



Leading in the B-Suite

Powerful conversations about life, race and leadership



Michael Hyter

# The Keys To Discussing Sensitive Topics: Familiarity, Comfort and Trust



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May 18, 2023

*Michael Hyter, President and CEO of [The Executive Leadership Council](#), 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 some of the biggest influences early in your life?**

Hyter: My parents, and you probably hear that from a lot of people. My mother, Betty, is 89, and my father, Leroy, is 91, and this is their 69th year of marriage. They were and continue to be my biggest influences.

They provided unconditional support for my three sisters, my brother and me, and we were encouraged to pursue dreams. We were often, and continue to be, encouraged not to fear failure, which is probably one of the best gifts you can give people when they are growing up. The fact that they are still exhibiting that strength and love to us and now their grandkids is extraordinary.

My father is a scientist and a biologist by training, and he was an educator professionally. He was a teacher and ultimately an administrator in the Detroit public school system. At one point, I thought I wanted to be a doctor because they made a lot of money. The doctor on the TV show *Medical Center* that I watched sometimes when I was growing up, had a Camaro and a house. I actually went to college to study biology but I struggled with it once I arrived. It took me a year to build up the courage to tell my father that I didn't like it, because I assumed that I was expected to be a doctor.

When I said to him, "Biology is not for me," he looked at me and said, "Son, I never expected you to do that. That's on you. If you don't want to do it, that's okay. I just want you to try as many things as you can." That was so liberating, and the message has stuck with me.

When I look back on my career, a lot of what I've done has been driven by my openness to try things, whether they paid a lot or not, and I've benefitted from those moves financially every time.

**Bryant: What kind of things were you doing outside of class as a teenager?**

Hyter: I grew up in Detroit, but we spent our summers in Huntsville, Alabama, with our grandparents. My dad had summers off, and so we would all pile into our Country Squire station wagon and drive all night to Alabama from Detroit for eight weeks every summer. I did Boy Scouts. We played sports. We all learned to play an instrument.

I was a clarinetist and pianist. My brother played saxophone and piano. One sister also played the clarinet, one was a violinist, and the other was a singer. Music was really big in our family. Between church, sports, and music lessons, that

was the non-school part of our structure.

I didn't realize at the time that this was their way of keeping us focused and not getting caught up in having a lot of free time in Detroit, which was a little rougher than Alabama. Our time was regimented, and we did almost everything as a family. It was the seven of us together all the time.

**Morris: Where does your drive come from?**

Hyter: As a freshman biology major in college, I had a 1.7 GPA in my first semester. That was alarming to me and to my family. The second semester, I had the same average. So now I'm confronting letters about the possibility of probation. I'm from a proud family. Education is our thing. I struggled with biology, as I mentioned, and that's when I went to a counselor to talk about changing my major.

I switched to accounting and my grades were a little better. But I did an internship and I did not like it at all. So my counselor said, "We have a new program in the business school. It's a human resources major. I think you'd like this because you're a leader on campus. You're very personable. People are your thing. There are analytics associated with it. Why don't you try that?" I changed my major to HR, and it clicked. It was like oxygen. I earned a 4.0 GPA on almost all my courses for the last two years I was in school.

The only thing that changed was that I found something that interested me.

I tell that story because I still remember what it felt like when people looked at me and assumed I was less intelligent because my grades were so bad. There was this automatic association with my intellect and my grades, as if I was living down to a stereotype. The only thing that changed was that I found something that interested me.

That experience became the foundation that has shaped everything that I do even now. I am obsessed with the fact that there are people who look like me who are perceived to be limited, but they just haven't been given a chance to find something they're interested in. There is so much talent that's being wasted. So that's the root of where my drive

comes from.

**Bryant: What headwinds did you face as you moved into your career because of your race, and what are the tailwinds that helped you navigate them?**

Hyter: When I was younger and just getting started, I was a manager in HR. Because the director role above me was vacant, I reported to the vice president of HR. I asked him what I needed to do to be promotable, and he said to me, and this is no exaggeration, "You're a nice kid. You lack polish, and you have lower intelligence. You don't have what it takes to be a director. There isn't much you can do because you're pretty much where you're going to be." It was so matter-of-fact and so casual for him, and it was soul-crushing. The headwind of low expectations continues to be, in some cases, a part of life.

