

Introduction



The best thing about being a journalist, in my view, is that it gives you license to ask people questions that you would otherwise never ask. I'm not talking about plumbing the depths of a subject's personal life, or digging for dirt and demons. Rather, I'm referring to those questions the answers to which truly reveal who a person is; what drives them; what moves them; where they derive their courage and strength; how they handle adversity and change and, even, success, because success comes with its share of challenges as well.

Those are the answers, when they are thoughtful and honest, that cut through the rhetoric of life straight to the heart of it. Those are the answers that can help the rest of us resolve the questions we struggle with in our own lives.

From the moment I did my very first interview more than a decade ago, it occurred to me that I was asking questions of my subject that I had never thought to ask my own parents or best friends. As a result, I learned things about that person that I didn't know about most of the people to whom I was closest.

As my career progressed, I realized that I wasn't just learning *about* the people I interviewed. I often learned *from* them. The experiences they recounted, and the added value that their hindsight perspective gave to those experiences, was often helpful to me. On occasion, they made an indelible impact.

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Such was the case with the first magazine feature I ever wrote. It was for *Black Enterprise* in 1988. At the time, I was a novice newspaper reporter, just one year out of Columbia University Graduate School of Journalism and about as green as green gets. Already in my second full-time job since graduating, my main ambitions were to become a staff writer at a respected magazine and to reach an annual income that would equal my age (23 at the time) in thousands. I hoped the freelance work at B.E. would inch me along toward both goals.

My assignment was to profile Clifton Wharton, chairman and CEO of Teachers Insurance and Annuities Association-College Retirement Equities Fund (TIAA-CREF). With more than \$50 billion in assets at the time, TIAA-CREF was the nation's largest pension fund and Wharton was the first African American to head a Fortune 500 company (a fact that is repeatedly overlooked today as the general media notes the rise of several other African Americans to top corporate slots).

In preparing for our interview, I learned that Wharton's life was a model of rare privilege and astonishing achievement. He was born the only child of the first black career officer in the Foreign Service to reach the rank of ambassador and, in addition to his pioneering appointment at TIAA-CREF, his own list of first-black accomplishments filled an entire page. He was the first black to graduate from the School of Advanced International Studies at John Hopkins University; first black Ph.D. in Economics from the University of Chicago; first black to become a director on the boards of a major life insurance company (Equitable Life) and automobile manufacturer (Ford Motor Co.); first black to become president of a predominantly white university (Michigan State) or chancellor of a university system (State University of New York). Wharton had also chaired the Rockefeller Foundation and, shortly before our interview, had become the first black elected a fellow of the American Agricultural Economics Association. That is just a sampling of his accomplishments.

Given all this, to say that I was anxious as I was led down a gleaming corridor toward Wharton's spacious office in midtown Manhattan would be a fantastic understatement. I was flat-out panicked. Here I was, a kid, basically, about to attempt a meaningful dialogue with a man who was in the throes of reorganizing one of the nation's largest yet most troubled financial institutions. TIAA-CREF was at a do-or-die moment in its long history, the pension funds of 890,000 account holders hung in the bal-

ance, and Wharton held the reins. Needless to say, he had more important things to do than be interviewed.

My worst fear was that he would take one look at me and despair that he had committed an hour of his workday to a rookie journalist the sum of whose knowledge about big business could free-fall through the eye of a needle. But I soon discovered that I needn't have worried at all, which is far more a measure of his grace in this situation than of mine.

Wharton was focused, responsive, respectful, and more generous with his time than I was led to expect. If he was ambivalent about my degree of experience or expertise, he never showed it. We talked in depth about the forces that shaped his childhood, his mentors, his consistent efforts to groom others for like success, his concerns about the chilling effect of racism in the corporate world and—his favorite topic—his wife, Dolores, and her own outstanding work. Of course, he also talked with passion and in great detail about his vision for TIAA-CREF, the progress made, and problems faced in executing that progress.

