

LEADING IN THE B-SUITE



It's Important To Make Sure That Black People Feel Seen | Everette Taylor

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Everette Taylor, CEO of Kickstarter, shares the story of his upbringing and the impact of having “crazy confidence” in his success and offers key advice for leaders.

This interview is part of our series of conversations with prominent Black leaders, Leading in the B-Suite, with Rhonda Morris and The ExCo Group’s Adam Bryant.

Morris: Tell us about the biggest influences early in your life that shaped who you are today.

Taylor: When I think about the person I am, much of it is tied back to where I’m from—Richmond, Virginia, specifically Southside Richmond. That part of the city is so uniquely tied to my identity. Growing up there, I saw everything you could imagine a child should not see. I saw gangs, I saw violence, I saw drugs. But at the same time, I saw strength. I saw so many single Black mothers like my own who did what they had to do to survive and make ends meet.

Seeing that did something to me. When you see that level of sacrifice and love, it’s extremely inspiring. It gave me a strong work ethic because they were the hardest-working women you could possibly imagine. It also showed you that sometimes you’ve got to do the things you don’t want to do to take care of the people you love.

Even today, in my job, there are things I don't like to do. But I saw these women do what they did day in and day out and work these hard jobs. My mom was a custodian for the Federal Reserve. She cleaned floors, toilets, and bathrooms. She hated her job, but she went every single night. Because I saw really strong Black women taking care of their families, doing what they had to do to make ends meet, I've always been a person who doesn't complain. That had a major impact on me. I know that I'm blessed.

Bryant: You were clearly driven to get out of that environment.

Taylor: Being in that bubble of Southside Richmond always inspired me to dream and want more for myself. I've always questioned why things had to be the way they were where I grew up—why people didn't travel more, why people didn't go to college, why people didn't make it out or move out. I was constantly curious, and that influenced me to want to break out of my bubble and do things and explore.

Music and TV greatly influenced my life—watching *The Fresh Prince of Bel-Air* and *Martin* and listening to people like Jay-Z. I remember seeing Jay-Z on the cover of *Black Enterprise* with Damon Dash, and they talked about starting a record label, doing things their way, coming out of the hood, and being able to turn themselves into multimillionaires. That was super inspiring because they looked like me, and they dressed like me. I loved the music. It was relatable. It gave me the ability to want to dream and inspired me to want to do more for my life and break out of Richmond.

I was also homeless for about seven months when I was a teenager, and that had a big impact on me. To live like that—having to live on the street and not have money—does something to you that you'll never forget. It allowed me to empathize now with people in much different situations than I am, to know what truly matters in life, and not get caught up in superficial things. Rudyard Kipling wrote a poem called "If," with the lines, "If you can talk with crowds and keep your virtue, Or walk with Kings—nor lose the common touch..."

When you're homeless, you realize what really matters: safety, warmth, food, and shelter. It's helped me to become a better man, a better marketer, a better businessperson, and to truly understand people at their essence. It also inspired me and motivated me to be able to take care of my family and myself and never be in that type of situation again.

Morris: When kids are young, they don't always know their circumstances are unusual. They just are what they are.

Taylor: It did feel normal at the time. It wasn't until I got outside of the bubble that I found out that people didn't live like this. We used to sit on the floor to watch TV, just in case bullets would fly through the window. When I walked down the streets, there would be drug addicts and prostitutes. It was just normal to me.

I remember seeing my mom one afternoon in the bathroom, and I would talk to her for a bit while she was getting ready. She would open the door, and I could see her. She wasn't looking at me, but she was looking in the mirror, getting herself together for work, and I could see the exhaustion in her eyes. She would tell me she hated her job but that she had to do it.

I could see it in her face, I could feel it in her energy, I heard it in her words that she felt undervalued, underappreciated, and that she didn't feel seen. It's so important for me to make sure that Black

people feel seen because oftentimes, we're in these roles and doing these jobs where we're just not seen.

Bryant: So what was that voice in your head telling you that you wanted more?

Taylor: I have crazy confidence. I feel like I have a little Kanye living in my head, saying, "You can do it," but in a healthy way. I've never been in a situation that I wasn't able to lift myself out of, even if it felt insurmountable at first. When I was homeless, I used to go to the public library in Southside Richmond to seek shelter. I would use the computers and learn about people like Mark Zuckerberg and Jack Dorsey.

