

LEADING IN THE B-SUITE



Dialogue Is Not Enough. We Need Action To Level The Playing Field. | Marc Morial

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Marc Morial, CEO and President of the National Urban League, shares powerful life and leadership lessons in our interview series, Leading in the B-Suite, with Rhonda Morris and The ExCo Group's Adam Bryant. Morial reflects on key lessons from his upbringing and discusses the need for action to level the playing field.

Morris: What were the biggest influences earlier in your life that shaped who you are today?

Morial: My early life was influenced by my mother, Sybil Morial, who's now 91, and my late father, Ernest Morial. When I was growing up, my mother was a second-grade schoolteacher, and my father was a civil rights lawyer. He later started a political career and became mayor of New Orleans.

They passed along the values of hard work, discipline, and community service through the stories they shared around the dinner table and by giving me experiences. I went to political and civil rights rallies with my father. He was the local NAACP chapter president, and I attended those meetings. I was exposed to people who got up every day, went to work, and then went to church on Sunday. They were extremely disciplined and set high standards.

My parents were part of the generation of people striving to destroy the walls of segregation. They had gone almost exclusively to segregated schools. They set expectations that we were going to go

to integrated schools and that we were going to walk through the doors that they fought to open. That made me one of the first Black students at my elementary, middle, and high schools.

They set expectations that we had a responsibility. They told us, "You better be twice as good and give it your all because you're not just there representing yourself. You represent the family and the community, and if you do well, other people can follow behind you." It was the notion that you have to live a life of purpose. Family influences were very strong for me.

I was also heavily influenced by some of my middle school teachers. I went to Christian Brothers School in New Orleans. My fifth-grade teacher, Brother Gregory, was one of the best teachers I've ever had. He created a classroom environment that was like a village. He used a currency in the classroom called Good Marks that you could trade. You earned them for good behavior, good tests, and good homework.

If you were late with your homework or disruptive in class, you were charged Good Marks. Periodically, throughout the year, he would have a day when we could buy games, candy, and things with those Good Marks. So, it was always a competition to see who could accumulate the most Good Marks. Strong coaches also influenced me. Mack Knox coached me in Little League and became a lifelong mentor and friend.

Bryant: What challenges did you face as one of only a few Black students in your schools?

Morial: During one of my first days at Christian Brothers School, one of my classmates bumped up against me in the playground and said, "I don't know why they let an 'N' like you come to this school." Of course, my instincts from how I grew up meant that we were immediately in a fight, and we went to the principal's office.

The principal looked at the other boy and said, "Let me tell you something. We don't use those words in this school. Don't you ever do it ever again. If I catch you doing it, I will send you home." Then he looked at me and said, "We do not solve our problems here by fighting. If you have a problem with anyone, you come and tell me." And then he looked at us both and said, "Get out of here. Go back on the playground."

I thought how he handled this situation was quite clever because he struck a balance and didn't penalize either of us. That moment also helped me understand one of the hard realities of racism and gave me a chance to understand nuances and that I should not judge all White people the same, just like you should not judge all Black people the same. I was a Black kid going to school in an all-White environment, growing up in an all-Black neighborhood. I had two sets of friends who never mixed. I lived in two different worlds.

The most important thing about the experience at Christian Brothers school was how most of them made me feel. It was highly welcoming. I learned later that many people in the Christian Brothers order had grown up poor.

Morris: What headwinds did you encounter in your career, and how did you navigate them?

Morial: After finishing high school, I attended the University of Pennsylvania and law school at Georgetown. I decided to return to New Orleans and joined a law firm early in my career. I was the first Black person at this law firm. At that time, there had only been five Blacks in the history of New Orleans to ever work at a Top 50 law firm in the city. While I was at the firm, I got a chance to work on

a case that ended up going before the Louisiana State Supreme Court. I got an opportunity to argue the case, which was rare for a lawyer who was only a year and a half out of law school.

