



Leading in the B-Suite

Powerful conversations about life, race and leadership

Biweekly newsletter

Every Organization Needs To Really Think Of Leadership As A Craft

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Amber Guild



Adam Bryant [in](#)

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York, shared powerful lessons with me and [Rhonda Morris](#), the CHRO of Chevron, for our interview series with prominent Black leaders. [Subscribe here](#) for all *Leading in the B-Suite* interviews.

Morris: What were some important influences for you early on?

Guild: I grew up in two very different households. During the week, I lived in New York City on 103rd Street with my mother and two older sisters, and then on the weekends, I was with my father and my stepmother and my two younger siblings in New Jersey.

My mother raised us with education at the forefront, because that's how her parents raised her. She grew up in the projects of Newark. They were homeless at one point. She was in foster care for a time. So education was her way out. She was always navigating to get us into magnet schools and gifted-and-talented programs.

At my father's home on the weekends, we were very politically active. We were constantly out on the streets protesting or supporting some issue. So much of my childhood was spent on buses that left our town at 5:00 a.m. to go to marches in Washington D.C.

The combination of those experiences taught me that it is our responsibility to make things better, to change things, to give a voice to those who don't have a voice. The other big difference between the households was that one was Black and one was White, and I was the only one who was both those things.

family came to New England in 1639 and has been there for generations. On my mother's side, we can trace our family roots back to at least the 1700s at a plantation in Georgia. My father grew up in an upper middle class White neighborhood and he was the son of a doctor. He went to college in the 60's and had an awakening about the disparities in the world. That's how he became active.

It became clear that I had opportunities that my older sisters did not.

My mother took a different approach to activism. She was focused on getting us educated and working, and changing things from within the system, while my father's approach was outside of the system. They both respected each other's approach, even though they were different approaches.

And as I got older, it became clear that I had opportunities that my older sisters did not, and I felt a responsibility to leverage that in ways that would make things different for my family and for other people and other generations.

Bryant: What were the opportunities that you had that your sisters did not?

Guild: When I was really young, I didn't really notice any differences. My mother thought it was important that she raise me with both a Black and a biracial identity. We also grew up in a predominantly Dominican

neighborhood, and most Dominican families looked like my family. We were all different shades of brown.

As I got older, I would notice the different experience of walking through a store with my older sisters compared to my younger sister and brother, who are White. I could see how people engaged with us or reacted to us differently.

But there was a moment when I really understood my privilege. I was in my early 20s, and I had been fighting with my oldest sister about something. I called my mom to get her on my side, and I said something like, “I worked really hard to get where I am.”

And there was silence on the phone. And then she said, “Amber, we all work really hard. You had opportunities and privileges that your sisters did not and do not have. You need to understand that, and you need to start thinking about what you’re going to do with that.” It was then that I started to absorb the fact that the combination of my light skin and familiarity and comfort navigating White spaces gave me privileges that many Black and Brown people did not have.

Morris: That comfort in different worlds seems to have extended to your career. You’ve held leadership roles in a number of companies.

Guild: There definitely is a parallel between today and how I navigated different worlds and communities and cultures when I was young. Certainly there are always some challenges, but I also really enjoy it, particularly the energy of other people.

all of these different disciplines. You've got business people, the creatives, and people who work in production and in media. I've always loved being able to find that common thread for different groups with the idea of progress and creating something exciting and impactful together.

Bryant: What was your first job out of college?

Guild: I actually got my first job in advertising while I was still in college. I was a psych major and a women's studies minor. I was going to graduate and get my master's in social work, and I was going to become a therapist but also start some nonprofits and save the world. But then I took a summer job as a secretary at Bozell Advertising when I was 19. My sister, Brandy, helped me get that job because she was also a secretary there.

I fell in love with the advertising business. I had no idea a world like this existed. Bozell was interesting because many of the scenes in the movie *Big* were shot in its offices. But looking around the agency, I didn't see anyone who looked like me or my family.

