



Lynn Crump-Caine

# My Mother Taught Me To Never Say, "I Can't." That Became My Mantra.



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*Lynn Crump-Caine, a board director and former executive vice president of McDonald's, 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 early influences for you?**

Crump-Caine: I had a modest — if not literally poor — upbringing, and our family had to make the best of, and make more of, what we had. My parents believed that whatever you were doing, no matter what the task was, you

should do it well, make sure you were thorough, take pride in everything you do, find something interesting in small things, and seek out the unusual.

One of the best things that my mom ever did for me was to tell me that I wasn't allowed to say "I can't." The first time she said that to me was when I was in a particular situation, and it was something I didn't want to do, and I said, "I can't do this." My mom sat me down and said, "You may not want to, you may not know how to do this right now, but I don't ever want to hear you say 'I can't' again."

That became my mantra that would inform my journey as a professional throughout my career. It made me think that there wasn't anything I couldn't do. I knew that, once I was given an opportunity, that ethos would kick in and help me go after things that required more courage.

**Bryant: What were you doing outside of class when you were in middle school, high school years?**

Crump-Caine: I started working in various jobs from the time I was 12. My first job was when I assisted my aunt who ran the daycare center at our church. When the first McDonald's was built in our town, I applied when I was 16 years old. I also loved sports, and I watched a lot of sports with my father. Even today, when I'm in social settings, you will typically find me with the men and women who are watching the sports event.

Outside of school, I was working and enjoying family things. Again, we didn't have a lot, but it seemed like plenty to me because we had a great time. I lived in a small African American community where everybody was a homeowner. I was in my twenties before I realized how unusual that was, and it helped me understand why my parents were always driving us to be our best. It certainly was a feat that they were homeowners in that generation.

**Morris: How did your interest in sports inform how you led teams during your career?**

Crump-Caine: It's important to be able to inspire and galvanize a team. I think the power of many is always better than the power of one or two. I'll give you an example. When

I took over the Atlanta Region for McDonald's, it was the largest region at the time in terms of revenue and number of franchisees. A senior leader of the company told me that I should change out certain members of the team and level up the leaders of those areas.

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I didn't do that. Yes, you have to assess the people you have, but if they've got the core competencies, you can do a lot with inspiration, training, and galvanizing your team around a purpose. You have to have an underdog mentality—together we can do this. In that role, I eventually had to let one person go, but otherwise the original team was the same team that was in place and performing at a high level through the next four years.

**Bryant: Was there a moment in your career when you realized that you potentially had a sharp trajectory in front of you to very senior positions?**

Crump-Caine: I was in an entry-level supervisor role at McDonald's, and was with the president of the company when he was out visiting restaurants. He asked me about my future and what I wanted to do next after this assignment. I answered that I'd like to do the job that was the next rung up on the ladder, and he then asked me why I wasn't thinking instead about a role that was a few levels higher than what I was doing at the time.

He planted a seed that was just as powerful as my mother telling me to never say, "I can't." I came from a background where you had to check every box, but he made it clear that I wasn't giving myself enough credit and that I could not only do more, but potentially move up faster. That was a big influence.

**Morris: What were some headwinds that you had to navigate in your career because you are a Black woman, and how did you navigate them?**

Crump-Caine: The higher I moved up, the more it became clear that certain people didn't want me in those roles. They

didn't want a woman and they certainly did not want an African American woman in those more senior roles. People would make comments, and some of the behaviors I encountered were subtle, and some were rather overt. Something we face in our lives frequently are individuals who don't see you as worthy. Until they do, you aren't in their eyes.

I handled those moments by sometimes talking to people about the team's objective and asking them why they were being somewhat resistant to the strategy that I was trying to implement, and we talked about their role in the organization if they continued to do that. But I also did a lot of listening because I wanted to understand. I wanted to really get that person to be truthful about their concerns. I had one White male colleague who seemed to feel that he was at a disadvantage because I had been promoted.

**Bryant: What did you say to that person?**

Crump-Caine: I said that everybody needs to be at the table, and there are already a lot of White men at the table. You know what you know, but what you don't know and what you don't understand is that I know a lot about other segments of people on the planet. So we all have to be at the table, and just because the company is deciding that we are going to strategically embrace that idea, I don't see any of the disadvantage that you are feeling.

**Morris: Why are conversations about race so difficult?**

Crump-Caine: For one thing, the truth hurts. Having to acknowledge that people have benefited from harm to other human beings is a really tough emotion to deal with. I understand that no good person wants to be a part of ill will and a legacy of hurting people.

I also have a lot of understanding and respect for those who are bold enough to say that they had nothing to do with that period, but are genuinely seeking to understand. That creates a platform for discussion because most people do not have enough understanding of history to connect the dots. When they do, it is interesting to see the revelation in their eyes, their heart, their words, and how they change.

**Bryant: Are you more optimistic or pessimistic about the prospect of real change?**

Crump-Caine: I'm probably more optimistic because there's a dialogue now. There are a lot of troubling behaviors in society right now, so that's disheartening. But the fact that we are having more discussions about race in this country gives me hope that things aren't just going to stay the same as they have been in the past, without equal opportunities for education, jobs, business ownership, etc. If we are not talking, nothing is going to change.

As encouraged as I am, circumstances are still tough in terms of equity and opportunities for qualified African Americans. We can't have companies setting timelines for improving diversity in the C-suite that run out over 10-plus years from now. The diversity, equity, and inclusion conversation is live in every boardroom, but CEOs have to invest in, develop and promote highly qualified people. I believe that having a diverse slate of candidates and then promoting the best person will ultimately be in the best interest of the enterprise.

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Boards have a right to ask and talk with CEOs about making sure that, at the very highest levels, there are capable people to promote. And it's not just about having slates of candidates. You have to put a diverse candidate in the role, and that takes courage.

I'm excited that the conversation is happening, but I'm not as excited by the behavior I'm seeing, in some places. A lot of leaders are reluctant to have the courage and take the risk because they know it's going to probably anger and frustrate a lot of other people by insisting on putting diverse candidates in senior roles.

**Morris: If you were speaking to an audience of young Black professionals, what career and life advice would you share with them?**

Crump-Caine: Do what you love. Do it well. Don't doubt

yourself. Pursue your passion and take some risk. You may do some different things before you settle on what you want. But once you do, do it with all your heart. That will unlock the equation for a successful career.

Once you discover what your passion is, train and educate yourself so that you can be the absolute best that you can be in that area. When I knew the next position I wanted, I trained and educated myself ahead of time. For example, I knew that real estate development was going to be one of the top two focuses as a field vice president.

So I called a field vice president and said, "Can I shadow you for a year? My dime, my time." So I learned real estate development before I took over my region. Over my entire career, I would try to get a jump on things that I knew I wanted, so that I was ready to rock and roll when I stepped into the position.

The other thing I tell people is that managers, leaders and advocates are not mind readers. I don't know how many times I have heard someone say to another individual, "Oh, I didn't know you wanted that," or, "I didn't know you were interested in that." So early in my career, I adopted a practice of making sure — right time, right person, and in an appropriate way — that people knew what I wanted to do next.

The last piece of advice I share is to take some risk, and "swim in different lakes," because that will help you spot unmet needs in the organization and with your customers. What's not happening that should happen? Look for those opportunities because that is how you can help the enterprise drive results and establish your reputation as a leader.

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