The main partner of the firm was a retired justice of the Louisiana Supreme Court. He said he would join me and sit at the counsel table with me. As we walked into the courthouse, he stopped me and said, "Good luck, but you know you're probably going to lose this case." I didn't say a word, but I thought, why is he telling me this just 30 minutes before I've got to go stand up in front of this court?

I got up to argue my case and thought I did a good job. As we walked out of court, the partner stopped me again and said, "Where did you learn to argue like that? You did an outstanding job. I served on this court and watched many lawyers, and I've never seen a lawyer with your experience level argue in that fashion."

I told him, "Well, Jackie Robinson is a member of your law firm, and you have him sitting on the bench. I've been here a year and a half. You guys haven't shown enough interest in me and my skills to determine what I'm good at." We ultimately won the case, and about two weeks later, I walked into his office and gave him my resignation letter.

I knew that I would be marginalized at the firm and that I would never get to realize my potential. There was no overt racism. I felt like no one saw me or thought I had what it took to succeed. Something in my gut said you've got to take a shot. I followed my instincts, and I've never looked back.

Bryant: What is your ongoing approach or framework for handling those inevitable moments when you do feel like you are encountering racism, subtle or otherwise?

Morial: My father drilled into me, "Don't get mad, don't get even, get ahead. You must be better than the rest to make it. That's not fair, but it's real. You're going to encounter racism, but you cannot let it break your spirit."

It was a generational mantra. You didn't just hear it from your parents. You heard it from your aunts and your uncles, and you heard it from your friend's parents. To survive in a challenging environment, you have to make sacrifices and be a certain way. And it didn't mean that you didn't stand up. It meant that you stood up with intelligence and principle. When I was in school, I was a good student and a good athlete. And when you're a good athlete, everybody wants you on their team.

Morris: One of the themes that seems to run through your career is the ability to unite people who are different. Can you share a bit about how you do that?

Morial: Growing up in a large family of assertive people, you learn to discuss and debate things. My philosophy when I was mayor was to focus on dialogues with all the different constituents, including those who had not supported me. I spent much time speaking with business, labor, and religious leaders. I would often reach out to them to give them previews of what we were thinking of doing about a certain issue to get their input and bring them into the decision-making process.

And that way, when there was a crisis, I wasn't calling people for the first time. I tried to have an open-door policy with people. I learned the mayor plays multiple roles. Sometimes you're a mediator, sometimes you're an initiator, sometimes you're disruptive and have to force things. New Orleans is an incredibly diverse mosaic of people, factions, and interest groups within interest groups. There's a lot of nuances and a lot of different personalities.

I also tried to create an understanding with the leaders of all the different interest groups—that we would not blast each other in the media without talking to each other first. If you don't like something, call me and we'll talk. It's about building coalitions. That's not about being weak. It's about being strong enough to assert and defend and wise enough to listen and modify if necessary. That is my thing—you must learn how to listen, see things, and modify when the moment is right.

I left office with a high approval rating. I joined a law firm. Three to four months later, I was asked if I was interested in becoming the president of the National Urban League. My task here is to take a great 20th-century organization and make it into a great 21st-century organization. Politics, COVID-19, George Floyd, and a recession have been unpredictable at every step. It's been a roller coaster ride and a great growth experience.

Bryant: Why is it so difficult to discuss race in this country?

Morial: We have a difficult time because the issue of race has been so damaging to America. On the other hand, the work of many to overcome it is also one of the great American stories. The story of the civil rights movement is a great American story. It's also one of the great stories in modern human history—how a nation that was built on a system of enslaving people and then segregating people could get past it.

There's also anxiety now because the country's demographics shift, and irresponsible leaders stoke division for power and political purposes. That has played a big role in how people feel today. A friend of mine told me that he was upset because his wife no longer wanted to go to events with some friends of theirs because of their political views. Things are so bad now that people who have been friends for years don't want to talk to each other anymore because of politics and the politics of race. It's corrosive, and we're not in a good place.

One of the things that's been misplayed historically is how we've been taught American history. It's been taught in a very superficial, incomplete way, and it feeds into the distrust and the inability to have constructive dialogue. And dialogue is not enough. We need action to level the playing field and bring more justice to our society.