



Leading in the B-Suite

Powerful conversations about life, race and leadership



Edith Cooper

You Should Put Yourself Out There And Always Be A Lifelong Learner



Adam Bryant [in](#)

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

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*Edith Cooper, co-founder of [Medley](#) and a board director at Amazon and PepsiCo, 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 and what were important early influences for you?

Cooper: My family shaped me the most. I am one of five children. My parents grew up in North and South Carolina, respectively. My mom's family were educators. My father's family were dentists and there were a couple of doctors here and there and, right after Reconstruction, a Postmaster General.

The common thread was a commitment to education. There was an expectation that we would focus on our schoolwork, that we would do well, and also that we would be respectful to others.

Maybe that comes from spending summers in South and North Carolina with my grandparents. I would hear, "Yes, ma'am," and "No, sir." In the South in the late '60s, it was important to be respectful to your elders and to others, in part because of the risks associated with interacting outside of your communities with the White majority.

Bryant: Can you elaborate?

Cooper: There were stories passed down in our family, like the time my grandfather was driving, and he unintentionally cut someone off. The other car swerved in front of him and a White man ordered my grandfather out of the car and pointed a gun at him. This was the reality of the environment in which my parents were raised.

My father went to dental school and then served in the Air Force. When he came back, he was courting my mom, who was at Howard University. He walked into a hamburger stand in his uniform, and the woman at the front said, "I am so sorry, sir, but you know we can't serve you up here. You have to go around to the back." This was in the late '50s. As a child, you hear about those interactions and you learn to think about interacting with White people differently.

But I also saw the other side. My grandmother, who was a math professor at Johnson C. Smith University, another historically Black college, had a taste for fashion, and she would save up her salary to buy clothes at the department store. I asked her once, "Grandma, you told us that you couldn't go in these stores. And why did you go in there if you couldn't try things on?"

And she said, "Because they're not going to deny me. I've saved up my money. I have rights to the finest things." She became a regular customer at a dry cleaner that didn't welcome Black people. But at her funeral, the woman who owned the dry cleaner came to pay her respects to my grandmother because they had developed a relationship.

So there was a balance of perspectives — these are people who could put us in harm's way, but there's also a huge opportunity to build bridges.

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

Cooper: We were so focused on our schoolwork. We had the pleasure of being tutored by our grandmother in math because we had to be better, which is often an expectation in Black families. Being good enough is not good. Being better is good. And so when most people were on Christmas break, we were learning the next phase of math from my grandmother.

Our parents also gave us a lot of different experiences. We tried different sports. We went to the theater once a year. We volunteered. I grew up in Brooklyn, and we would go to art lessons on Friday at the Brooklyn Museum. It was important to our parents to give us access to and take advantage of the things they did not have so that we could imagine greater possibilities and be able to make choices.

Bryant: Where does your drive come from?

Cooper: I am the middle of five children, and in a busy household, everybody finds their way of connecting. Early on, I had an innate curiosity about other people that really fueled me. I loved spending time with my grandparents, and they had plenty of time to chat with me.

To this day, I thrive and am inspired by real dialogue with people who are in some way different from me and who I can learn from. In this case, it was generational, but it's broader than that. I also was motivated by those who doubted me; that built up a resiliency and a tenacity in me early on that has been important in my life.

I worked at a bank in Chicago early on in my career, and the bank paid for me to go to business school at night at Kellogg. After I got my degree, people at the bank suggested I go into HR. But I was more interested in interest rate derivatives. I always sought out opportunities to use my brain in ways that were hard for me because I found everything people-related to be intuitive. If you doubt me,

you should be ready because that gives me the drive to prove that you are wrong. I also like proving to myself that I can dig in and tackle many different things.

Morris: Could you share some of the headwinds that you've encountered in your career because you are a Black woman, and the tailwinds that helped you through them?

Cooper: The main headwind came from being an "only" — I was often the only Black woman in an environment of mostly White men. But because there were so few of me, people didn't even know what to expect. There was more typecasting of the kind of jobs that I would excel at.

I worked on a trading floor, and I was determined to find my way through the many headwinds I faced. I would show up at client meetings and people would ask me where I went to college or what country I was from originally. It's discouraging, it's disappointing, and it's insulting at times, but I was able to turn it into a tailwind because I was not going to let people get into my head. I know why I'm here, I know what my job is, and I'm just going to keep moving forward.

