



A Lateral Move Is Sometimes The Best Move To Get Another Level Of Experience

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Calvin Butler, the CEO of Exelon, shares powerful lessons for overcoming headwinds, navigating race in corporate America, and how to own your career in this Leading in the B-Suite interview with Rhonda Morris and The ExCo Group's Adam Bryant.

Morris: Can you share some important early influences that shaped who you are today?

Butler: I was blessed to have parents who influenced who I am and how I treat people. I learned from my mother empathy and a level of humility. I get my impatience from my father and a belief that you should never settle—if you're going to do something, always push for excellence. Both of them believed that you should always treat everyone with respect.

My father used to say, "The same people you see going up are going to be the same ones you see coming down, so treat everyone well." That is foundational to who I am. I take the time to get to know people's names, their backstories, and what motivates them. That helps me be a better leader and, more importantly, a better person.

I am a Midwesterner through and through. I grew up in Hazelwood, Missouri, a suburb north of St. Louis. We were one of a handful of Black families in the North County. I remember often being the only Black kid in my elementary school. Athletics was my way of being accepted. I played football, baseball, and basketball, and I was pretty good at hockey. Sports always gave me a sense of purpose

and inclusion. Sports is a great venue to break down barriers and that's what it did for me. My mother was an avid reader, and when I wasn't playing sports, I was reading.

Bryant: Looking back on your early career, what was a pivotal moment for you?

Butler: I started out as a lawyer, but in the late 1990s, I was recruited to join RR Donnelly to take over government affairs for them at the state and local levels. A year and a half in, the vice chairman of the company said to me, "I think you have the skills to be CEO of one of our businesses, but I need you to learn the business. I need you to go work in one of our manufacturing plants." And I said, "Okay, let's go."

They put me in charge of running the second shift of a bindery plant in Pontiac, Illinois. I had to learn the operations and to understand what motivated the men and women in the plant and what I had to do as a leader. Up to that point, I was more of an individual contributor. The lesson from that period is that it wasn't really about me. It was about my ability to empower others to achieve a common goal. I ended up running two manufacturing plants in the span of about six years. We ran the most profitable plants in that portfolio because I understood what motivated the people and I got them the resources they needed to do their jobs.

It helped that my father had worked at the Kincaid Power Plant, which was owned by ComEd, for 15 years. He was a troubleshooter at that power plant and worked swing shifts. When he was talking with his coworkers, I was a fly on the wall and would listen to the labor issues they were dealing with. I saw the toll that the grind of the swing shift had on his body—working six weeks from 7 am to 3 pm and then 3 pm to 11 pm and then from 11 pm to 7 am. You never are able to develop a steady sleep pattern, and that's an aging process in and of itself.

I also learned about the disconnect between management and labor. So I understood and appreciated what the labor force did in the plants. That absolutely influenced my approach when I took over the plant, because I could connect with people. I was one of them. I knew that the fundamental premise was that they wanted to provide for their families and give their kids a good education. As a leader, my job is to make their lives easier so they can do their jobs and have a better life.

Morris: How did you win them over?

Butler: I was about 33 years old. It was in Pontiac, Illinois, which has a population of about 12,000 people, and RR Donnelly was the second-largest employer in that community, with about 630 employees. Out of those, there were three African Americans and now I was their vice president of manufacturing.

I had to demonstrate to them that I wanted to understand their challenges. I took the time across all three shifts to have small group meetings, to understand what was working and what wasn't, and to talk about where we were trying to go. I told them we can do this together, and then you just start chipping away at it. You're responsive to their concerns. You take care of the little things and allow them to do the big things.

I put a lot of effort into introducing myself to them and getting to know them, and that helped break down barriers. It goes back to the foundational elements. They just want to provide for their families and make sure this plant stays open. My only way to do that was to continue to manage costs, but I told them my goal was to be the most profitable RR Donnelly plant. I said, "If you guys ride with me on that, I got you."

Bryant: Was there a moment when you first realized that you had an aptitude for leadership?

Butler: I was in my junior year in college—at Bradley University, a liberal arts university in central Illinois—and a student was passing out fliers to form a White supremacy organization. Many of the African American students met in the auditorium at the student center. Many were crying, nervous, and upset, and everyone was asking what we were going to do.

I stood up and said, “Look, I hear everybody, but we’re never going to get anywhere if everybody’s talking.” At that point, someone said, “Well, Calvin, why don’t you help us?” So I stepped up and said, “Look, we’re going to organize this.” I put small committees together and said, “We have to go to the administration and tell them this is a problem.”

