



Leading in the B-Suite

Powerful conversations about life, race and leadership



Joanne Berger-Sweeney

If People Ever Underestimate You, Then Use That To Your Advantage



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Joanne Berger-Sweeney, president of Trinity 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 early influences that shaped who you are today?

Berger-Sweeney: My family was a huge influence. My father had a sense of adventure and believed that you can go out there and do anything. The story is that he finished Howard Law School and started driving the next day to California. He decided that he wanted to "Go West, young man." My

mother and older brothers came later by bus and I was not yet born.

I don't think I understood just how difficult it must have been for a Black man to travel cross-country in the mid-1950s until I read Isabel Wilkerson's book, *The Warmth of Other Suns*. She wrote about how there weren't hotels in a number of states that Black people could stay in. So where were they going to sleep, and where were they going to eat? All this was kind of dangerous territory, so my father was a real adventurer in going to California.

They were both smart people. My mother had a gentler spirit. She woke me up every morning with a kiss and said, "You can do anything you want to do." She thought it was brutal to have an alarm clock in the house to wake up her children, even if she had to come and wake me up three or four times. She also taught me that you can learn something from every single person you meet. Sometimes it's good, sometimes it's bad, but you should have an open mind.

My mother was executive director of the Los Angeles Girl Scout Council, and she was the first Black female director of a major metropolitan area for the Girl Scouts. She was a music minor, and she played the organ, so music was always a vital part of my life. She had this gentle, humanistic spirit, whereas my father was a bit more bold and in your face, which you probably had to be as a lawyer at that time. And my father liked horses, outdoor things, and motorcycles. They were some wild people for Blacks in the '60s and '70s.

Morris: Do you know why your father picked California?

Berger-Sweeney: I do not. I think he thought it was glamorous. He grew up in Harlem, and his father was the minister of the largest Black Methodist church in Harlem. My father played basketball, and he went down to Atlanta and met my mother because they both were students at Clark Atlanta University.

I think he thought California was the land of milk and honey and dreams. There was a sense and hope at the time that California did not carry the prejudices of the South and it wasn't as harsh as the North and the East. A lot of Blacks went west, thinking it was going to be the American dream.

Bryant: These top leadership roles like yours take a lot of stamina and drive. Where does that come from for you?

Berger-Sweeney: It comes from an inner sense of joy. We were loved as children, and it created this sense of joy. And I think energy comes from good health, sunshine, good nutrition, and joy. And we grew up in California, so I was out in the sun. You could ride your bicycle and your skateboard all year round, and I just remember growing up in the sun. When I was younger, I loved skateboarding. In middle school and high school, I was able to ride my bike down to the beach in the summer. I have this memory of constantly being outdoors.

My two brothers are incredibly successful, too. To all of our cousins—none of them lived in California—we were like Hollywood celebrities. We just all grew up as these happy California kids. When you're happy, that gives you a lot of energy.

Morris: What led you to leave sunny California?

Berger-Sweeney: Once again, it was my mother's influence. She was college-educated, as were my father and my four grandparents, all at historically Black colleges. She was proud of their educations, but she thought women's colleges in the Northeast were the pinnacle of higher education.

She said to me, "You're Black, you're from California, you're female, and you're going to have a lot of things to deal with. I think you should go to a women's college." My whole life felt like it was a male world, and she just thought a women's college would be the most magnificent thing I could do. I started at Wellesley when I was 16.

Bryant: What was a big break you had early in your career?

Berger-Sweeney: One really big break came at Johns Hopkins, when I ended up working in the laboratory run by Joseph Coyle, who became a mentor and friend. It's a lesson I love to share with people. Joe Coyle is a White male. Your mentor does not have to look like you, but they have to support you and believe in you, and he did. I felt like one of

his favorites from the beginning. He was supportive of me, and he would stand up for me when I encountered any moments of racism and prejudice. He saw something in me.

His interest in helping me stemmed in part from the fact that he and his wife adopted two children, and one was part Asian and the other was White. He was chair of the child psychiatry department, and his wife worked in clinical psychology. They had financial resources. They could send their kids to the best schools, and they saw how those two kids were treated differently.

So some of his understanding of who I was and what I might have been encountering was based on how he saw his two children treated differently. That gave him empathy that you wouldn't necessarily expect of most White men of that era. We stayed in contact, and he continued to support me. Every time there was an opportunity to open a door for me, he did so, including writing a letter and being a reference for the job I have now. That's 25 years of being in my corner.

