



Know What's Required To Reach Your Goals | Michael Bonner

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Michael Bonner, Managing Director of Aviate and Pilot Strategy at United Airlines, shares insightful lessons with Rhonda Morris, the CHRO of Chevron, and The ExCo Group's Adam Bryant on overcoming racial headwinds and knowing when to challenge your superiors for our interview series with prominent Black leaders Leading in the B-Suite.

Morris: What were important early influences for you?

Bonner: My father was a big influence. I grew up through seventh grade in Gardena, California, in a rough neighborhood in the mid-to late-'60s. My father is Black, and my mother is White, and they saw the gang-centric environment as a huge threat to them as a couple and to me.

So they decided to move to Cerritos, Calif., which was a diverse, new, and growing community, to give me new opportunities and make sure I would not get distracted by the wrong stuff and stay focused on the right stuff. That lifted this burden off my back of being constantly bombarded about joining a gang. Once we moved, I got into high school life and sports.

My father instilled in me the value of hard work and the importance of always having a plan for what you want to do. And it wasn't just about the ultimate goal. He said to always have some milestone goals along the way so that you can track your progress.

Another big influence was my third-grade teacher. I was eight years old, and she knew I was passionate about flying. Two years later, when I was in fifth grade, she arranged my first airplane ride—in a Cessna 172 with her husband, who was a general aviation pilot. She also instilled in me the value of having a passion for learning and education.

Bryant: What did your father and mother do for work?

Bonner: My father was enlisted in the Air Force for seven years. He was overseas in Germany, where he met my mother, who had grown up there. I was about three months old when we came to the States, and my father worked several jobs right out of the Air Force.

He was a janitor. He worked on the loading dock for an air freight company called Flying Tigers. He then started on the production line at a company that eventually became Allied Signal, where he stayed for 35 years until he retired as director of customer service. My mom was a homemaker and also worked for the school district for a few years.

Morris: What kinds of things did you do outside of class?

Bonner: I was involved in sports, football, and basketball, from a very early age, around five. And I was in the Cub Scouts and Boy Scouts. Other than that, I was interested in airplanes. My dad would bring home aviation magazines from work for me. I'd look through them and learn early on how to identify pretty much every type of airplane.

Bryant: Where does your drive come from?

Bonner: It comes from me. There is this voice that is always there—during my 12 years of active-duty service in the Navy, when I was part of the Air Force reserves, and now in the work I'm doing at United as managing director of Aviate, our pilot career-development program. I've always wanted to have a bigger hand in driving the organization. And there's just always been this drive to get to the end of the plan or the roadmap that I drew out for myself because of the guidance from my father.

It's not about money or prestige from having a higher rank or position. It's about wanting to shape how the organization performs and help my teams feel like they want to perform at a higher level and go the extra mile—for each other, not for me.

Morris: What headwinds have you encountered in your career because of your race, and how have you navigated them?

Bonner: One of the first times I felt that my race was an issue was just after I had been awarded a Navy ROTC scholarship. I first met with my class advisor at the Navy ROTC unit. He was White. He was a Naval aviator, and he was going to be my career counselor for the next two years.

In that first meeting, he asked me the usual questions, including what I wanted to do in the Navy and what I was studying. I told him, "I want to fly, just like you." And he said, "That's awesome. What do you want to fly?" And without any hesitation, I told him that I wanted to fly F-14s. I don't know if there was any ill will in what he said next—maybe he was just thinking out loud—but he said, "I don't know if we have any Black F-14 pilots in the Navy."

It turns out we did. There were about three at the time. But that's what he said to me. I was dumbfounded. I had no idea what to say, and I didn't say anything. I didn't ask him what he meant. It was my first meeting with my advisor, so I just smiled, and we continued the conversation.

That meeting made me realize that there were going to be times in that program when I was going to be asked questions that a White male wouldn't be asked and that I would just have to accept that. I used that for motivation all the way through flight school. I kept my head down because that was one of the great things about military pilot training—it is a numbers-based program. If you get the highest GPA through all your graded flight lessons, then you're going to have a really good chance of getting the airplane you want.

When moments like that have happened over the years, they take up about 30 seconds of my time, but no more. My wife always tells me that I often don't pick up on the glances or the facial expressions from people. And I consider that a blessing because they don't faze me.

Probably the worst case of experiencing bias was from the commanding officer of one of my squadrons. He didn't have the courage to tell me that, at the time, my performance was average and I could do better. Instead, he just said, "Keep doing what you're doing, keep working hard."

However, my written performance reports were mediocre. A mentor, another Black F-14 pilot, instilled in me that you must challenge your superiors when you are not getting clear guidance on where you stand and what you need to do to start moving up. He gave me that pep talk and encouraged me to do that going forward.

Bryant: What was your sense of why that commanding officer was not being straight with you?

Bonner: I believe he was a bit intimidated by my race, and I think he didn't want to upset one of two Black F-14 pilots out of 300 pilots on the base at the time. I never felt that I came across as somebody who was not open to an honest assessment. I had a thick skin and wanted to know what I needed to work on. I think he was afraid of upsetting me. He didn't want to give me honest feedback verbally because he thought I couldn't take it.

Morris: I have flown regularly on United for over 30 years and rarely see female or minority pilots. What is it like for you?

Bonner: I continue to get the occasional glance or comment from customers or from people walking through airports. I make it a habit on every flight to walk out and say hello and goodbye to passengers rather than talking to them from the flight deck.

Sometimes, I'll get a comment like, "Wow. That was a really good job," possibly insinuating that they didn't expect me to do it well. But again, I don't let those moments take up any space in my brain. I just smile and express my appreciation for their patronage, and move on.

And I do make it a point to engage with kids—not just Black kids, but all kids, and especially kids from underrepresented groups. I think it's what we should do as pilots, but it's also about trying to be visible and show them that you don't have to be a White male to do this job.

Bryant: What's your best career and life advice that you share with young people?

Bonner: I tell them the exact same thing that my father told me. I was a senior in high school and I knew I wanted to fly, and I knew I wanted to fly in the military at that point. And I've never forgotten what he said, and I've applied this approach to every job and every goal I set for myself. He said, "If you know what you want to do, then know what's required to get there."

In other words, do your homework and then, on that journey, accomplish 110 percent of those requirements. Because if you do that and you go knocking on doors with your resume or your qualifications, they can't say no. They can't not let you in the door because you not only have met the requirements; you've exceeded them.

Morris: You spoke earlier about your approach of not letting those moments of bias and micro-aggressions bother you. Can you talk a bit more about how you learned how to do that?

Bonner: I decided that would be my approach because of what I learned when I moved from Gardena to Cerritos. When I walked into school in the seventh grade in Cerritos, I was dressed like a gang member. Those were the clothes I had because that's what everyone wore in Gardena, regardless of whether you were in a gang.

From the moment I walked into school in Cerritos, the Black group came up to me and wanted me to hang with them. I looked across the schoolyard, and I saw this group called "the surfers." I started hanging out with them more and began to wear what they wore. I never surfed and barely went to the beach, but I was considered a surfer.

When I went to high school, I had this light bulb moment—that it just made no sense to me. I didn't want to be part of a group. All the words and looks that come with being Black and being a surfer or whatever just didn't matter. I chose not to let any of that take up any space in my brain anymore.

This interview with Michael Bonner is part of our Leading in the B-Suite interview series, which features powerful conversations about life, race and racism, and leadership. Join the conversation on LinkedIn.