



Barry Lawson Williams



Leading in the B-Suite

Powerful conversations about life, race and leadership

📧 Biweekly newsletter

"This Next Generation Is Really Taking A Leadership Role To Get This Solved"

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***Barry Lawson Williams**, whose deep leadership experience in business includes serving on 14 corporate boards, shared powerful lessons with me and **Rhonda Morris**, the chief human resources officer of Chevron, for our interview series with prominent Black leaders. Subscribe [here](#) for future Leading in the B-Suite interviews.*

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

Williams: It starts with my parents, particularly my mother. She was a schoolteacher, then became a principal, and ultimately rose to become deputy to the director of the school system in New York City. Education was always emphasized in my family. Both my parents not only went to college — and they were the first in their families to do so — but they also did at least a year of graduate work.

Even though my father had a year of graduate school training at NYU, the best job he could get was in the post office. There just was no question in my family that we were going to get educated and live a professional life. I knew I wanted to be a professional person, but I didn't have a lot of role models.

There were several important inflection points for me early on. There was an elderly White woman in our neighborhood, Mrs. Borne, who sponsored our neighborhood basketball team in the city league. She would show up with fresh uniforms that were washed and ironed, and then coach us, take the uniforms back, and show up again the next weekend.

We were playing in a county tournament, and I had played well. I was the best player in my age group of 10-to-12-year-olds. After we played, the kids who were 12 to 14 were up next, and Mrs. Borne said to me, “Are you tired, Barry?” I said, “No.” She said, “Come on. You can play in this game, too.”

So as a ten-year-old, I played in the 12-to-14-year-old league. You can’t imagine the confidence I got from that because I scored and rebounded just as I had done with my age group. And since then, I’ve never been afraid to play in new environments, because I knew I could function at any level, even if I had to play over my head. And I point to that event as giving me the confidence and understanding that no matter where you are, you have to make some sort of contribution.

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The second story is from a similar age, when I was about ten years old. I was selected to be a safety patrol officer, stopping cars to let kids cross the street in front of the school. And then I became the captain, with the sash and the captain’s badge.

One day, I saw all my friends playing basketball, and I left my post early to join them. A teacher talked to me later, saying, “You can’t do that,” and she took my badge away. And I said, “All right. I’ll do better.” I learned that if you want to be a leader, it has demands and requirements. Whenever I’ve been in leadership positions since then, I’ve made sure that I understood the demands.

Bryant: You attended Harvard University in 1962. I imagine you were very much in the minority in that class back then.

Williams: Of the class at Harvard and Radcliffe, out of about 1,900 students, there were 32 Black men and six Black women. Harvard was not all ready for diversity at that point. But I had it easy because I had a lot of friends who were going to neighboring schools like Boston University, and half my family lived in Boston. So I had a support group. On Sundays, I went to my grandma’s house and ate smothered pork chops.

But I decided in my sophomore year that I didn’t want to live two lives. I would bring myself, my race, and everything to Harvard. And Harvard will have to accept me seven days a week as a Black person. There were a lot of discussions during parties about civil rights and the Vietnam War.

After I finished college, I decided not to go to graduate school right away. And I even decided not to take an academic fellowship. I took a travel fellowship, which required that I be out of the country for 12 months and learn about other cultures and how business was done in other cultures. And that led me to love international work, to love diversity. It's strange for a Black person to say that you really learned about diversity, but I didn't speak the language. I didn't know anybody. I really had to learn other cultures.

Another critical moment that shaped my life was having the opportunity to be part of the first joint program at Harvard between the law school and the business school.

Morris: How were those conversations about race back then different from this moment?

Williams: Some of the conversations were the same. The big issue in the 60's was not only race, but also what role should we and our White friends should play. That question is still important now. My sons are demanding that their White friends not be racist, and they also want them to be very active in being anti-racist.

The perspective of this next generation is interesting. They tell me, "Dad, you and your friends did a great job trying to deal with race. But you tried the vote. You tried legislation. You tried many things. They didn't totally work. Now it's our time. And we're going to get it solved in our way. And, oh, you might be uncomfortable with how we do it. But we'll get it done."

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can't ignore it.*

This next generation is really taking a leadership role to get this solved. I think that more people, and specifically White people, are more interested in engaging in a conversation. Some don't have the best approach, but they're trying. There's this collective sense that people are not going to let it be the same as in the past. And because of technology and social media, there's just a greater spotlight, and people can't ignore it. They've got to be involved in the discussion.

There are discussions now about the role of the Black community in helping itself. Black wealth has not significantly changed since the sixties. And the average Black family has one-tenth the wealth of the average White family. Part of that is because we don't have our institutions to fund our economic activity. And so some of the discussions are the same. What is different is that I'm older, and my kids are pushing me to say, "What are you going to do and what are we going to do?" That's the difference.

