



Anthony Foxx

Stay Engaged With People To Find Similarities, Not Differences



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***Anthony Foxx**, a former U.S. Secretary of Transportation who now serves as a business advisor, shared powerful lessons with **Rhonda Morris**, the CHRO of Chevron, and me for our interview series with prominent Black leaders. [Subscribe here](#) for all Leading in the B-Suite interviews.*

Morris: Who were some of the biggest influences early in your life that shaped who you are today?

Foxx: My most significant role models were my grandparents. I grew up in their house. They were schoolteachers. My grandfather had been a principal in the

segregated school system, and my grandmother taught French. Growing up in the '70s and '80s, I would see them come home and grade papers. Sometimes they'd have a student who needed additional help come by the house. I'd hear about the school board meetings at the dinner table. These were just salt of the earth public servants doing what they did. I learned a lot by osmosis, just watching them and their dedication to the community.

I also would credit people I grew up around in my community. There was a lawyer in town named Julius Chambers, who followed in the spirit of Thurgood Marshall and led some of the most important civil rights cases at the time. Even though I didn't know him very well when I was a kid, he gave me something to shoot for. I saw many people in important roles who made me think that I could accomplish something that perhaps one day would make other people look up to me in the same way.

Another big factor was the environment in my home state. The North Carolina state motto is, "To be rather than to seem." There's a lot to that. Rather than putting on airs or trying to stick my chest out or something like that, I've found it's more valuable to be authentic at all times. If I get excited, I'll act excited. But usually, I'm observing the world and commenting on it as I see things.

Bryant: What were you doing outside of class when you were a kid?

Foxx: I read a lot as a kid. Because my grandparents were teachers, they always had books around the house. I rode my bike around the neighborhood quite a bit and I eventually started playing a lot of basketball. That was how I became a little less nerdy and a little cooler to the people in my neighborhood. I never was particularly good, but I was good enough to get picked and to be passably good when I played. Basketball where I grew up was kind of like golf for other kids growing up in different settings. It was a way to be social.

Morris: What are the reasons you decided to study history and go to law school?

Foxx: History gave me a way to understand the environment

and the world around me on a much deeper level. Law did the same thing and allowed me to understand how rules get established and decisions get made. I remember reading Thomas Hobbes' *Leviathan* and *The Second Treatise of Government* by John Locke.

A lot of Western philosophies we studied boil down to the idea that there is inherent contentiousness between people — that if someone has something you want, absent any rules, people are prone to stealing or fighting. I never thought that was true as an absolute fact.

As I've seen more of the world, I see Eastern and African philosophies that point to a different, more collaborative and mutually dependent way societies can be organized. One concept, an African one called *Umbutu*, says that I cannot be a whole person without you. I like this approach much better than Hobbes' and Locke's. Examining different societies has spurred a lifelong pursuit of trying to understand people, systems, and governments well enough to try to be helpful in whatever way I can be.

Bryant: What were some headwinds you encountered in your career because of your race, and what were the tailwinds that helped you navigate them?

Foxx: One of the first experiences that shaped my sense of being a Black man occurred right before I went to college. I went to a summer program at Davidson College, where I ultimately went to school. It was an immersion program. The first night we were there, the school had a square dance — a ritual of the college for every freshman class at that time. It was not an experience I had ever had before. It wasn't one that I was particularly interested in having, frankly.

Over the next several days, other things happened that made me think, "This place does not really welcome people who come from where I come from." I shared that with the director of the camp, who, I found out later, went to the admissions committee to try to have my application denied.

It didn't work, but one of the admissions officers confided to me that this had happened. He gave me this advice: "Be careful what you say and who you say it to." Before that time, I had no awareness of how much fear I could provoke in the

world around me or how to respond to it.

That experience stayed with me. And when I was in politics, sometimes even some of my supporters would say, "Can you be more boisterous? Can you be a stronger voice?" Some of the same criticism was made of Barack Obama. I had learned to pick my moments and choose my words carefully.

Often the content was the same but I learned how to be heard as I intended and not misheard, as can happen so easily. The result has sometimes been that I am considered taciturn but that's not exactly right. It's tactful. Some of us achieve certain things because of our restraint, not because of our vigor or excitedness.

Some of us are able to navigate the world because, even when we see things, we internalize them. We think about them. We decide at that moment whether there's a way to say something or whether there's a need to say something. Then you make a judgment about how to navigate a situation. My approach is to speak softly but carry a big stick. That's how I've navigated the world.

Morris: What is your advice to young Black professionals on whether, when they encounter certain behaviors, to call them out or absorb them?

Foxx: My first piece of advice would be to be outstanding at your job, whatever it is, because that gives you a lot more latitude. But the specific situations are highly variable. If it is something that gets in the way of you doing your highest and best work, then you have a responsibility to speak up. If you see it interrupting someone else's ability to do their best work, you have a responsibility to speak up. But everything should be in the context of what is the most constructive way forward.

