



Ruth Simmons, president of Prairie View A&M University



### Leading in the B-Suite

Powerful conversations about life, race and leadership

# "Some Of The Best Learning Moments Come From Discomfort."

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*Eager to share our interview with **Ruth Simmons**, president*

*of Prairie View A&M University, in the second installment of a series we've launched with prominent Black executives called "Leading in the B-Suite." Our goal is to share the lessons of leaders to spark more conversations about race in corporate America and what should be done to increase the ranks of Black leaders in the C-Suite (thus the B-Suite name). I'm lucky to have **Rhonda Morris**, the chief human resources officer of Chevron, as my partner for this series (check out **Rhonda's post** for the backstory of this project). Guaranteed you'll learn a lot from this powerful interview.*

**Morris: What were some of the biggest influences early in your life that shaped your values?**

Simmons: My family was my biggest influence, particularly my mother. I was born on a huge sharecropping plantation in east Texas, and I was the youngest of twelve children. As a tiny baby, my mother and father would drag me along on a cotton sack so that they could pick cotton. For my parents, who had minimal means at their disposal and lived with trenchant segregation, there wasn't much that they could do except keep their children nourished and safe.

My mother also shared her reflections with us about what we should expect in life and what we could do when difficulties arose. Somehow this woman with an eighth-grade education had a set of values that turned out to be enduring for me. Here's someone who was discriminated against, beaten down, made to feel inferior, and what did she teach us? She taught us to respect everybody. She taught us to be

proud of who we were when she knew that the biggest problem we were going to face in life is that people would tell us we were worthless and not give us opportunities.

She also taught us how to work, and her mantra was that whatever you do, do it well. I watched the way she pressed clothes with an iron heated on the fire. She moved it fastidiously between buttons and made sure everything was perfect. She taught us to respect the work we did. Other people might take shortcuts, but we were not to do that.

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I also remember my very first day of school. Our home was basically a shack, and I walked into my first schoolroom, and it was full of light, very orderly, and the teacher's voice was magical. Everything that came out of her mouth was the most wonderful thing in the world to me because here was a person who was responsible for my education and cared about me and encouraged me. I fell in love with school and learning.

**Bryant: What was your big break that set your career on a different trajectory?**

Simmons: Going to Princeton in 1983 as a director of studies. It was tough at first because when I got there, I discovered a lot of problems, and I didn't see a way to keep quiet about them. I had always been

outspoken. I said that the situation for women and minorities at Princeton was not very good and I told them what needed to be done.

But people didn't want to hear it. The fatigue that people experience when their colleagues are activists and trying to bring about change is very real. There was one particular person who just despised me and would cross the road to the other sidewalk whenever he saw me coming.

But then I was asked to direct the African American studies program. My field of study was French, so I resisted at first, but then they said, "Tell us what it would take to convince you." I realized that the one thing I could do for African American studies was to care about it more than anybody else. I met with the dean of faculty, presented him with eight conditions, and told him that I wouldn't do it if he said no to any of them. After each one, he said, "Done."

One of my first steps was to make a list of outstanding scholars whom I wanted to bring to Princeton. Toni Morrison was first on the list. At that time, she wasn't so well known, but shortly after being appointed as a professor at Princeton, she won a Pulitzer, and later the Nobel Prize. Then I recruited Cornel West and Nell Painter. Princeton then promoted me to the dean of faculty office to have that kind of impact on the whole university.

There I met a dean who was the defining professional guide of my life. He was Jewish, and from Philadelphia, and we could not have been more unlike. But he challenged me, and he brought me to tears many

times with his criticisms of my work. He also told me that I would be a university president one day.

Our relationship was unusual, because many women and African Americans and other minorities don't get to work with someone who is willing to tell them the truth about what they are lacking. We are so careful talking across race that people are reluctant to say, "Your writing is horrible. You need to do something about it." What many students and employees get over time are meaningless, patronizing compliments because people are fearful of the reaction if they really speak about any deficiencies.

