



Ron Williams



Leading in the B-Suite

Powerful conversations about life, race and leadership

"Companies Can't Hide Behind The Idea That The Talent Is Not Available."

Published on October 28, 2020



Adam Bryant [in](#)

Managing Director at The ExCo Group (formerly Merryck & Co. Americas)

***Ron Williams**, the former CEO of Aetna, shared must-read insights and stories for the interview series that **Rhonda Morris**, the chief human resources officer of Chevron, and I are doing with Black leaders about race in corporate America and what should be done to increase the ranks of Black executives in the C-Suite (thus the B-Suite name of our series). Guaranteed you will learn a lot from our conversation.*

Morris: What were some early influences that helped shape who you are today?

Williams: I grew up in Chicago, which was a highly segregated city when I was a child, and my father spent a lot of time working. The one thing that he was very clear about was the importance of hard work. While he didn't have much formal education, he had a lot of emotional intelligence, insight and strong motivation. The influences early on were my family, the church and the Boy Scouts.

I started working when I was about 13 or 14. One of the most important things I learned from those early jobs was what I did not want to do in life. I washed cars in Chicago in the dead of winter, and that made it very clear to me that no matter where life took me, it was not going to be to that destination.

Bryant: What was an important break in your career that set you on a higher trajectory?

Williams: There were several. I decided that I wanted to continue my

education beyond high school, and I made a decision to enroll at the local community college. I had to work to pay for books and tuition, but I discovered that I was really good at psychology. Your ability to listen, to understand and to speak well mattered more than in some other disciplines.

And I met people along the way who saw things in me that I didn't necessarily see in myself. They said, "You're going to go far, you have a lot of talent, you have a lot of ability." At first, I didn't fully appreciate and understand it, but the people who were really supportive helped me develop this philosophy of always striving to be better. Eventually, that was distilled into the idea of always pushing to be 15 percent better in all aspects of life.

*"My father always told me
that you can learn something
from everyone."*

Couple that with the notion that you should work extremely hard, and there are really no limits on what you should be able to do. I've always loved challenges. Another thing that has always helped me was seeking out people to benefit from their wisdom and their perspective. My father always told me that you can learn something from everyone, and to make it a point to learn from everyone.

Bryant: You need a lot of stamina and determination to achieve your levels of success. Where did this come from for you?

Williams: I've always had this strong intrinsic motivation to do better in terms of solving problems to make the world a better place. I talk to a lot of CEOs about this. The difference between a good CEO and a great CEO is having an enormous amount of consideration for the people and the team. It's also about having an enormous amount of strategic agility that means you can think about the future at the highest and most abstract level, but also when necessary get down in the boiler room and tighten the last bolt to the precise correct torque that it needs to be tightened.

Morris: There's a lot of discomfort in corporate America talking about race and racism. What have you learned is the best way to have those conversations?

Williams: I've found that it really helps to move the conversation away from racism to actions that have racial consequences. No one thinks of themselves as a racist, and yet people engage in actions every day that have adverse consequences on one group or another. For example, when you describe a job with a stereotypical definition of who will be successful in a role, you are creating a barrier to others because most likely the job will be filled by a White male. It's really important to look at the consequences of actions.

It's also important to give people the experience of what it's like to be in a culture different than their own. At Aetna, I would take members of my executive committee to a golf and tennis outing sponsored by Black Enterprise magazine. There were 300 Black corporate executives and a few non-Black executives. It often was the first time they had

been in an environment where the culture was different. The music was different. The humor was different. They were a fish out of water, and they didn't understand that that's what other people went through on a regular basis.

And there has to be a real demonstration of a belief in equality and equal opportunity. I've had some tough conversations with CEOs this year, and one thing I sometimes tell them is, "If you performed on revenue and earnings the same way you are performing on achieving a company that is reflective of the customers you serve, would you still have a job? Your results are miserable on this front, and so if you, the board, and the company believe it's important, why is this level of performance tolerated? It either says it's unimportant or that you're incompetent. You pick the answer."

Morris: Many companies aggregate demographic data about their employees. Because if you aggregate it, it often tells a better story than disaggregating it by ethnicity and gender. What are ways to look at the data to tell an accurate story?

Williams: One of the implications of moving the conversation about race to more about diversity and inclusion has been to de-emphasize people of color as a component of the problem. Now, I'm a huge believer in women. I mentored many women who worked for me who are now CEOs. So we have to track progress with women, but also look specifically at the progress with African Americans, Hispanics, Asians, and members of other underrepresented groups. So you have to disaggregate the data.

And companies can't hide behind the idea that the talent is not available, because that is a circular trap. There are plenty of smart, capable people who come out of state universities and other colleges, and not just from the Ivy Leagues where companies often focus their recruiting efforts. We have to create more on-ramps in corporate America so that we are bringing people in who have the ability to do the job but don't necessarily have all of the non-essential components. One trap that companies fall into sometimes when talking about recruiting and increasing diversity is the question of "qualified people." No one would ever say 'qualified' for other recruiting efforts. It's only when you are recruiting people of color.

