



## Leading in the B-Suite

Powerful conversations about life, race and leadership



Allan Golston

# I Have Work To Do. So I Don't Let The Headwinds Slow Me Down.



Adam Bryant [in](#)

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*Allan Golston, president, United States Program at Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, 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 influences that shaped who you are today?**

Golston: I grew up in a family that had lots of love. My parents were great parents. They both grew up poor. They put themselves through school, my dad through the GI bill. My mom worked while she put herself through nursing school. They worked their way up to the middle class with

just lots of love, lots of friendship. We had our struggles, like many do. Sometimes we didn't have everything we wanted and, in some cases, not everything we needed, but we had a lot of love.

But without question, the person who had the greatest influence on me was my mom. For a period of our time, it was just her and me. She had me as a single mother. She later married my dad, who adopted me, and we became this family before they had my two younger brothers.

My mom taught me so much directly and indirectly. I learned courage and persistence and the value of education by seeing her put herself through nursing school. She worked the equivalent of two jobs for most of her working life. I learned what it means to be committed to values and community and what giving back and volunteering means.

I learned from her how to navigate racism and bias with endurance. She was determined to thrive, even when structural racism meant that she was paid less as a nurse than her peers. That racism also denied her opportunities to be promoted sometimes, and it threatened the security of our family.

It pushed her and my dad to teach me what it would be like to be a Black boy and man in the United States, and to not have fear and just believe in myself and believe I could do anything while also being acutely aware and cautious about what it meant to be Black in America.

**Bryant: Where did you grow up?**

Golston: I grew up in a neighborhood in Denver called Park Hill, which was somewhere between 70 and 90 percent African American. It was at a time when families looked after each other's kids. You could play outside all day and after dinner. You just didn't worry about safety.

During my elementary and middle school years, I was bussed out of my neighborhood to schools in White neighborhoods. There were some good aspects of that. I feel like I got a quality education. My parents would come and meet the teachers, and if they didn't feel comfortable with them, they would ask us to be moved. So I had great

teachers.

But I was also in a community where some people just didn't want me or other Black kids to be in those schools. So my parents would talk to us about why that is. As a young person, it's hard to get your head around things like that — "What? Just because of the color of my skin?" The students I interacted with were fine, but there were issues with many parents who did not embrace the bussing structure.

But overall, Denver had an economic structure that allowed my family and families like mine to thrive, to get an education, to have social and economic mobility. I'm grateful to have grown up there and to have been educated there, because you saw role models like Black doctors, nurses and teachers. I could see and imagine the possibilities. My parents made sure that we had diverse experiences, whether it was going to the zoo or the Denver Art Museum. We spent a lot of time in libraries. Overall, I had a great life growing up.

**Morris: What kinds of things were you doing outside of class when you were a kid?**

Golston: I was a nerd, almost embarrassingly so. I loved learning. I never had to be told to do my homework. My parents would say, "Hey, why don't you go and play? It seems like you've been studying a lot." They wanted me to be balanced socially and not just focused on academics. I had friends, but we were all just these book nerds.

Outside of school, I mostly worked. I got my first job when I was about 15 – I helped the custodians clean in a local school. I would put the chairs up and sweep the floors and clean the chalkboards. I did extracurricular activities like debate and some track and field.

**Bryant: Any big breaks that helped you early in your career?**

Golston: I had a lot of great breaks. I was aware as a Black boy and Black young man, because my parents talked about this, that you can do anything anyone else can. But you're going to have to work harder to prove it, because everyone is going to assume that you don't belong in a classroom or

that you don't belong here or that you can't do this type of work. So that stuck with me.

Early on, that's just how I took that information in — I have to work harder than this person just for anyone else who is looking or observing or judging me to believe that I am capable, and I have to do more. So that shaped a bit of my work ethic. And between high school and college, I was in a program called Inroads, which essentially takes academically strong students of color and places them in internships between college semesters or during the summer between academic years in these corporations. You would have a mentor. That was a big break for me because my internship was with a bank that ultimately became part of Wells Fargo.

**Morris: What are some headwinds you faced because you are a Black man in America, and what are some tailwinds that helped you navigate them?**

Golston: Being Black in this country comes with headwinds just as a variable. As just one example, I was in college, and I applied for a part-time job as a teller at a local bank in a suburb of Denver. I had experience from the internship I mentioned and I had references. But when I applied, they said, "Okay, but we're going to require you to take a polygraph test." I said, "Great, no problem."

During the polygraph, the guy asks me — I remember this distinctly — "Do you use drugs?" I said no. He said, "Have you ever used drugs?" I said no. He then said, "Are you trying to tell me that you have never done drugs?" He went into this unscripted line of questioning that was clearly based on his stereotypical ideas of a Black male. He went on and on, but I passed the polygraph test. I've had my share of moments that were based on people's stereotypes.