From that interview, I got all of the information I needed to write a profile that, thankfully, I can still read without embarrassment. But, more important, I walked away from that meeting with new insight into the heart and mind of a great leader. Two of the more lasting lessons I took from Wharton's example that day were to value every encounter and to discount no one. As he has noted himself, "Doing wonderful things for the bottom line is fine, but without a sense of genuine compassion, leaders will fall short of greatness. Great leaders do not lose their humaneness nor forget what it was like when they started at the bottom." For obvious reasons, Clifton Wharton was one of the first people I interviewed for this book.

I also learned that day that a genuine thirst for information and an innate ability to connect with people are two of a journalist's most valuable tools. The know-it-alls among us sometimes forget—or refuse—to ask the most basic questions, and it's those questions that sometimes yield the most telling responses.

As an editor at *Black Enterprise* for several years now, it has been my responsibility and great privilege to interview scores of entrepreneurs, professionals, and corporate executives. Whether they were building their own companies or sculpting careers, whether they were little known strivers or prominent Wall Street tycoons, the common thread

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among them has been this: They long for mentorship from other African Americans. No matter where they were on the ladder of success, they bemoaned the fact that they were often isolated—within their industries or their firm, or their department, or even socially.

Generally, high achievers keep a tight lid on their feelings of loneliness and frustration. After all, one of the most fundamental tenets of success is that you focus on the pros, not the cons; the solutions, not the problems; what you can control, not what you can't. And you certainly don't uncap your well-masked inner conflicts in the presence of a reporter. But, as I have conducted one-on-one interviews over the years, that lid has typically blown off, resulting in a degree of candor that often surprised my subjects and me.

As much as I'd like to think people have opened up to me because of some skillful ingenuity of mine, I know that, in part, they were just happy to be talking to a black reporter from a black publication about their experiences in a way that only another black person can fully appreciate.

It was also important for them to be able to tell members of their own community (in the form of *Black Enterprise* readers) what it's really like to strive for success in an environment that neither encourages, supports, nor even respects those ambitions in the same ways it does for whites.

Wherever you are now in your life and career, I'm sure you know the feeling. This book was designed to help fill that void. The 27 women and men who fill these pages may not be able to mentor you personally, but in this book they offer you the next best thing.

The context of our experiences is at times as significant as the experiences themselves. These subjects don't just spout the seven secrets of successful people, they know what it is to put all those time-tested principles into play and still get mistaken for a messenger or mail clerk. Like you, they have armed themselves with everything we're taught is needed to become successful and happy—a great education, a positive outlook, and a commitment to excellence—and yet, on a daily basis, they still operate within a culture that undercuts their potential, their performance, and, at times, their very right to the American Dream.

What they focus on here, though, is not that common framework of our lives but how they have learned to function and prevail within it, which is not to say that they swagger through each chapter full of vain-

glory and self-congratulation. Quite the contrary. Our greatest lessons most often stem from our darker times. So, in excavating those lessons, these women and men—all best known for their triumphs in life—frequently recall their brushes with defeat, self-doubt, and personal tragedy. In so doing, they become more than role models; they become *real* models.

One by one, they tell you precisely what they had to go through to reach their goals, how they made it, and what they learned along the way. For example, how did poor Texas sharecroppers imbue their twelfth child with what it takes to become the first black president of one of the nation's most elite colleges? Smith College president Ruth Simmons tells you how.

Why would one of the few African Americans to ever be made partner at one of Wall Street's premiere investment banks opt to leave and start his own small firm? Provender Capital Management founder Fred Terrell tells you why.

Is there one (hard-driving, anal-retentive) personality type that holds the key to high-level corporate success? Absolutely not, says Time Warner's Dick Parsons, who lauds the attributes of his own Type-B personality in his chapter.

How does it feel to ride a 30-year wave of corporate stardom, then find yourself unemployed? Girls, Inc. CEO Joyce Roche and Avis Group CEO A. Barry Rand lay it all out.