**Morris: Many people are uncomfortable talking about race. Why is that, and how do we change that?**

Simmons: What's wrong with discomfort? Some of the best learning moments come from discomfort. I tell students that it is their job to permit themselves to be uncomfortable. Students might occasionally say to me, "I'm tired of people who don't understand me. They ask me about my hair. Why is my hair the way that it is? They make references to things that they think I'm supposed to know. I just don't want to be bothered with people who do that to me."

And when they do, my answer is always, "Go and be bothered by it, because every human being's job is to reveal who they are and why they are who they are. That's what we do in life." We are far too easy on ourselves when we insist that we need comfort. We don't need comfort. We need to get along. We need to share. But we don't need

comfort for that.

*"I tell students that it is their job is to permit themselves to be uncomfortable."*

In terms of how to have conversations about race, I have a few thoughts about that. Before you can drive, you need to learn the rules of the road. But nobody ever tries to teach you the rules of cross-racial, cross-cultural engagement. Isn't that odd?

First, you have to be willing to listen. You have to engage and not preach. A lot of people, when they engage in a conversation, really want to say, "Here's what I think," and that's the end of it. That's not a conversation. You have to be willing to hear difficult things if you're going to break through a very difficult barrier between races. Listening is important, no matter what people say. And if you're going to pick up your marbles and leave because somebody has said something offensive, it never works.

Saying something personal about somebody else is not constructive. It's okay to express how you are feeling, and others are not entitled to sanction you because you're expressing how you feel. It's not a bad idea to have people, if they are in a small group, sign an agreement in terms of the rules everyone is going to follow in the conversation. And any conversation around race has to begin with a common goal and trying to establish a middle ground. What's the point if you're not

doing that?

**Bryant: What can and should be done in corporate America to increase the representation of Black executives in senior leadership roles?**

Simmons: I was speaking to a group of CEOs here in Houston recently about this, and I gave my own career as an example. I could well have been someone who spent her entire career at a lower level of administration. I had all the signs of someone who really was not worth the trouble. I spoke out, and I didn't go along with everything just because people said I should. I had my own values and way of thinking and yet people mentored me.

More mentoring needs to take place. That's what you need to do in order to make the senior ranks of corporations more diverse. You want to make sure that companies are transparent about opportunities, and that differences are seen as an asset rather than a liability. If you are looking for sameness, you'll never get there. The only way to do this work is with consistency and with conviction.

**Morris: What has been your reaction to all the pledges and commitments that companies have made in the wake of the killing of George Floyd?**

Simmons: In my work with CEOs, I tell them to be careful not to engage in tokenism. Doing something symbolic is not going to be the solution. What's most important is to have a plan that will be sustained,

and to build lasting partnerships. People feel a lot of pressure to do something right away, but I discourage that. Those announcements will make people go quiet for a short period of time, but they are not going to make your company better.

The role of companies is to do more than just make money. You are preserving civil society. You're advancing democratic values. You are helping people create wealth. You're making the country safer by eliminating great disparities. Seeing a company's role as just hitting next quarter's earnings is really missing the boat. That's why it's so important to invest in preparing leaders, because when leaders fail, we all fail.

**Bryant: What career advice do you give to young people?**

Simmons: I find young people today are immensely impatient. They want to get things done overnight. They jump around a lot to try to find the best spot or to find an edge somehow. They want to leap over learning phases because they just want to get there quicker.

I always say to students that you should care about your work. Care about the quality of what you do. And if you do that, there are a lot of things that flow from that. You're going to keep learning. You're going to get better and better because you're listening and you're growing.

I also tell them that they have to develop values that are strong enough to carry them through a lifetime because they are going to be knocked around a lot by people who want to shake the foundations of who they

are, and by people who have all kinds of different motives.

*"Ethics and values are practiced; you don't memorize them."*

Our resilience is built on what we believe in and what we trust and what we think is right. Ethics and values are practiced; you don't memorize them. And the reason you don't get derailed is because your values are your constant companions. They guide you every day. They help you to make decisions. So form and protect those values.

The final thing, and this goes back to my mother, is to always respect other human beings no matter their station, no matter their views. Always convey that you respect their humanity, no matter what. It's very hard to go wrong if you do that because it will keep you from the worst kinds of actions and temptations. We're all human beings with the same kinds of frailties and opportunities. Of all the things my mother said to me, that's been the most important.

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