Morris: What have been some headwinds that you've faced in your career as you've moved up, and how did you navigate your way through them?

Berger-Sweeney: I can admit now, in retrospect, that when you're a Black female and you're the only one in a particular situation, when something happens, you don't know whether to view it through a lens of racism or not. You can't tell because there aren't other people who look like you. You don't know if what is happening to you is because of your race or not.

The headwinds grew stronger as I moved up in my career. Professor Kecia Thomas at the University of Georgia described a phenomenon for Black women in which you go from "pet to threat." As you start to move up the ladder, everybody wants to help the Black woman because it's almost like you're their little pet and they're going to give you opportunities. But the higher you go, the more you become a threat to them. You find that the people who were initially supportive of you now see you as a threat when you're on equal footing.

Systemic racism has been part of America almost since its

founding. And the people who perceive you through racially tinted glasses are of every color. It's not just White people who treat me in a racially motivated fashion. Sometimes it comes from Blacks, sometimes it comes from men, and sometimes it comes from other people of color.

Those headwinds are often strongest when I am presenting or making statements, and I'm positive that the questions or comments that I hear would not be asked in the same way if I were a 6'2" White male. If I were that White male, there is no way they would have asked me those questions in that manner, confronted me in that way, or assumed that I didn't know what I was talking about and that I did not have data to back up everything that I said.

The underlying assumption is that you only got the position because of your color, and not because of your qualities or because you're smart and have all the skills that you need to do the work and to outcompete others to get the job you have.

I met a female Black engineer with a degree from Stanford. She said that when she was there, she encountered a lot of people who implied that she did not deserve her spot because she was a Black. She finally said to someone, "Well, if they were just going to give me the degree, why didn't they do it when I walked in the door? Why did I have to go through four years to actually get this degree if it was assured because of my color from the time I walked in?"

Bryant: What are some tactics you have used to respond when people say these things to you?

Berger-Sweeney: Some of it goes back to your question about my early influences. My mother said that you're going to learn something from everybody, including sometimes how you don't want to act.

My father also used to love to say that you will attract more bees with honey than with vinegar. I was a little spoiled growing up. I had two brothers, who were seven and eight years older than me. I was the only girl, and sometimes when I would complain about not getting my way as a child, he would say you're going to get a lot more out of life if you are nice than if you try to convince them with bitterness.

So those are two life lessons from my parents that really helped me deal with some of the prejudice that I've faced. But sometimes I do get mad. Sometimes I get angry, and sometimes I have to go away and reset. But another mentor, Larry Bacow, the current president of Harvard who will step down in June, told me when I moved into this presidency, "Never let them see you sweat." It's a good reminder that even if I'm angry, I don't want them to see it because they will have won.

I also realized that you can use someone's underestimation of you to your advantage. If you want to have that view of me, go ahead, and then just wait for me to pull that rug from under you. I'm smart enough to be able to get around you most of the time. So it's this combination of confidence without cockiness. It's a true belief in my ability, and that came from my parents.

Morris: Why is it so difficult to have discussions about race and racism in this country, and what are some constructive ways you've handled that?

Berger-Sweeney: Until we have a bit of reckoning of race and the role it has played in this country since its founding, it's going to be hard to move past race. I will give you another answer as a scientist, which is that race is a social construct. It is not a biological construct. And what is the fastest growing race in the US? Multiracial. Maybe 50 years from now, questions about racism are going to be irrelevant.

My children are mixed race, and so many people I know in that next generation are mixed race. It's soon going to be a concept that's outplayed its use in America. Do we want to wait that long? Maybe not. Having some kind of reckoning around race is still the only way that we can move forward, but it will pretty soon be irrelevant—not as a historical concept, but it will be irrelevant to the present. That's my prediction.

I do have one more piece of advice, based on who I am and what I do. I am a scientist. I love science. Science is in my heart and soul, but I chose to spend this part of my career as an educator because I do believe that education is the way through prejudice. I believe that when you bring together

people from different backgrounds, different races, different countries, different socioeconomic levels, and they get to know each other, they learn from each other. And the world will be better if more of that happens.

It is particularly great to do that at the undergraduate level. Students are old enough to start to truly reason for themselves, and they're in those years when there's a natural tendency to break away from your parents' views and start to create your own identity.

That is why I decided to become an educator in the liberal arts and in a small college. I could have been at a big research university, but this is where the action is happening and where that learning really can occur. Can that happen in the workplace? In neighborhoods? In churches? Without more interactions on a humanistic level, we will not get past these questions of race.

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