**Bryant: How did you deal with that moment?**

Golston: I just answered the questions and stayed calm. I needed the job. My personality was more about getting through it at the time. I have a lot different views on how I probably would handle that now, but I just handled it. He had the power and he was standing in between me and getting a job. I needed to work. I had bills. So I got through it. I didn't

complain. In many ways, he probably expected and wanted me to complain.

It's this idea that there's an assumption that you don't belong in the room. Sometimes you can be in a room with important people, and it's almost like you're invisible. Then when I mention I work for the Gates Foundation, all of a sudden you get this acknowledgement that you're a human. My philosophy is to just get through it. I have work to do. I don't overly focus on the headwinds. I learned not to let them drag me down or cause me to get depressed about them. I just keep going.

When there are situations where I feel like I need to say something, I tend to ask questions, rather than be confrontational, to draw people out to understand what's driving their thinking. But I do challenge now, as respectfully as possible, with questions. Part of it is curiosity and part of it is, "No, this isn't okay." As you get more mature, you feel like you have a bit more freedom and leeway to do that.

But those moments happen often. I live in downtown Seattle. There's a store literally across the street and I shop there all the time. Normally I'm in work attire — I'm in the "uniform" — and there's no friction. I'm somehow presenting as safe to those around me and there are no problems. But a few years ago, I needed milk. I was cooking and I had a t-shirt and shorts on and tennis shoes. So I run into the store. I grab the milk. I pay. I didn't get a receipt. I never get receipts. I'm walking out with the milk in my hand, and I got stopped by a police officer. He said, "Did you steal that milk?"

I was speechless because I thought, here I am with a milk in my hand and no receipt. So I said, "I can show you the credit card receipt on my phone if you want to see it." It was just this weird experience where you think, "Milk? Seriously, come on."

**Morris: What advice would you give to an audience of young, Black professionals, about when to engage on moments like that and when to let them go?**

Golston: I always try to seek to understand. The context of these kinds of moments really matters, and one's judgment in real-time matters. Sometimes I'll say, "Hey, I'm getting the

sense that you're uncomfortable with X. Am I reading that right? Why is that?" But there are a lot of things that I ignore. Even coming to New York, someone assumed that I was hailing taxis in the taxi line. I was in a suit. The guy said, "I'm just going to grab that taxi." He didn't even want to stand in the line with everyone else and he assumed I was there to hail a taxi for him.

I used to ignore those things, but now I just state the facts — "I don't work here and I am ahead of you. I think the next taxi is mine." My view is that I have a role to state what's happening and to make something that is implicit explicit. I don't think his intent had malice but I feel that it was my role is to say, "Here's what's happening," and deal with it there.

**Morris: What are your other approaches for having constructive conversations around race?**

Golston: Engagement is an important tool. It's not the only tool. Sometimes you do have to confront things. But for me, I try to acknowledge that race is a hard topic but a necessary topic. I do try to acknowledge the opposing view, because in my experience you often don't get far in talking about race if you just shut the other person down.

Here's an example. I was challenged in a professional setting about the degree to which there is profiling in policing. This person said, "You hear about different examples here or there, but I don't agree that it's systemic." That's just a stunning statement. But I said, "Yeah, it can be confusing. This is hard to get your head around. And, no, I don't believe all police are bad people, but here are the facts."

I also use my own experiences when I can and try to make it very personal, so people understand it actually happens and each of us has these stories. Making these experiences explicit, to make them part of the dialogue, is really important. When I engage in race conversations, I also try to also talk about systemic dimensions in addition to individual acts.

I'm often in these conversations about representation and somebody will say, "Yeah, I hired an African American," or, "I have a Latino on my leadership team." They're proud of that. They think that they're now finished and they're done. So I

will say, "Yeah, that's fantastic. It's an important step, but it's actually systems that make a difference in our country. We have to change the system." So my question to this person was, "Does your leadership structure really represent what you're going to need to be successful for the future?"

**Bryant: You're a very patient man.**

Golston: Well, we've been dealing with this in our country for about 400 years. I'm not suggesting my approach works for every situation or for everyone, but I think we're all patient because we've lived with it for centuries.

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

Golston: First, find out early on what you're good at. Is it math? Is it data? Is it communication? And put in the hard work to be great. It takes really hard work. It takes thousands of hours. Once you're great, other things follow. You get recognition, and your opportunities expand. You build your reputation. That's fundamental.

Second, there's hardly a better distinguishing factor than preparation. Real preparation — knowing what you're talking about, being on top of things, always aiming for expertise and excellence — is critical.

The final thing I would say is learn to manage your finances. I did not grow up in a family that understood how to manage finances or think about wealth accumulation. In many ways, no one that I know of in my community understood it. So learn how to manage your finances, how to budget, save, build wealth, and the power of compounding. I see a lot of younger professionals who don't put in enough time, or understand the importance of putting in the time and energy, to learn how to manage their finances.

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