That was a moment for me — and this is probably where my father's influence comes in — because I said to myself, we've got to change this. I don't want another generation of Black and Brown kids to grow up feeling the way I felt when I looked at certain ads. People like me were not seen or heard, and if they were, they were stereotypes or caricatures. So I felt right then and there, this is what I'm going to do, and I want to change this. I wanted to change it because I loved what I knew it could be.

Morris: How have you been able to do that?

Guild: First of all, by having diverse teams. Diversity, equity, and inclusion cannot be a side project. It has to be the core of what you do and core to the operations of your business. It starts with looking for talent in nontraditional places. Writers and designers can come from so many different backgrounds, and we have to be open to that.

But representation is just the beginning. You have to create inclusive cultures, and that includes all of your systems and processes, including hiring, performance reviews and feedback. If you're not evolving all those approaches, you're not going to create companies that are representative of the world and the country we live in.

Every part of the employee life cycle has to be evaluated for its barriers and opportunities. And one that is not necessarily obvious is that a lot of companies don't develop and grow leaders in the same way they do other subject-matter experts. Oftentimes, companies promote people based on their skills at doing a particular job. But then they are suddenly leading a group of people, and they may not necessarily be natural leaders.

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When you have someone in a management position who doesn't really know how to lead, you have so many issues — the performance of the team suffers, and a manager who is struggling tends to impact marginalized groups more. As just one example, if the manager is

White, they may feel uncomfortable giving constructive feedback to people who don't look like them.

I would love for every organization to really think of leadership as a craft, and give it the same attention and focus as they do other disciplines, like design or engineering. Those are crafts, and so is leadership. Focusing on leadership and leading through the lens of diversity and equity and inclusion would dramatically change the culture within companies – this would create a more engaged and inspired workforce, and result in more innovation, creativity and positive business results.

Bryant: What have been the headwinds you've faced in your career because of your race and what have been the tailwinds that helped you navigate them?

Guild: In the early part of my career, it was crazy how often I was treated differently than my coworkers. I remember when a lower-performing colleague was about to get promoted, even though my impact and output was greater. A client stepped in and said to the company, "Are you crazy? You've got to promote Amber."

Other moments happened because some people weren't quite sure what I was. They knew I wasn't White, and they often thought I was Latina. I would face a lot of the bias that Latina women faced. Someone even said to me once, "Oh, I thought you were Puerto Rican because you're so feisty." And I said, "Did you just say that out loud?" The world has evolved and there are fewer moments like that now. And I keep remembering the words my mother said to me when I was in my 20s — how are you going to change things?

*I always felt very clear on who
I am.*

I know that people can have perceived racial ambiguity with me — and it is only perceived, because I do not have racial ambiguity. They're not sure where to put me. And sometimes I can leverage that to open up a conversation about race. And again, I thank my mother for always making me not feel ambiguous. I always felt very clear on who I am and who I continue to be. I feel good identifying as both biracial and Black.

Morris: Over the past year, many companies have made pronouncements around diversity initiatives, but sometimes it seems as if there is a gap between the walk and the talk.

Guild: I have to assume positive intent. But companies sometimes face challenges because they jump immediately to the strategy of what they are going to do and how they are going to do it.

It's better to invest the time up front to say, before we say how we're going to change things, what are we changing? What is actually happening now? That diagnosis is really important. If the leaders of the organization don't understand where the bias is, where the barriers are, where the systemic issues are, and they're just rushing to say, hey, here's how we're going to change it — but they don't actually know what the "it" is — then it's a lot harder to be successful.

A lot of companies are struggling with this now. It's going to take longer than any of us want it to, but leaders have to understand what's

really going on in their organizations in terms of the culture, systems and behaviors before they can start to change and transform the culture. That to me is the new frontier.

Bryant: If you were speaking to an audience of young Black professionals, what is your best career and life advice to them?

Guild: I would say keep respectfully pushing the leaders of their organizations to better understand how to ensure that they are creating cultures that will get the best out of their people.

Being respectful is not about hierarchy, and it's not about young or old. It's about how you engage with other humans and the world. And assume positive intent and try to stay optimistic. Organizations can do good and do well, and the younger generation seems to feel that way too, and they will push us — not just in this country, but around the world — to do so. I want them to keep doing that.

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