Bryant: What headwinds have you faced in your career because of race, and what were the tailwinds that helped you get through them?

Williams: I've always tried to seek out problematic situations with companies that were fundamentally challenged because the CEO candidates from "central casting" were going to steer clear of trying to clean up those messes. You could call it a headwind because certain places weren't going to be as welcoming and open because I didn't fit the profile. But it was also a tailwind, because when the company is badly broken, you could be from Mars and they would still hire you. They don't care.

The other thing is that you just have to move through the headwinds. If you are going to be offended at every stupid thing someone does, you will be offended all day, every day. My approach is to assume positive

intent and assume they don't know any better. And if someone is really a jerk, then you deal with them on that basis. But if not, you give them a corrective educational moment — “Don't do that again. Don't say that, and here's why.” — and then move on.

I remember a moment when I'd just become CEO of Aetna. We were headed to the White House to meet with President Bush about some issues, and because we were going to two other cities as part of the trip, we were using a corporate aircraft. So we get to the small airport for private planes, and they had a greeter outside who welcomes you. As we're going through the door, there's a guy next to me who is not with my party, and he's carrying a backpack and wearing his hat backwards.

"Why did you think I was a driver and was not going to my plane?"

But the greeter looks at me and says, “Where are you going?” I looked at him, I said, “Inside.” He said, “Well, the driver's restroom is around the other side.” And I said, “Let me get this straight. This guy's carrying a backpack with his hat on backwards. I'm in a suit and tie. He's White, I'm Black. Why did you think I was a driver and was not going to my plane?”

This should have been a memorable day in my life. I became the CEO of a Fortune 100 company. I was going to meet the president of the United States of America and this guy wanted to direct me to the

driver's restroom because I am Black and I can't possibly be getting on a plane.

I called the supervisor over. They were profusely embarrassed, and I asked the greeter, "What made you think I was a driver?" He wouldn't answer, which was probably smart on his part. You can't let these moments ruin your day, but it's important to understand that no matter who you are, no matter where you go, the one thing that doesn't change is the color of your skin.

Bryant: What do companies need to do to get more Black executives into the senior leadership ranks?

Williams: The standard has to be just as high for addressing this issue as it is for earnings and revenue growth, and compensation has to be tied to results. People get nervous about the idea of quotas. The reality is that there's an earnings per share quota, and you hit that target or you die as a CEO. A company should be reflective of the customers it serves. Who can argue with that? Boards need to do a better job, CEOs clearly need to do a better job, and society has to do a better job.

Morris: That idea has led to statements like, "The 40 year old white male who says I didn't get the job because like I'm the wrong demographic." How do you answer that?

Williams: The world's not fair. It hasn't been fair. You have been the preferred demographic and now will be one of many competing. We are increasing competition and broadening the candidate pool and picking

the best candidate based on the critical essential attributes for success. You've been competing against a subset of talent for a long time. And the reality is our business has to be reflective of our customers. We're going to have to make choices. We're going to do our best to get them right. Is this going to adversely impact some people? Absolutely.

Whenever you're confronted with difficult issues, speaking plainly is the best answer, rather than trying to give people a bunch of gobbledygook. When the dust settles, we are going to look like our customers, period. And it's not just about your own employees. When your consulting firm shows up, who's on the team? When the accountants show up, who's on the team? They should have diverse teams, as well, and not just in junior positions.

Bryant: What advice would you give to early- to mid-career Black professionals?

Williams: Think about where the world is going and how you're developing your skills and competencies to create opportunities for yourself. And recognize that, of all the assets you have in your life, the single most important asset you will have is you and your own intellectual capability to add value.

Don't think that you work for other people. You work for yourself. And you are learning the skills and competencies that will get you the future job, not the job you have today. People early in their careers sometimes will say, "They're not paying me to do that." No, they're not, but the

next person will when you do that new job.

"Read the annual report. Go to town hall meetings."

It starts with doing an exemplary job on whatever task you're asked to do. Then work to understand the organization and its culture, and that means understanding the strategic goals not just of your boss, but of your boss's boss. And you want to understand the company's direction. Listen to the earnings calls. Read the annual report. Go to town hall meetings.

You want to be a presence in the company, and take an interest in the work of your colleagues – meet other people and ask them to explain what they do in their department. That's how you develop that ability to have a better understanding of the enterprise.

The more you understand different functions within the organization, the better decisions you'll be able to make. So build relationships, do a great job, and take those high-risk assignments that others will run away from.

Be sure to subscribe [here](#) if you want to receive all our future Leading in the B-Suite™ interviews! And check out our previous interviews with:

- ***[Carlos Watson](#), CEO of OZY Media***

- ***Ruth Simmons, president of Prairie View A&M University***
- ***Mellody Hobson, co-CEO of Ariel Investments***
- ***Robert L. Johnson, co-founder of BET***
- ***Ursula Burns, former CEO of Xerox***