



Leading in the B-Suite

Powerful conversations about life, race and leadership



Dara Richardson-Heron

Never Let Anyone Stifle Your Ambition



Adam Bryant [in](#)

Senior Managing Director at The ExCo Group; Author, "The Leap To

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***Dara Richardson-Heron**, a veteran leader who was the chief patient officer at Pfizer and the CEO of YWCA USA, 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: Who were important early influences for you?

Richardson-Heron: My mom and my dad. Watching them lead inside and outside our home provided early lessons about leadership for my three sisters and me. My father was an executive in a major telecommunications company and my mother was an executive at home. We called her the home engineer. We had specific roles to play on our family team.

Our roles as children were to do well in school, to be

respectful and honorable citizens, and to try to achieve excellence in all that we did. Our parents often said to us, "To whom much is given, much is required." They had high expectations for us. They wanted us to leverage our blessings and gifts to make an impact on the world.

Among many other important roles she played, my mom was a board member for key nonprofit organizations in our town of Oklahoma City, where I was born and raised. But she also kept our lives and our household in order, making sure that all of us were organized, accountable, and that we had what we needed to manage our time and focus on our specific role on the family team.

At our family dinners, my dad would regularly share his challenges and successes at work. Some of the stories were not pretty—stories about inequality, blatant racism, and other things that he had to endure. At the time, it was a lot, because we were little. But as we grew up and grew into our respective leadership roles, it was clear that those stories were intentionally curated to provide us with some timeless pearls of wisdom and also the intestinal fortitude to prepare us for life.

In addition to my parents, throughout my life and career I've had the honor of watching and learning from many other great leaders and also some not-so-great leaders. With the great leaders, I've tried to follow their example, but I learned the most from some of the not-so-great leaders about what not to do. I watch what people do more than what they say. That notion of authenticity really helped shape me and my values as a leader.

Bryant: Can you talk more about those stories your father shared?

Richardson-Heron: He rose through the ranks to a senior leadership position at his company. He talked to us about the systemic ways in which people of color were not given promotions, and how he fought to get members of his team into higher leadership roles because they were well-qualified. He would talk about how he was treated and how some of the senior executives talked to him—telling him what to do and what not to do. My dad was not meek.

I honestly don't know how he made it through and stayed there so long. But at the dinners, he would share some of the really hard challenges he faced while advocating for others in their roles. When my sisters and I went to Oklahoma for my mother's funeral, which was about six years after my dad's funeral, a woman came up to us and said, "Aren't you the Richardson girls? I just retired, and your dad is the reason why I can retire comfortably. He fought for us and made sure we had what we needed to excel and get promotions. If it weren't for him, I don't know where I would be."

Morris: What were you like as a young kid? What kinds of things were you doing outside of class in middle school and high school?

Richardson-Heron: My dad said that I declared that I wanted to be a doctor by the time I was two years old. So as early as I can remember, they would bring me toys so that I could pretend I was a doctor. Our parents also were very clear about exposing us to the world. They hosted foreign exchange students in our home. So we had people from Trinidad, Japan and many other countries. We got to learn about different cultures.

I took school very seriously. I knew that in order to get into medical school I was going to have to really excel. During some summers, I was a candy striper at the hospital. I would shadow my parents' physicians. As I got older, I worked in research labs. I chose to go to Barnard College for undergrad because at the time, Barnard had the highest percentage of students who successfully matriculated into medical school.

Bryant: You started out as a doctor, but your career has led you into CEO roles and other very senior leadership roles in a lot of both for-profit and not-for-profit organizations. Was that always your plan?

Richardson-Heron: I was not uncomfortable stretching outside my comfort zone and seeking out career opportunities and paths that were not traditional. I definitely wanted to be a physician and I wanted to be a leader, too. In an early role, I was a top performer, but I wasn't even

considered for high-potential leadership and development opportunities. One day, I went to the head of HR and said, "Why am I not being considered?"

