

## Insights

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### LEADING IN THE B-SUITE™



## Take Advantage of Disadvantages: Steve Beard, CEO of Adtalem | Leading in the B-Suite

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***Steve Beard, CEO of Adtalem Global Education, on the advantage of disadvantages, the gift of setbacks, and the importance of prioritizing excellence in this [Leading in the B-Suite](#) interview with [Rhonda Morris](#) and [The Ex Co Group's Adam Bryant](#).***

**Morris: What were important early influences that helped shape who you are today?**

Beard: I grew up in Chicago, on the south side of the city. I've spent my entire life here. My parents were blue-collar, working-class folks—my dad was a transit worker on the subway, and my mother was a secretary. One thing I remember most about my parents, aunts, uncles, and grandparents was the importance of hard work. There was a lot of emphasis on family and on always doing the best job you could with whatever you were doing.

As kids, our job was to get good grades and do chores around the house. The expectations were high. The rewards for doing well were affirming, and the nudges were prominent when you didn't do well. It was a simple upbringing, but the values and priorities were clear, and my appetite for working hard has stuck with me throughout my career.

My sense of resilience is informed by the experience of my parents and my grandparents. I was fortunate enough to make it all the way to high school and still have my great-grandparents with us. I heard stories of what it was like living in rural Mississippi before they migrated to Chicago and the obstacles they faced.

**Bryant: Is there a particular story from your family's history that stands out?**

Beard: My great-grandmother, on my mother's side, came to Chicago when she was 17 years old and began working as a domestic. She was the anchor for bringing the balance of her siblings and cousins to Chicago. What she accomplished—figuring out how to make a way for herself, sending money back to her family down South, and then sending for them one by one to come up to Chicago and creating what would be this large extended family—was truly courageous.

My grandparents and parents benefitted at first from the fact that Chicago was part of the industrial Midwest. It was a place where people could get jobs in unskilled roles that paid a living wage and that allowed them to live in dignity. But in the late 1970s and early 1980s, that work began to disappear because of globalization and offshoring.

It had a devastating effect on Black families here in Chicago. We weren't immune to those challenges, but I remember my parents working hard to pull together multiple shifts and overtime and extend themselves in extraordinary ways to help our immediate family, cousins, aunts, and uncles. The role of family in supporting one another through adversity has stayed with me and informs how I think about the ways I can give back in light of my own personal success.

**Morris: What was your path from high school to college?**

Beard: There was not a big push from my family to go to college. We were pushed to perform well in school more out of a sense of values than anything else. I thought I'd graduate from high school and find a job. College was not the goal necessarily. But I had an English teacher in high school who asked me if I was going to be sitting for the ACT. When I told him no, he insisted that I take it, and I got a pretty good score. The same teacher then asked me about applying to college. He got a bunch of applications and made me complete them in his office.

When I was accepted to university, it wasn't clear how we were going to pay for it. But I was fortunate to get a scholarship to the University of Illinois, and things took off from there. I worked in the summers as a bus driver for the Chicago Transit Authority. It helped supplement the scholarship.

My teacher saw potential in me that was not being utilized and decided to lean in and nudge me, and that made all the difference. That teacher's intervention would be the first of many such interventions over the course of my academic and professional career that were pivotal in my life.

**Morris: You had this experience of going to college that nobody else in your family had. What was that like?**

Beard: It's interesting. When I would come home for the holidays, there was the beginning of a difference in outlook. For a variety of reasons, my family didn't have the luxury of thinking about life in an investment-and-return framework. You expend some investment today, and the reward for that shows up tomorrow. Any success you experience today is a result of an effort you made yesterday.

But they were mostly living week-to-week, paycheck-to-paycheck, and just trying to make ends meet. By contrast, when you go to college, you're expending a bunch of effort now for a payoff that is several years down the road, and you begin to think about your life in that frame.

That's the basis of middle-class values—delayed gratification, sacrifice today for a reward tomorrow. You repeat that, and it becomes a virtuous cycle that compounds itself. As you accelerate through life and a career, you begin to reap the benefits of all kinds of good choices you made yesterday, which reinforces the need to make good choices today in ways that pay off in the future. I share that lesson often when I'm speaking to high school students.

**Bryant: You mentioned the importance of people who gave you important nudges to help you at different stages of your life. Something about you clearly made so many people want to help. Can you share your thoughts about the art of how to make the most of those relationships?**

Beard: I was the beneficiary of well-timed nudges that made a difference. It happened at JPMorgan Chase. It happened in law school and in the law firm where I worked right out of law school. When I look to help folks who are coming up in their careers, I look for that high-potential young person for whom the light switch may go on just because I've taken an interest in them, their careers, their vision, or their well-being. None of the folks who helped me had to help me, but they did, and it made all the difference for me.

The first thing I tell young people is that these relationships are an exchange of value. When someone is sponsoring or mentoring you, it's not charity or an act of benevolence. It's an investment, and that investment demands a return. There's no substitute for excellence. You need to make sacrifices to do excellent work for those who are invested in you. In return, mentors—on the basis of what you invest in the relationship—can create pathways for you to advance in your career.

The decision that individuals made to help open doors for me has been on the heels of my making the right kinds of sacrifices in support of their goals and delivering the kind of excellent work they were looking for.