We scheduled a meeting with them early the next morning, at around 6:30 am. And 600 students showed up to support not just Black students, but to oppose this White supremacy organization coming on campus. All the local media were there, too.

I realized that I had a responsibility because people were willing to follow me. The question was just what I was going to do with it. Up to that point, I would tell you I was pretty much focused on myself, like most college students. That was the first time I said, okay, let’s take the platform and the ability and do something good with it. I was student body president my senior year.

When I was student body president of Bradley University, I got to know the administration, which is how I met my first mentor, Bob Viets, who was chairman of the board of trustees. He was also the CEO of the local utility company in Peoria, Illinois. I got to know him because during that time, we were selecting the new university president and a new athletic director, and I was the student representative on both selection committees. Bob saw my work ethic and offered me a summer internship working for his company.

The most important thing that happened that summer was that we developed a relationship beyond just the university. I got to know him and his family. He invited me to his home for dinner, took me to his country club, and I met his friends. My world expanded. In those moments, I got to see how he interacted with other CEOs. It opened my eyes because I did not grow up with that level of exposure.

Morris: What kinds of headwinds have you faced in your career because of your race?

Butler: Because I’m a lawyer, I prepare for everything. And when I was being considered to run a manufacturing facility, I remember the conversation about me was “Calvin’s so polished. We don’t know if he can connect with the hourly employees.” I thought that was interesting because they didn’t know anything about me.

And it was ironic because they usually say that African Americans couldn’t get into the C-suite because they weren’t polished enough. And now I was too polished to run a manufacturing facility. So it was always a different hurdle to overcome. Because they didn’t think I could connect with the person on the shop floor, they even tried to exclude me from the interview process.

I’ll also tell you that for most of my career, I was always the only African American in the leadership room. That always begged the question, why is that the case and what can I do to change that?

Bryant: Do you have an answer to that?

Butler: It's how I lead now. It's about being very intentional about being inclusive. It's never wrong to give people opportunities. I've never told any of my team members to hire a woman or a person of color. What I do say is that if you're going to fill a position, you're going to have a diverse slate and an opportunity for people to showcase who they are and what they can do. As a result of that, if you look at the Exelon leadership team, it's amazing who we are and how we show up. I truly believe we are better when we have diverse perspectives around the table.

Morris: Where are you on the optimism-pessimism scale of whether real progress is happening in this country in terms of race relations? So many organizations made commitments to do more and do better after the murder of George Floyd, but now we are seeing a lot of backlash to those efforts.

Butler: The fact that I continue to have these conversations with colleagues across not only my business but with other organizations, as well, is a reason for optimism. I also know that I have changed as a leader, and the leaders around me have changed as a result of that period. We are leading with more openness, empathy, and transparency than ever before.

Is there a concern that you might get labeled a woke organization by doing these things? I tell them I can be woke all day because we at Exelon talk about it being in our values system. You don't change your values based on a moment or a time. If you truly have values, be grounded in who you are.

And as an organization, one of our driving values is that we will lead with diversity, equity, and inclusion, we will show up in our communities in that way, and we embrace opportunities for all. I don't hesitate to talk about that with others. Did we calibrate how we frame things? A little. But we make no mistake about who we are and why we do it.

Bryant: What career advice do you give to young Black professionals?

Butler: Let's start with the advice I give to everyone, which is to own your career. You should constantly evaluate where you are and where you want to go and own it. It doesn't mean you don't seek counsel, but understand this—everybody has an opinion, and people usually are going to tell you that you should do something similar to what they did in their career.

And so I always tell people that owning their career means making decisions based on you and their family and what they want to accomplish. Be very clear in your own mind about where you want to go. I would also say to everyone to be ready to lead at all times, meaning that you never know when you're going to get tapped and be given an opportunity.

When it comes specifically to Black people, I say that you should really understand your own personal brand and how you're being perceived by others, because it does reflect on how you show up. It's important to understand who you are and how you're being perceived. Because no matter who you think you are, the perception of you will be your reality. When you're not in the room, and others are talking about you, you need to understand what they're saying and, more importantly, why they're saying something.

The last piece of advice, especially for young Black professionals, is that it's okay to take a sideways step. And what do I mean by that? A lateral move is sometimes the best move to get another level of experience because you're adding another tool to your tool belt. As you move up in an organization, there are fewer jobs, and so you're always going to be compared to your counterparts for the next spot. So always ask, what is going to separate you from that group? My sideways moves made me better prepared to take on my first CEO role.