I spent six or seven months in a kind of fog. I was probably reaffirming his perception because I wouldn't speak up in meetings. I didn't feel like I was empowered to take on assignments or anything. But he was fired and replaced by a woman who was a non-HR person. She was an officer and was given an HR assignment for her career development.

She never imposed any limits on my potential. She assumed we would grow together. She would give me assignments that stretched me. Then she would give me feedback, and it would be very constructive, but honest, as in, "You need to lean in and raise your hand when you have something to say, but be concise." Or she would send me a note and say, "I saw what you did. Great job."

She eventually promoted me to director. All this woman did was assume that I could do the job, and she positioned me in visible situations and then gave me feedback. She was intentional about it. That experience gave me more confidence to lean into challenges, in the face of doubt, rather than letting someone else's doubt control me. Failure is basically data rather than something to be afraid of.

**Morris: Conversations about race are often difficult. What approach do you use?**

Hyter: There are three words that serve as a kind of template

for me. Familiarity leads to comfort, and comfort leads to trust. Those steps are often missing when sensitive topics are being discussed. What I've noticed is that when you have people who are in a foxhole together – this is true in the military, but it's also true in corporate teams – and they're expected to create an outcome together, they focus on familiarity with one another as individuals and as teammates. The comfort with each other increases as a result, and that leads to trust, which creates a solid foundation for discussing sensitive issues.

Race is not as complicated to talk about if two people are familiar with one another. It's much more complicated to talk about it with strangers who have an opinion that they're trying to impose on the other person.

**Bryant: How has your thinking evolved about leadership development programs for specific demographic groups?**

Hyter: When I was a young professional, I was one of 23 Black and Brown professionals who participated in a 12-day program to teach us the importance of taking personal responsibility for our own career development, how to think about taking risks and the importance of building what they call strategic relationships with others. Part of the goal was for us to understand the importance of being strategic about what you want, and focusing on those things that are going to move the needle rather than just being busy. It was about being more focused on outcomes and less on negative stimuli from others.

That program was a significant turning point for me because I was a resistant participant. When my head of HR asked me to participate, I said, "Are there going to be any White people there?" "No." "Well, I don't want to do it then. I don't need remedial training. If it's not available to everybody, then it basically means we need special training." She said, "It is specifically for Black and Brown people. Just audit it." So I went and it was transformative.

I started being sponsored by people because I was relatable and contributing.

The strategic-relationship skills I learned helped accelerate

my ability to integrate into the organization. I started building really good quality relationships with many high-level people because I was contributing rather than being afraid to do so. Then I started being sponsored by people because I was relatable and contributing at the same time.

So the network of support started to emerge from senior people who weren't even in my direct line of responsibility. And because of the friends and colleagues who went through the experience with me, I wasn't alone anymore. There was at least a small group of us who could turn to each other if someone had a negative experience, and rather than complaining, we pushed each other with questions like, "So what are you going to do?"

I'm now in the business of bringing together these groups, primarily through The Executive Leadership Council. The leadership development programs we offer are so well-received because we incorporate the cultural nuances of being Black in organizations as part of the curriculum. There are headwinds that seem to uniquely exist with more regularity for the Black population working in predominantly White institutions, both not-for-profit and for-profit. It's similar to the benefit of attending an HBCU, where people can gain more confidence faster and sooner to be more competitive when they go back to their respective organizations by going through a program that is culturally nuanced versus generic.

**Morris: What career and life advice do you share with young Black professionals?**

Hyter: I tell them that biases and micro-aggressions exist, but focus on the actions you can take to achieve the outcomes you're striving for. Focus on that versus being shocked and surprised and debilitated by biases and micro-aggressions, and keep moving forward no matter what headwinds are coming at you and surround yourself with people who encourage you to do so. Be courageous in your pursuit of your career ambitions. Throw yourself into new opportunities and seek challenging ones, rather than being afraid to do so.

I also want young professionals to focus. Every job you're in,

focus on how you can expand your contribution, your influence, and your impact in the role that you're in rather than being concerned about what other people think of you. Are you making a contribution? If so, what? What is your influence and your impact? Are you adding value to the situation? It is also important to build strategic relationships.

Too often, I've seen people break in the face of resistance because they're frustrated that people don't love them. People will never love you in corporations. It's transactional by nature. But are you making a difference? And if not, what do you need to do differently? Expanding your contribution and impact should be your first thought, rather than what's wrong with the environment you're in.