Bryant: I imagine in many of your roles early in your career, you were often the only Black executive in the room. How did you deal with that?

Williams: I knew race was still an element, but when you come in the room with three degrees from Harvard, you've got a foot up on the argument that you're not qualified. I have overcome any racism by over-performing. I've overcome it by making sure I had the right mentors to support me. And I've overcome it by making sure I had a support group of fellow Black executives. One of the proudest things I ever did was to start a group in San Francisco in the 1970s that grew to about 120 Black executives in the San Francisco area.

We would meet every Friday for drinks, and we'd have a dinner each quarter. And we'd support each other. Somebody might say, "My boss is crazy. This is what he did to me." And somebody else would say, "Oh, let me tell you what my boss did and what I had to encounter." It was very therapeutic. For me, working hard, having good mentors, and having a support group helped overcome any instances of racism in my career.

Morris: But when some of those racist incidents happened, how did you not get angry?

Williams: I remember a security guard once stopped me when I was walking into the building where I worked. He asked for my identification and asked me to stand by for a bit before he released me. I got angrier and angrier the more I thought about it. You have two choices. Do you get really angry or do you do something about it? The next morning, I asked the building maintenance people to explain to me why this happened.

They said there had been a suspicious Black person in the building at noon. And I said, was the suspicious guy 6-foot-6 and 280 pounds, like me?

I recommended that there be some sort of sensitivity bias training for the guards so that when Black people came in the building, they didn't have encounters like I did. There's no sense just getting angry. You have to convert that to action, because if that happened to me, it could happen to other people.

Bryant: You have an incredible wealth of experience from serving as a director on 14 boards. What are your observations about how discussions about diversifying the talent pipeline play out in those meetings?

Williams: I first started serving on boards in 1982. There wasn't much discussion at all about diversity then. Back then, diversity meant you had one Black executive and/or one Black person on the board. That was defined as 100 percent success. It wasn't until much later that you started having broader, richer discussions about diversity.

The biggest challenge I've heard is that people would say there's a perceived lack of supply of talent. And that's something I've been working on now, which is to identify as much Black talent as I can who's board-ready now. And if they're not board-ready, I want to help identify the next generation of aspiring directors. I'm not having any problem discovering talent.

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aspiring directors.*

This is very important for boards because, particularly after Covid, they can't go back to business as usual. They're going to have to have new models, new approaches, new skillsets on those boards. And those skillsets are not in the province of people they've traditionally looked at, including former or even sitting CEOs.

We're talking about specialties like data security, data analytics, and risk management. Boards are going to have to really seek diversity if they want the different viewpoints that will enable them to make better decisions about new strategies and new models.

Morris: What do you think the boards of corporate America can and should be doing that they're not doing now?

Williams: Boards have to start considering increasing board size, and also some sort of term or age limits. Because the biggest problem I see for creating opportunity for diverse candidates, or any new candidates, is the lack of board rotation. On a typical board, there are ten people, seven of whom are ex- or sitting CEOs, CFOs, or COOs. One is an academic or an investment banker. So you've got to get more board rotation.

Second, we need to have more board evaluations, and a willingness to say to longstanding board members who've done a good job up until now, "Thank you. We now need new skillsets, and we need you to step down and let somebody else take the seat."

We need boards to get wired into this tremendous range of talent that exists. We have a database of 500 African Americans who are board-ready now. And we have a sponsor identified with each name. Those sponsors are Black board members who know how boards function and who can attest that someone on this list could function effectively on a board.

Bryant: From your director's standpoint, what else should companies be doing?

Williams: The most important things are to have complete disclosure about where you are on diversity and where you are on race. You have to start with the numbers, and you can't aggregate them. They have to be broken out by position and level.

Second, you have to make it a formal recurring item on the board agenda. You can't have it simply be left to some committee to handle it once a year. Just like we elevate compliance or risk management to the board level, not to a committee, you also need to have an organized formal discussion about diversity.

People have said to me, "Barry, you're helping get all these young, energetic, qualified Black people on boards. What kind of reception are they going to have when they get on these boards?" The discussion about race should be built into the board orientation. It has to

be part of the continuing education. And people have to be given mentors so they can speak up if they have issues. And the CEO and the lead director have to check in with them.

Morris: What career advice do you offer to young Black professionals today?

Williams: First, master a skillset. Make sure you're a differentiator. Make sure there's a reason that people want you on the team. Second: get a mentor, and also get a sponsor. And the difference is that a mentor will listen to you. A sponsor will do something for you.

I have learned the importance of hard work, initiative, accountability, having high standards, making tough decisions, but also being supportive and leading by example. Leadership consumes a lot of energy and it can be lonely and unpopular work.

You need people who are good listeners, but you also need people to advocate for you in certain circumstances, so get an advocate. Finally, get a support group. Because in sharing experiences, you can learn from other people about their approaches to encountering similar problems.

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