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Sometimes I would complain to my father about how I was treated. He's an avid reader and he would share articles with me about, say, the first Black person on New York Stock Exchange, or a profile of a woman leader from *Black Enterprise* magazine. Vernon Jordan was also a mentor to me, and he would sometimes say, "My generation had to break down the brick walls. Your generation's going to have to step over the bricks. In some ways it might be harder, in some ways it's easier, but you don't have a choice."

Ruth Simmons, who's been the president of Smith College, Brown University and Prairie View A&M University, was on the board of Goldman Sachs during a really formative time for me when I worked there. She once met with a handful of Black managing directors. It was supposed to be a 30-minute meeting, and an hour and a half later, the executive office kept sending people to knock on the door.

She finally said to them, "Why don't we try this? You just wait there behind the door until I open it, and that will be the time when we decide to leave." You can imagine, as someone who was trying to make their way with all sorts of doubts and questions, how somebody like that can be an important tailwind. She inspired me to keep pushing forward. She became a real role model for not internalizing other people's issues or bad behavior.

Bryant: If you extend Vernon Jordan's bricks analogy, what does the next generation have to do?

Cooper: It's more about becoming a brickmaker and changing the shape of the bricks. This new generation does not have a lot of patience for things that are wrong. We need to call it out and we need to stop it. And I think that was why the George Floyd and Black Lives Matter movements were so important because it was a gut-wrenching, massive declaration that we're not doing this anymore.

Now, sustaining that, especially in the midst of continued challenges, cultural tensions, and enormous setbacks like the Supreme Court's overturning of affirmative action, is another question. We have to get the majority to continue to pick up the bricks and get rid of them.

Morris: Are you more optimistic or pessimistic about the prospect of lasting change?

Cooper: I'm optimistic. I am also realistic that without intentional, consistent, persistent focus, this will be another moment, rather than a long-term movement. People need to continue to own the responsibility to keep those conversations going. Leaders have to do better and own it in a different way and pay attention.

If White leaders walk into the room and they see a lot of people who look just like them, they need to pay attention and say to their colleagues that this means that we don't have all the great ideas in this room. We must do better. It means that people shouldn't get excited just because they moved the needle on recruiting in the short-term. That's a start, but then you have to think about the students that you will be welcoming to your organization in five years, and how you will ensure that they thrive.

There can be this misperception that people just drop out of the sky and become the head of X, Y, and Z. It doesn't work that way. There needs to be a lot of determination and rigor to build a pipeline of talent. This is not something that you can start and stop and start and stop if you are trying to create an extraordinary organization.

Bryant: Why is it so hard to have these conversations about race in corporate America?

Cooper: It's not historically been a pretty tale. There are some people who might want it to be viewed as something that's behind us. And for a lot of reasons, people gravitate to others who look like them. Having economically segregated communities or racially segregated schools, which are driven by economics, creates a level of unfamiliarity.

▮ We can't just stay in our lanes of familiarity.

When you are not part of the power structure, and often historically Black people have not been, you think twice or three times before you really engage. One of the things about Black Lives Matter is that it started conversations. But what I want is to make sure that if a White executive is having a conversation with a Black employee who just joined their firm, please commit to keeping the conversation going, so that you really understand who they are and what they want to do at your organization professionally.

We can't just stay in our lanes of familiarity and we can't also hide behind the idea of "that was then and this is now," because we are a reflection of our experiences as Black people, and White people are a reflection of their experiences. We have to continue to push ourselves to step into that space of getting to know each other. And in some cases, it's the hard conversations around race. In some cases, it's just getting to know other people who are different from you.

Morris: What is your best career and life advice that you typically share with young Black professionals?

Cooper: First, I would just be so excited for them because their greatness goes beyond what I imagined for myself at

their age. And own that greatness. Look to your left, look to your right, to the community of other people of color, of similar backgrounds and perspectives, and enjoy that and own that and invest in that. This will be a medley for you forever.

You have to enter situations that are new and different. You have to open your mind and the aperture of your learning to get to that uncomfortable place to really be able to capture the experiences of other people so you walk away with that "aha" moment.

And, to share a lesson from Ruth Simmons, always be prepared at any moment to learn the most important lesson of your life. And that will come from places you can't even imagine. And so put yourself out there and be a lifelong learner. Your career will not be a straight line, and there will certainly be bumps on the road, but you're not doing it by yourself, and you've got this.