



Leading in the B-Suite

Powerful conversations about life, race and leadership



Bennie F. Johnson

Achieving Anything In Life Requires Grit, Creativity And Hard Work



Adam Bryant [in](#)

Senior Managing Director at The ExCo Group; Author, "The CEO Test"

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Bennie F. Johnson, CEO of the [American Marketing Association](#), 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 early influences for you?

Johnson: My parents. My mom is a retired public school educator, and my dad was a software engineer for the government but later became a pastor. And so my experience of leadership was always dynamic, family-centered, and community-focused. My parents were the first in their families to graduate from college, so being

intellectually curious was important. They gave us space to be ourselves even if they didn't understand what we were interested in. They valued commitment to excellence in terms of academics, but also in terms of character and integrity.

I started out as a young entrepreneur. I was always thinking about how to create something new and create businesses. I started my first business when I was probably nine years old, selling candy on a school bus. I even went to my teacher beforehand to ask permission to be able to sell candy on the bus. Through those experiences, I learned what it meant to work through peers, and what it meant to work through systems to bring about change and to make the world what you wanted to see.

My dad grew up in a family where he didn't have a father figure in his life, but he jumped in and was a super father figure for me and my friends. He was a Boy Scout leader, and he invested in this group of young men and taught us what it meant to be a leader. My dad would cook for us and bring us all together. Those kids have now grown into great fathers and leaders, including a bunch of CEOs.

Bryant: Besides the candy you started selling on the bus, what were some of other businesses you created?

Johnson: In high school, I started a business with a friend organizing trips to amusement parks. I saw an opportunity. When you're 14 years old, you can't drive. You can't go to an amusement park by yourself, but I could rent buses. I did this throughout high school. I learned a lot about engaging with customers and building a brand.

I remember participating in a high school business plan competition, and I wrote up my plan based on the business I was running to organize trips to the amusement park. I got an honorable mention for that. And the MBA judges of the competition told me that my business idea didn't make sense and wouldn't work.

But I'd been making money for three years from running that business. And the lesson was that it was all about perspective. If you're a 45-year-old MBA, you have a job and you have a car, so you don't see how hard it is for people to

get to the amusement park. Because we bought tickets to the park in bulk, we got a certain number of free tickets, which I used to get parents to sign up to be chaperones. That's how we did it.

It was a bumblebee moment.

I love that story because when the idea was submitted into a business-plan competition, I was told that what was happening already wouldn't work. It was a bumblebee moment—the bumblebee is not supposed to be able to fly, but it does.

Creating something of value that didn't exist before provided a great feeling of self-worth and self-reliance. Those were key building blocks for my confidence in the later parts of my career. I knew that I could depend on myself—my skill, my intellect, my ability to build relationships—to create things and make something happen.

Morris: Where did you go to college?

Johnson: I went to Yale. My path was unusual. I grew up in Washington, DC. I'm a proud product of DC public schools. I think I was the first person from my school to go to an Ivy League university in 25 or 30 years. At the time, I knew I wanted to be at a place that helped create leaders, and so as a young kid, I was curious where the president at the time, George H.W. Bush, went to school. He went to Yale. I knew I wanted to be at a place that would challenge me, that would increase my sphere of influence because of the other students I'd be with.

While I was at Yale, I met someone who would become a mentor of mine, Woody Britton. At the time, he was a very senior executive at PwC. We had an incredible conversation. He asked me what I was doing that summer, and I told him I was still looking for internships.

A couple of days later, I received a phone call from his secretary with the start date for my internship at PwC. What was really powerful is that Woody had gone to Yale 25 years earlier with the last classmates from my high school who had gone to Yale before me.

Bryant: I imagine you've spent a lot of your career working on teams where you were in the minority. What is your playbook for navigating those situations?

Johnson: I started my career in the P&G brand-management program. It was the first time I had been interviewed for a brand position by an African American senior leader. In the moment, I did not realize the specialness of it. Years passed before I was interviewed again by an African American senior leader in marketing. In future roles, I was often the highest-ranking minority.