Sometimes a person might say or do something offensive, and you have to decide whether they are capable of changing. If the answer is yes, then I might pull the person aside and say, "I saw what you did. This is how I saw it. You might want to think about going back to the person you did this to," or whatever the case may be. If I decide that the person is not capable of changing, then the question is: is

there someone above that person who needs to know about this?

What people often see from me is probably my second or third reaction. They very rarely see my first reaction. I really don't wish people to see my first reaction a lot of times because I can be highly combustible, believe it or not, even though I seem soft-spoken. I know that about myself. So if I see a situation and have a reaction, then I think to myself, what is the most likely way that I can express this and get the best possible outcome?

The last thing I'm going to say about this is my actuarials are not good because of what I just said. The freedom to say exactly what you're thinking at the moment you're thinking it is a freedom that I, as an African American male, have unlearned. I will sometimes do it, but oftentimes I'm holding back.

I don't know what holding things in does to your biochemistry, but there's a reason why Black people live with a lot of stress. It's because they're constantly absorbing these micro-aggressions, and some of them are worth confronting and some of them, quite frankly, aren't. If you confronted them all the time, that also would be stressful because you'd never stop. You wouldn't be able to get any work done.

Bryant: Do you have any advice on the most effective way to frame up and start conversations about race?

Foxx: No. We're all trying to figure this out. We're trying to do something in this country that really hasn't been done anywhere in the world, which is to have this massive blending of people and cultures and backgrounds into a single thread. I don't want to overstate how hard that is, but I don't want to understate it either.

It's a challenge, particularly when people grow up believing in the differences more than they believe in the similarities. But you have to stay engaged with people. I'll give you an example. My roommate in college, a guy I love like a brother, was in this fraternity, Kappa Alpha — Robert E. Lee's fraternity. They'd have Old South Day, and I would think, "How can these guys be so unexamined about what they're

doing?"

As I say, my roommate is still one of my best friends, and 30 years later, after the murder of George Floyd, people who had been in this fraternity started asking whether they should decommission it. He was part of the group that was voicing concerns about continuing the fraternity. I said to him, "Man, finally. I'm glad you finally saw that for what it was." Months later, he came back to me and he said, "That really affected me when you said that."

We have to stay committed to each other on an interpersonal level.

The point is we can't argue with each other like we're on opposing cable news networks. We have to stay committed to each other on an interpersonal level and believe that our sharing space and experiences will impact things at scale. The kinds of conversations we're able to have, even causally and without a lot of ceremony, about race will have a greater long-term impact than a symposium focused on race.

It's important as an American to realize that it is impossible to be an American and be part of only one community. I've started referring to myself and similarly minded people as "omni-American," because I'm part of a lot of groups in this country. We have to find a way to recognize that.

Morris: Are you optimistic or pessimistic about the prospect of real change?

Foxx: I grew up believing that history is a rising road in this country — that it's better for me than my grandparents, that it was better for them than their parents and that it will be better for my kids. I don't think that's true today. It does feel like, politically, we are entering into this second post-Reconstruction phase, where all the reparative work has been dismantled, and now perhaps we're in a period of retrenchment.

I've lived most of my professional life believing that even small steps are helpful. We are getting to a point where marginalized people have less patience for those small steps. We'll see what this next generation comes up with,

because we've given them a broken world in many ways and I hope they can do better with it.

That said, I'm optimistic, despite all the headwinds. I look back to the period when my great-great-grandparents were coming along. They got 14 kids into college, and that was one of many small acts of courage by people who probably had no good reason to believe, other than the faith they had in their religion and their country, that things would ever get better. So even though we can't necessarily see from where we are today to the better outcome on the other side, that doesn't stop me from believing that it is possible. As long as it's possible, I'm optimistic.

My final message for young people who come from marginalized communities is that it's easy to think that when bad things happen to you, it was your fault. Things like getting passed over for a promotion or not getting the plumb assignment. That's a terrible burden. It's really important to have two levels of your brain working at the same time.

Yes, you have to look at yourself and say, "Did I play a role in this — in my effort, in my work product, my behavior, in my demeanor, in my communication — that contributed to this outcome?" Sometimes the answer is no, and in those situations, you have to protect your spirit. You have to protect your sense of yourself because that's where the health disparities come from. That's where all the pressure comes from. That's where the stress comes from.

I re-read *Invisible Man* again during the pandemic. It's the one book that I think everybody should read in this country, because there's no better description of the challenge of race. The metaphor that Ralph Ellison uses to describe the White mindset is blindness, and the metaphor for Blacks is invisibility.

That's what it feels like when you make a good point in a meeting, everybody passes over it, and then ten minutes later a White colleague says the same thing and carries the day. Such moments are not accidental. I don't know how it ultimately gets fixed, but what I do know is that White Americans are capable of seeing more. And as a Black American, I have a responsibility to do the very best I can to never be invisible.