



Leading in the B-Suite

Powerful conversations about life, race and leadership



Kevin Warren

The Better We Know Each Other, The More We Break Down Barriers



Adam Bryant [in](#)

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

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Kevin Warren, chief marketing and customer experience officer at UPS, 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?

Warren: I will start with my mom and dad. My mother was a schoolteacher in Washington D.C. public schools, and dad worked for the local government and drove a taxicab part time. Until they passed away, my mom and dad were married for 60 years, and they lived in the same house for 50 years, with the same phone number and the same plastic on the

furniture. They provided a real sense of stability, but with high expectations for the education they wanted us to pursue. They really grounded me and gave me a good foundation to navigate life and business.

Bryant: Do you have brothers and sisters?

Warren: I've got three older sisters, and I was born ten years after the youngest of the three. It's interesting when you reflect on how that affects your leadership style. I've worked for strong women in earlier jobs, like Ursula Burns at Xerox, and I work for a strong woman now — Carol Tomé, our CEO at UPS. So I've always worked to leverage women talent. About half my direct reports are women now.

Morris: What kinds of things were you doing outside of class when you were growing up?

Warren: I grew up in a lower-middle-class neighborhood. Sometimes it could get tough. My mother sent me to judo class so I could protect myself from getting beat up. But then once I went to middle school and high school, basketball was my sport of choice. I also was on the chess team as well as on the table tennis team. I played a lot of sports. I was a reading nerd. I enjoyed learning. And I had a good group of friends, some of whom I am still in touch with.

Bryant: You mentioned that your parents were a big influence, but you also need just a certain amount of drive and stamina to be able to put in those kinds of hours every single day. Where does that come from for you?

Warren: It's like inner drive of being a competitor. I've always had it and just really wanting to be the best in whatever I was trying to do, whether it was being a good student or an athlete. It's just part of my DNA. It's certainly been a blessing, but sometimes it's a curse because sometimes it's difficult to turn off. I wish I was a little nicer and more compassionate, but that drive is just a natural thing.

It's something I've been able to count on and channel, to make sure that I use that superpower for good versus evil, and channel that competitiveness to make the team and the organization better. How can I contribute to the community

and make it better? That's just something I was born with and it was reinforced by my parents.

Morris: What is it like to work for you? What kind of culture do you try to create on your teams?

Warren: I believe in having fun, and "fun starts at 101," as in when you've achieved 101 percent of your plan. It's impossible to have fun if you're losing. But if you're performing, you can have fun. For me, that's a big motivation to make sure that we deliver, because I want to be able to celebrate success.

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I want to be able to invest in people's careers. I want to be able to reward and recognize top performers. Then that will help attract more top talent to our company. So it is about work hard, play hard. And remember the order — work hard, play hard. But to me, it is all about having fun.

Bryant: What headwinds have you encountered in your career because of your race, and what have been the tailwinds that helped you navigate them?

Warren: Sometimes there is a perception, based on your color, that you really aren't accomplished, and that you've gotten to where you are because of affirmative action. Second is that a lot of managers and leaders feel comfortable with people who are like them. That creates barriers that have to be overcome.

There were times when promotion opportunities came up and I knew I was the best qualified person, just based on the results. You go through the panel interview and you don't get the role, even though the person who did get the job didn't have the track record of performance that I did.

So you sit down with the hiring interviewer afterward and they tell you, "I just felt more comfortable that this person would fit my style more." How do you overcome that? In that company, I did get the next promotion. But those headwinds are just the reality. You can't just barely clear the bar to get the promotion; you've got to clear it by a lot.

That translates to work ethic. That translates to skill development and understanding how things get done. That translates to networking, mentoring and being a mentee, and being open to different experiences. All those things end up making you sharper and better.

Morris: When you are facing those headwind moments, how do you decide whether to let something go or address it head on?

Warren: This one is nuanced. There are some examples where you just can't let stuff slide. For example, let's say you're sitting in on a talent review and the candidates for one of the roles are all White males. I'm in the room, so if I don't say something, I'm wasting a seat.

So I just call it out, and not in an emotional or personal way. I'll just point out that all the candidates are White males for a position at a company headquartered in Atlanta. That then sets a tone for the rest of the functions. Sometimes you've got to call it out. That's your responsibility.

