because of your hard work and getting out of your situation, I had a safety net that you never had. So you were giving me advice in terms of, 'Don't do this because you're going to fail, and therefore you're going to be homeless.' That was never my

reality. My reality was that I would have gone to business school and I would have lived with you guys. But you didn't have that opportunity, and so the advice you gave me was through the wrong lens. I love you for that and I appreciate you for that." He acknowledged that what I said was right.

**Bryant: You mentioned earlier that you're passionate about connecting people in different worlds. What are the key lessons you've learned about navigating those different worlds yourself?**

Braswell: You have to be authentic, and you have to be comfortable in your skin. The way that happened for me is I grew up in an all-White town. I fortunately fit in because I played a lot of sports, and I had a lot of friends. But I was never exactly like them. Then when I would play basketball in inner cities, I wasn't fully accepted, either. So you find yourself forced to figure out your identity very early on and get comfortable in your own skin, because you'll never be "enough" for any group.

That has allowed me to never try to fit in. I am who I am, and this is how I show up to work, and how I show up with my family. So I stopped trying to be something for everybody. When you can do that, people sense a calmness around you. Some people gravitate to that type of feeling because it's consistent. No matter what room I'm in, I'm consistent in how I interact with people.

**Morris: What kinds of headwinds have you faced because of your race?**

Braswell: If you look at the data, there aren't many people who look like me who have successfully raised the capital to scale businesses. I know they exist, but I didn't have access to them. None of my mentors look like me. So that was a headwind.

There are countless obstacles and challenges that happen every single day, and they are made more difficult because I am the "only" in many instances. When I ask for advice and I get advice, it's through the lens of somebody who doesn't live in my shoes. So their advice may not be helpful to me because they didn't deal with the same obstacles I'm facing.

I remember sitting in a room of very prominent VCs. There were eight White men, and I remember one partner saying to me, "You went to Yale. There is no reason why you would have needed a diversity program to get into a corporation. You are privileged. There is no way you would have needed help." I just remember thinking, okay, they don't get it. I left that meeting and decided to change my approach.

I flipped the narrative and stopped trying to pitch investors.

I had a competitive advantage, because that person thought he knew everything, and he knew nothing about the world I live in. So I flipped the narrative and stopped trying to pitch investors. Instead, I would teach these people something, and that gives me the leverage because there's something I know that they don't know. So I had to flip my thinking of who had the power in those conversations. It was very intimidating the first time, but that has helped me very well.

**Bryant: Why is it so hard to have discussions about race in this country?**

Braswell: The best class I ever took at Yale was called Inequality in American Democracy. There were about a hundred of us in the classroom. The professor was White, and so were most of the students. He said to us at the outset, "The first thing I want you to know is that the Constitution was written by slave owners. Therefore, inequality is built into the fabric of this country."

That was the first time I heard a teacher say that out loud, and the rest of the class built off that point. It completely blew my mind to think of American history through the lens of slave owners who wrote the laws of this country. It was one of the greatest academic moments of my life because I saw the world differently after that.

Not everybody has the benefit of taking that class. So it's hard to talk about race because we don't even agree on the lens through which we should view America. If we're not viewing America through the lens of how this economy got going, and on whose backs it was built, then we're not going back to the root issue of how this country was started.

Because people aren't coming to this conversation with the same context, they often don't trust each other and they think others have the wrong intentions. We feel like this is going to be combative. But ultimately it comes down to an alignment and agreement on the lens through which we should perceive this country. If we get to that point, then it's easier to talk about race and why George Floyd's murder was not shocking to us as a community, because that's not the first time and it won't be the last time.

**Morris: So what are your suggestions on how to have the conversation about race?**

Braswell: First, start with why. Why do we even want to talk about this? What are people looking to get out of this conversation? I think people just jump into the conversation and then it's awkward. So let's take a step back and talk about why. Then let people come in with eyes wide open that there are going to be important nuances. And it can be uncomfortable to ask questions that you feel you should know the answers to, and that includes Black folks.

If that trust and grace aren't there, you can't talk about race.

Give people the time to gather their thoughts and give them grace. Some people might say something that is a bit off-color. This is the space where that's allowed, but we're going to dig deeper to try to get to the root of people's perspectives, and there has to be a level of trust that everyone gives each other. Because if that trust and grace aren't there, you can't talk about race.

The rules of engagement have to be agreed on by everybody. How do you track and measure your desired outcomes? And it can't just be one conversation. This has to be a part of the fabric and the DNA of a company and its culture. Then it becomes less about talking about race. It's about, this is how we're showing up as human beings in this organization. We're going to engage the whole person and race is a part of us.

**Bryant: What career and life advice would you give to a group of young Black professionals?**

Braswell: My general advice is to define what success means for yourself. When I was going through my journey of figuring out what do I want to do in life, I asked myself, what's the impact I'm supposed to have on this planet with the time that I have?

I kept coming back to this concept of wanting to be "successful," but I never took the time to think and define for myself what success means. A big part of that for me is striving toward my potential, but never hitting it. To me, that is success. As long as you're striving toward something — a goal, a mission, a calling — but you're never quite reaching it, I think you're going to be in a really good place.