I find that a lot of young people who are early in their careers expect folks to take an interest in them out of a sense of benevolence or out of a sense of just wanting to do good. But the best relationships are ones where value is exchanged from both sides. There's no substitute for digging in, doing the work, being prepared, being on time, working late,

whatever it requires, and then watching how that investment converts into a return in the kind of sponsorship that accelerates your career.

**Morris: How do you handle setbacks?**

Beard: Setbacks are opportunities. They're inevitable, so one should not be surprised when they happen. Never let a tragedy or crisis go to waste. They present opportunities to learn about yourself and the environment you are in, dust yourself off, and push ahead. It's also an opportunity to look in the mirror and ensure that you are assessing yourself with clarity.

Sometimes, when things are going really well, you begin to develop a narrative about why things are going so well. But when you encounter a setback, it can challenge that narrative. You should be open to that opportunity. It allows you to reconcile how you see yourself and others see you and restart more authentically, giving you a more attractive opportunity to succeed.

So, setbacks are a gift. They don't feel like it at the time, but leveraged correctly, they're a mechanism for propelling yourself forward.

**Bryant: What headwinds have you faced in your career because of your race, and how did you navigate them?**

Beard: Our parents and grandparents made clear to us that the obstacles and the perceptions that come with being Black or African American are just a fact of life, and there's really no point in lamenting them too much. You just kind of price it in, like the idea that you've got to be twice as good to do just as well. That's just part of the deal.

When you encounter the inevitable slights—like the feeling that maybe you were working with less information than other people were working with, the feeling that folks had an inside track that you didn't have, or that folks knew how to maneuver in an organization in a way that you didn't—I didn't get caught up in those for most of my career because I anticipated them. I also learned not to take real offense to them.

At some point in my career, probably when I was well into private practice as a lawyer, I came to view being underestimated as an asset. Because what it meant was that I always kind of snuck up on people. They never really saw me coming, and by the time they figured out what they were working with, I was already one step ahead of them. I sort of embraced the advantage of disadvantages and used them to my benefit.

I'm also mindful of the fact that as difficult as things may have been for me on my journey, they're not nearly as difficult as they were for the generation that preceded me and the generation that preceded them. I feel a sense of gratitude for the people who came before me and paved the way for me.

I owe it to them to be another proof point for folks about what African-American professionals are capable of when they're given the opportunity to compete on a level playing field and that they are as prepared, disciplined, and effective as anyone else.

My office is surrounded by items that remind me how fortunate I am. I have a black-and-white photograph of Mississippi sharecroppers working on a farm. I have a photograph that was on the cover of Nicholas Lehman's book about the Great Migration, "The Promised Land." The photo was taken on Easter Sunday in Chicago in the same neighborhood my family lived in when they came to Chicago. I've got a \$50 savings bond that hangs on the wall that my father purchased in my name in 1971 when he was 23 years old and working on the subway.

While I may face some challenges and be disadvantaged in some ways, I didn't come this far to allow those headwinds to deter me from taking full advantage of the good fortune I have to be where I am.

**Morris: Why is it so hard to have constructive conversations about race and racism in this country?**

Beard: This period is fascinating because it's almost singular in my lifetime, given the backlash we are seeing and resistance to honest conversations about the historical realities of the Black experience in the United States. These were easier conversations to have a decade ago than they are now, and I am deeply troubled by the backsliding.

I think our current politics and public discourse have given aid and comfort to those who would just as well not confront the legacy of that aspect of the country's history or embrace the need to continue the work to advance a population of Americans who've been historically disadvantaged.

My hope is that the pendulum swings back toward something a bit more normalized, and we can have honest debate and dialogue about how we advance the fortunes of Black Americans who still are not fully enfranchised as a collective people, even now. It all feels a little radioactive, and folks are backing away from it, but my hope is that it passes. I would hate to think that the high tide of Black achievement is behind us. I continue to hope that the best days are still ahead of us.

**Bryant: What other career advice do you share with audiences of Black college students and young professionals?**

Beard: I have come to conclude that no one's going to manage my career for me. I have to manage it for myself. I have to take ownership of my destiny, even with the benefit of mentors and others intervening on my behalf. It's really up to me to set the pace.

As an African American in corporate America, you've got to be willing to take risks, and I've taken a few, and most of them have paid off. You have to be comfortable with the idea that your career may not be as linear as others, and you may make a lateral move or even take a step back to take a step forward. There's a certain nimbleness that is required.

It's important to keep your eye on the clock, to make bold moves early, to get down to the business of really accomplishing what you set out to do in a given role—to build teams and agendas and outcomes that quickly make you obsolete in your role, which makes you available for the next thing ahead of you.

I often remind people that managing your career is both a heads-down and heads-up game. There's time to head down and focus on the work in front of you, but you've also got to be heads-up, surveying the landscape and looking for opportunities to reach the next rung of the ladder. And you've got to do that at the same time. You can never sacrifice excellence because that's the precondition for everything, but you also have to keep your head up and look for opportunities because they often come from unexpected places and unexpected people.

**On the advantage of disadvantages and other leadership insights, this interview with Steve Beard, CEO of Adtalem Global Education, is part of our Leading in the B-Suite interview series featuring powerful conversations about life, race and racism, and leadership.**



**Rhonda Morris**  
CHRO, Chevron



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