Then there are other times that require more judgment about the best course of action. They require some executive savviness. It's almost like Sun Tzu's *Art of War*. Do the calculus. Can I win, and is it worth winning? If the answer to those first two is no, you've got to figure something else out. If the answer is yes, you've got to stand tall.

Rather than saying something in front of everybody, it might make more sense to follow up with someone after the meeting. That way, you've maintained that person's trust and respect. Sometimes those decisions about when and how to deal with something have to be lightning quick. You've got to be clear about whether you can win, and whether it's worth the battle.

Bryant: You wrote a powerful [article](#) on LinkedIn in 2021 about moving to Buckhead. Can you share the story here and tell us what prompted you to write that?

Warren: I wrote it shortly after the murder of George Floyd. I shared the story of how, before going for a walk in my neighborhood, I would make sure I grabbed my driver's license in case somebody questioned what I was doing

walking the streets around my house. Then I wondered if a White colleague of mine, who lives two blocks up the street, was taking his driver's license on walks.

I wanted to share that story to start the conversation to demystify what it can mean to be Black in America. After that article was published, I was sitting in my staff meeting with my team. The White males in particular were dumbfounded, because they couldn't believe that somebody at my level in the company was still that vulnerable. So that helped open up conversations, and many of them shared that story with their families.

I'm always looking for ways to break down barriers. The more we have in common as we get to know each other and have conversations, the more we demystify the perceived barriers. I'll give you another example. My wife and I have a holiday party at our house before Christmas each year, and we invite my direct reports and their guests.

There are fewer things more intimate than inviting somebody into your home. They see how you live, the books you read, the artwork you have. Also, it was my hypothesis that many of my White colleagues maybe had not been in a Black person's home before.

It's about changing the paradigm of how some people can think narrowly about Black people.

So last year, I invited five members of the Morehouse Glee Club to sing Christmas carols in my home. One of my colleagues shared that he expected them to sing gospel, rather than the standards. Then the singers stayed for a while after they sang, and everybody got something out of those conversations. It's about changing the paradigm of how some people can think narrowly about Black people. It's about opening up, and when we do that, we find that we're more similar than we are different.

Morris: Where are you on the optimism/pessimism scale that real change is going to happen over time?

Warren: I'm optimistic by nature, so I am optimistic, but the challenge is the pace and the sustainability of change. We

know the numbers. When you look at the statistics, in terms of Black representation in corporate America, we've seen some movement there. We've driven accountability. We've trained a spotlight on the numbers and the companies that had no representation or very little representation.

The question is, will that momentum fade? How sustainable is it? That's what we need to really fight for. One of the things I talk about often is to not just look at it as an issue of diversity. Let's say somebody doesn't believe in diversity, equity, and inclusion. It's better to talk about it in terms of a talent play. Be pragmatic, because the more open you are to different levels of talent, the better your chances of being successful and the richer those conversations in the boardroom are going to be. It's about driving the business, not an issue that's apart from that.

Bryant: When you give talks to audiences of young Black professionals, what career and life advice do you typically share with them?

Warren: I have an answer I give for everybody and I'll share that first before I talk specifically about Black talent. From a career standpoint, people need to focus on what I call the "triangle of success." There are three aspects, and if people really show that they're doing well on all three, then the correlation between that and being successful is very tight.

The first part of the triangle is performance. That's mandatory. You've got to be able to deliver on whatever goals you're given on a consistent basis and at an extraordinary level. The second part of the triangle is behavioral. Are you more focused on giving credit or taking credit? Are you open to feedback? Do you volunteer to help and mentor others? Are you collaborative, or is it all about you? A lot of people might be good performers, but they fail on this second part. That really limits how far you will go.

The third part is about continually building your skills. Are you going to be better in 2023 than you were in 2021? Think about the iPhone 1 versus the iPhone 14 Pro. You can never stop trying to improve.

Then I'll make an extra point that is true in general but especially true for Blacks. I mentioned the background of my

parents. They lived in the same house for 50 years, had plastic on the furniture, and they had the same phone number. My mother never even went on an airplane.

So you think about the risk profile of somebody growing up in that environment. It really can lead you to be risk-averse. But we've got to lean in and be bolder. Take risks. Bet on yourself. We all know there's a ratio between risk and return. Often our White colleagues see an opportunity and they think, "Hey, I can do it. I'm good enough." We need to have that.

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