



James White's Leadership Lessons

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In this series, we explore some of the most important lessons and insights from our executive coaches and mentors. The ExCo Group executive coach and mentor James White, Former Chair, President, & CEO Jamba Juice, the process of generational change, pushing forward with optimism, and other leadership lessons.

Q. The murder of George Floyd seemed to galvanize so many companies to do more and better, but the world feels increasingly polarized and politicized. Are you optimistic or pessimistic about whether real change is underway in terms of DE&I?

A. As a leader, I've always centered around being optimistic, and I remain optimistic. We went through an unprecedented last three years of significant change, the murder of George Floyd, the pandemic, and a great sense of hope that we may see significant change around diversity, equity, inclusion, and race.

Whenever there is significant change, there's also going to be significant pushback, and that's where we are today. The good news is that we are now in a process of generational change, and the change is going to continue to push forward.

I see progress in the way language has changed. I see progress in the way that the very best leaders and companies have remained committed to the work. The reality is that we live in a divided world, but if you're leading an organization, you've got to find the things that unite us and press ahead.

Q. Despite the rise of stakeholder capitalism, and the pull to have companies engage on broader issues in society, a lot of leaders we talk to are now saying it's too much, and that the risk of engaging on those bigger issues has become too high. What advice would you give them?

A. We are in a moment when lots of folks would believe this is a time to be heads down and almost do nothing, given the volatility of the current environment. The thing that I encourage CEOs and any leader to do is to really be prepared to stand alone. Leadership courage has never been more important, and I think it will be ultimately rewarded.

The CEOs I see doing the best work in this space may be saying less publicly, but they are staying very focused on the good work inside their own companies. The companies that are continuing to follow their own true north and do the right things, with leaders who have the courage to stand alone, will be rewarded by most of their stakeholders.

Q. What are the patterns you've noticed among the white leaders who are committed to this issue? Is there some common thread in their backgrounds?

A. Among the leaders who care most about the issues related to building more inclusive work environments, I've found the one common thread is that there is a high capability around empathy. Empathy has a way of fueling the passion to do the right thing. As you know better, you always try to do better. Often those leaders spent time earlier in their lives in more inclusive environments, like team sports and the military.

Q. What, in your experience, is the best way to start what can be uncomfortable conversations about race?

A. The first piece of advice is that the conversations should be about finding the things that unite us and that we might have in common. In my conversations, I start by saying that this is just about being human, and using that as the foundation. I often share personal stories that both humanize myself and open up conversations about shared experiences.

For example, I had prostate surgery two years ago. When I speak to audiences, I share with them the fact that the treatment created hot flashes for me. So I will forever be more understanding of women who have gone through menopause. I've found that the more authentic and personal I can be in sharing my stories, I can unlock different discussions and have people think about this work very differently.

Q. What advice would you share with a CEO who asks you for guidance on the best approaches and frameworks to get started in terms of showing a greater commitment to DE&I in their company?

A. There are a couple places I like to start. One, I want to understand the CEO or the executive's own journey, and their personal "why" behind taking action on this work at this moment. Beyond that, I always ask people to share where they see their organization now, and then I do a thorough analysis and almost an anthropological review of how things work today at their company.

Then I ask them to take me to their desired future, so that I understand what their ambition is. What problem are we solving? What do we hope the organization becomes? With those two insights, then you can start on the appropriate actions, including understanding what capabilities need to be built inside the company. Then leaders can hold one-on-ones or town halls or listening sessions to learn and gain insights about how to best iterate toward solutions inside the company.

Q. Can you share a bit more detail about that upfront analysis you do?

A. The starting point is to thoroughly document the current state of play. What are the documented processes in the company now? What are the rituals inside the company? What are all the HR-related processes that touch employees? I'm looking to see whether any those processes are disadvantaging certain populations inside the organization.

Then once I have a sense of their ambition and what they want to accomplish over the next two or three years, I typically advise organizations to create a small action learning team that can help lead the organization cross-functionally through the work.

Q. What is the typical timeline involved in doing this work?

A. The time frame is going to vary from company to company, but typically the assessment work requires about 60 to 90 days. Rolling out initial versions of a strategy to drive change and shape culture is going to take another six to nine months. Then it's going to take a full year to really see impact.

More sustained progress will take multiple years. The best companies, once they start this work, almost never stop because there is an apparatus in place to refresh their thinking, and the language and the conversations just happen over time so that it becomes an iterative process about how to best lead and shape the culture.

Given all the change in the world, it's never been more important for companies to make sure they've thoughtfully refreshed their culture and values to ensure they line up with the strategy and the current environment.

Q. What are some patterns you've seen that can undermine a company's efforts to move the needle?

A. The main thing is that you need commitment at the top. The CEO can't delegate this work to someone else in the organization, because if they do, the work is almost never sustained over time. We've seen a lot of cutbacks in and around the DEI space and the culture space over just the last 15 or 18 months, and a lot of chief diversity officer positions are being eliminated.

That's a sign that their previous statements and commitments were reactive, rather than being core to the values of the companies and the companies' leadership. This work is not an event. It's a more sustained way of running a business that will create advantages long-term. It has to be baked into the strategy of the organization.

If it's not—if it's somebody's side job, if it's not fully integrated into the strategy, or if it's not resourced appropriately—it almost never works. And if companies are just going to make their efforts part of another celebratory month of the year for some group, you you might as well save your money. In my view, that's a bit of a waste of time because it's going to create more polarization inside organizations.

The more thoughtful systemic work is based on creating opportunities and space for more voices to be heard inside the company. That helps with both retention and recruitment. As we think about the multiple generations now working inside our companies, we've got to find creative ways to maximize all those generations in a thoughtful way, in addition to maximizing the increasingly diverse workforce.

The next generations of employees are going to be dramatically more diverse, and you have to move your business forward to meet the moment.

Q. What is your take on unconscious bias training?

A. I'm not opposed to unconscious bias training if it is in the context of a more thoughtful learning journey inside the organization. But a lot of the DEI training on its own often leaves people with more questions than answers. I'm more a fan of thoughtful leadership training that provides leaders with tools to be able to lead differently, because that helps take individuals and the organization on a learning journey. Together we can learn and grow. We show each other grace as we're doing the work.

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That approach has a far better chance of being sustained versus just dropping the training-of-the-moment into an organization. I'm a former CEO and a 30-year operator. I serve on boards. So my solutions work in the real world. I have a perspective on what sustainable change looks like, and what the best levers are to drive sustainable change.

Q. What's a good example of putting this approach into practice?

A. I'm on the board of Schnucks Supermarkets, a fourth-generation, family-owned retailer from my hometown of St. Louis, with 100-plus retail locations. The CEO, Todd Schnuck, meets with his CHRO, chief diversity officer, and a couple of the operating leaders on a weekly basis on this specific topic. Then I meet with them as a board member every month.

We're going on three years now of having these meetings where everyone is discussing how to improve and what the metrics are showing in terms of impact. The CEO and his leadership team have taken themselves on a learning journey, showing grace to each other and assuming positive intent, and knowing that nobody has all the answers. That would be a shining star example of the commitment.

The best companies are continuing to stay committed to this work, and they're creating a competitive advantage for themselves in terms of recruitment and retention. The next generations of employees are going to be dramatically more diverse, and you have to move your business forward to meet the moment. This is how the next generation of leaders is going to really distinguish themselves.