This required a lot of diplomacy, a lot of focus, and a lot of grit. I like to build teams and build rapport and work through some of the barriers. In many cases, I was not just the only African American male in the room. I was also the only marketing and brand person in those conversations. And often I was also the youngest person in the room.

There were challenging moments, but you use them as an opportunity. How do I take these moments to improve myself, my team, and the work we're doing? It's always challenging. You have moments when you wish it were different, but it's an opportunity to build better. It's an evolving playbook.

Morris: What is your framework for deciding whether to let some comment go that may have gone over the line?

Johnson: I let many things go because holding onto the weight does not do anyone any good. Letting those moments consume me takes me away from all the hard work and creativity that I want to focus on. My parents and my community invested a lot in me. I'm not going to let anybody dampen that. So I let the weight of those moments go so that I am lean and healthy to be able to move forward.

My goal there is to open up the door so I'm not the last.

My goal is not to marvel at the fact that I'm the only African American person in the room. My goal there is to open up the door so I'm not the last. And so I'm constantly thinking about how I can build a team around me of people from

different backgrounds. How can I do things to help make them stronger, faster, more dynamic so they have agency in their work to be able to navigate that room or lead their own room?

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

Johnson: Because it's complex. We have a tendency to want things that are clean and easy and simple for us to digest. A good friend talks about things being "snackable." We want ideas that are snackable. But conversations about race are horrible. They're nuanced. They provide moments of celebration. They provide moments of education, and they provide moments of sheer terror. When you try to have those conversations without first building a shared history or rapport, then there's going to be tension. People often retreat because they're scared of saying the wrong thing.

We should never stop having those conversations. Just because they're hard doesn't mean we should stop. I'm a teacher's kid, so we're going to use that as an opportunity. Have I had conversations that have been positive and people have grown from them? Yes. Have I had others where they've gone sideways? Absolutely. What we want to do is create a habit of being engaged.

I am so thankful that I'm an entrepreneur and innovator at heart because you really get a tough skin of pushing through your ideas and creativity. You're breaking through status quo. You're breaking through change and challenges, and I think that those skills and experiences serve you well as well when you're leading as an African American. It gives you an empathy and an understanding of everyone else. You're pushing ideas and thoughts that may not be accepted on the front end, but you don't stop.

Morris: If you were speaking to a group of young Black professionals, what career and life advice would you share with them?

Johnson: I would encourage them not to put barriers or boundaries on their expression, their experience, or their interests. Often we are told to pick a course or an area of focus, and that self-limitation can creep in and can block us

from other experiences and bringing in the rest of the world. A lot of my world is connecting things together that don't seem like they make sense, but the beauty is bringing them together. So I always tell people to open up their aperture.

And if you want to achieve anything in life – and this applies to everyone in every role, of course – that requires grit, creativity, and hard work. The last piece of advice I share is about building your network of support and community. These are the people around you who believe in you, who will challenge you, will support you. These are the people alongside you and coming behind you, not just the mentors ahead of you.

Bryant: One of the consistent themes in your story is that you don't seem to dwell on setbacks.

Johnson: I just keep pushing. There are setbacks, of course. And I always know that somewhere, sometime, someone's had it worse than you can ever imagine. I also know as an innovator and entrepreneur at heart that you have to have an Edison moment of failing multiple times before you find something, and you learn from those setbacks.

Before I first became a CEO, I had been a finalist for seven other CEO roles before that, and I didn't get one of them. All those interviews happened over a short period of about six months. It was insane.

But when I did get my first CEO role, it was so perfect for my background and experience, and from that vantage point, it completely changed how I thought about those setbacks. I was a kid from public schools in DC who was a finalist for seven CEO roles. This is my second CEO job, so that means I've been interviewed for nine CEO jobs. Think about that. Those aren't setbacks. That's a story for me to tell to help someone else who may be on those same journeys, because guess what was on the other side of it?

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