That gave me hope. I wasn't some White guy from the Northeast, but I thought, I can do this, too. I don't need to be an athlete. I don't need to be a musician or a rapper. This world of tech is really interesting, and I thought I could do that. I needed to figure out how to get into college, learn how to code, and how to start my first company. That kept me fired up. I also wanted to take care of my mom and my sister and make sure that they were in a better place.

Morris: So, how did you transition to college?

Taylor: I only applied to one college, Virginia Tech, and the only reason I went there was because it had "tech" in the name, and I wanted to be in tech. I knew nothing about university. I searched for tech schools in Virginia, and Virginia Tech was the first thing that came up. And I said, all right, I need to go there.

Shortly after my first year, I had to drop out to help out my mom back home. I had an amazing first year in college, partied, had a good time, and met all these people. It was a crazy experience. After experiencing this completely different world, going back to Southside Richmond was a super humbling experience. I was working at Joann Fabrics, basically making minimum wage. Buying lunch and gas took all my pay.

I decided to start throwing parties because that was what I knew how to do in college. I started saving up, making some money and turned it into a company—EZ Events. Then, we built technology for ticketing for those events. Then we sold the company. I was 21 years old. I returned to school, pledged Alpha, and was trying to be a college student again.

Then I discovered that the company was sold again for way more money than we sold it. We didn't know about software as a service or that we could leverage this technology for other things. We learned that people will buy your company for less than its value if you don't know better. This inspired me to go out to Silicon Valley, and I connected with Sean Ellis [founder of GrowthHackers], who gave me a job as head of marketing for his startup. That was my big break. I packed up my car, and two weeks later, I was in California.

Bryant: You seem to be very comfortable putting yourself in new situations.

Taylor: I'm a hustler. I have a hustler spirit. I will figure it out. One of the biggest things to know about imposter syndrome is that no one has it all figured out. It's important to understand that we all make mistakes, and we all don't know something. I've learned that just because someone is older or more experienced doesn't mean they're smarter or more well-equipped than you. Experience is important, and learning is super-important, but I don't think there's anything that I can't do outside of swimming and doing the moonwalk. I have this overwhelming confidence that I can figure it out.

Morris: How have you handled all the headwinds you inevitably face because of your race?

Taylor: Dealing with it has become so normal for me. I don't even feel it anymore. Unless it's really, really bad, I've just become a master at dealing with it and not letting it get to me and not letting it bother me or flipping it on people and making them feel uncomfortable in those moments. If you can figure out a way for someone to see themselves or how disrespectful they are or how dumb they are in the moment, it's the best feeling.

Bryant: How do you do that?

Taylor: I know this may sound weird, but I say out loud that I'm Black. In those moments when it's about race, or they don't even realize subconsciously that it's about race, I will acknowledge my Blackness at that moment, and they will feel so awkward. It catches people off guard to acknowledge your Blackness and how your Blackness is impacting their perception of you or whatever they're doing. A lot of people don't even realize that is what's happening.

Morris: Why do you think talking about race is so uncomfortable in this country?

Taylor: When you talk about race, you have to honestly look at yourself, and people have a hard time doing that. Race is something that we all deal with, and we're all processing it consciously and subconsciously. For most people, they want to think, "I'm not racist or biased. I'm not a bad person. I have Black friends." Having these generalized ideas about yourself is easier than having hard conversations. People don't want to feel uncomfortable. They want to live in their bubble and feel good about themselves.

Bryant: What's your best advice for young Black people?

Taylor: I joined the workforce during a toxic time when it was all about putting in crazy hours and losing sleep to be successful. I spent a good part of my career not investing in my family and friendships and love how I should have, including making time for myself and investing in self-care, my mental health, and my physical health. It was just like work, work, work, nonstop. I missed important moments. I didn't have a lot of fun. I didn't sleep a lot. I wasn't eating healthy.

And you then come to a point and wonder, what is all this worth? What is success without happiness? What is success without peace? What is success without your health? What is success without time with your loved ones? What is success without love? So, I encourage people to find balance in their lives. Don't lose out on the important moments. Don't sacrifice your mental or physical health or time with your loved ones just for work. You'll regret it later.

But at the same time, you also have to optimize your time well. Many young people don't optimize their time well, like spending hours on social media or going out every night. You can still do that a bit, but you've got to be able to cut that out, focus, and understand timing and the moment you're in and lean in. Youth is a gift. I don't think many people understand how special or useful that time can be when you're in it.