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She said, "We didn't think you would be interested in considering additional leadership roles because you're already a physician." So a group of people took it upon themselves to make that decision for me without even asking me. That's why I tell the people I'm coaching and mentoring that you've got to raise your hand because people will try to limit you or limit your potential and say, "Oh, you've achieved enough."

Other career opportunities have come from me talking to mentors and other people, and being really clear about what I wanted to do and what I didn't want to do, and not being afraid to take on nontraditional roles and responsibilities as a physician.

Morris: How have you dealt with other headwinds you've faced?

Richardson-Heron: We often talk about microaggressions. But I don't know why people call them "micro" because they're really "macro." I've learned how not to allow those moments to impact me, but honestly, it's disturbing every time. I deal with headwinds by pushing back professionally and respectfully, but I don't try to correct the record every time something happens.

There was an older physician I worked with early in my career who clearly didn't respect women of color. During my first few weeks at work, it was clear that it was going to be rough sailing. He would dismiss my recommendations during our private one-on-one meetings, but then later take credit for them in meetings with his boss. It was infuriating.

I don't let these things go unnoticed. I respectfully and professionally push back whenever it's appropriate. I deal with them mostly by focusing my efforts on making a positive contribution, adding value and excelling, so that

these individuals who may or may not have my best interest at heart will never have an opportunity to say that I'm not doing a good job. In other words, I overcorrect in terms of excellence. It's a challenge to take that approach, but it's never failed me.

I also leverage the tailwind that was gifted to me by my parents during those dinner conversations. They would tell us that life is not always fair. Equal opportunities are not equal for everyone, and you may be treated differently because of your race or your gender. But they would always say you must never allow anyone to stifle your ambition, or to make you show up as someone who you're not, or to limit your abilities and your achievements. They also challenged us to use that negative energy instead to fuel our drive and determination to reach even higher heights.

The way I look at it is, let your haters make you greater. That's kind of my tailwind whenever it's happened, and those moments continue to happen, even now. But when you do the right thing, really good things do happen. When you do the wrong thing, it always comes back to haunt you.

Bryant: Why is it so hard to have discussions about race and racism in this country. And how do we keep these conversations alive and have them in a constructive manner?

Richardson-Heron: We've been talking about it for so long. For me, it's just too much talking and not enough action. I can think back to the early 2000s, I believe 2006, when the Annie Casey Foundation put out a report, "Race Matters: How to Talk about Race." That document is 17 years old, but the content still rings true. The way you talk about race is to tell stories. When people see numbers and data, sometimes they reject the numbers if they don't align with what they think. But stories are very powerful.

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We also have to think about universal values like having a place to live, having enough food or having a job. We need to talk about these values that unite us rather than divide us, and focus on things that might impact everyone as opposed

to singling out a group of people.

We also need to frame issues in terms of opportunity. We talk about American ideals, the land of opportunity, but we've got to make it clear that opportunity is something that everyone aspires to. You have to bring your authentic self to those conversations, and you've also got to be willing to listen to other people's perspectives. We have to just be really open and suspend judgment and also speak our truth.

There are so many people who would be surprised to hear what I've experienced as a woman or as a woman of color—or as a leader generally in the corporate world. But I don't wear it on my sleeves. People have to understand that your truth is your truth.

And when there is discomfort or when people do want to have those conversations—and this is something I saw after the murder of George Floyd—don't just ask the Black person in the room for help. Don't think that they are going to have all the answers, because no race is a monolith. Provide the resources to bring in people who can lead those conversations.

But I also think it's time out for talking. It's time to speak with action, including promoting people of color who are deserving of advancement into senior roles. Don't disempower them when they get in those roles. Don't create roadblocks for them.

I don't need to have another discussion about race in the workplace. What we need is for organizations to put the right people in the right place, support them in those roles, block and tackle when necessary, give them the budget, and the human and financial capital they need to do the job and watch them soar. Those are the things that really work.