Too often, we view people with great titles or status or wealth as somehow different from us. We assume they were born to their dazzling fates or we believe they were plucked from the crowd by some omnipotent benefactor—that they were, in effect, handed their success or merely destined for it, whether deserved or not. The people featured in this book prove all that untrue.

Each of them has taken chances, made tough choices, hit rough spots—even fallen and failed—only to rise again having learned from the experience. Those lessons, clearly articulated in each chapter, are as distinctive and highly personalized as the individuals conveying them. But there was one message that each expressed: "It's an old Christian value: Know thyself." So said Sy Green, the first African American managing director at the insurance giant Chubb & Sons, and so said all who share their lives' experiences in these pages.

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The single most critical key to success, based on their collective view, is that *you must know who you are*, stand firm in that, and be comfortable with it. Then, when the tides turn (as they inevitably will) at work or in your personal life, you will float. You may be tossed around a bit, and get bruised and confused in the process, but that most fundamental crumb of knowledge about your values and motivations, about what you want and what you won't accept, about your very essence and capabilities, will enable you to right your course.

Ultimately, that's what this book is about: helping you to right your course; stay on course; get on course; find your course.

David Crocker, a former executive who rose from the depths of IBM's massive 1980s downsizing to become a terrific motivational speaker, is fond of responding to the old saying, "Experience is the best teacher," with the notion that there is in fact one better: *Other people's* experience. This book offers you the invaluable benefit of exactly that.

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CHAPTER ONE

Kenneth Chenault

CEO, American Express Co.



Perched high atop one of the World Financial Center's gleaming twin towers, Ken Chenault's spacious office has a panoramic view of Manhattan that is framed on one side by the majestic Hudson River and punctuated with the Statue of Liberty. It is, in a word, breathtaking. So much so that it's hard to imagine staying focused on the enormous task of running a \$20 billion business in such a room.

But Chenault is no daydreamer. In his 20 years with American Express, the New York native has made a name for himself as a clear-headed strategist with a special knack for steering through the chaos of corporate transition. Now, in one of the most highly anticipated successions in corporate history, Chenault, 49, has become Chief Executive Officer of this respected global empire.

With a record of high achievement and leadership that dates back to high school, Chenault seemed destined for greatness. But even this proven strategic planner wouldn't have predicted it on this plane. As a Bowdoin College student, Chenault set his sights on a career in social service, although his peers envisioned him in politics. "There weren't many African Americans in business for me to be exposed to," says Chenault, who also graduated from Harvard Law school, "so business just wasn't in the frame." Chenault is married and has two sons.

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There's an African parable that I often include in the speeches I give because I think it starkly illustrates the challenges we face. It goes like this: *Every morning in Africa, a gazelle wakes up. It knows it must run faster than the fastest cheetah, or it will be killed. Every morning in Africa, a cheetah wakes up. It knows it must outrun the slowest gazelle, or it will starve to death. It does not matter whether you are a cheetah, or a gazelle. When the sun comes up, you'd better be running!*

To western minds, this epitomizes type-A behavior. It's a shortcut to a coronary; the paranoid vision of a dog-eat-dog world, where only the top dog survives. But if you have seen the plains of Africa—even if only in your heart—it conveys a different, more subtle meaning.

At any given moment, running fastest may be essential to existence because behind you may be a hungry predator. This is the reality of life. But running fastest is also the ultimate expression of freedom. It can be a celebration of the essence of life. So, what I take from that parable is that at any moment, no matter who you are, you must be prepared to give your best.

Growing up, there was a strong expectation in our house to do your best, and there was a great emphasis on manners and integrity. My mother was very realistic and practical. She always said, "It's a tough world we live in. You need to face reality. But, at the end of the day, you need to overcome it."

My father always stressed focusing on the things you can control. He said, "Your own performance you can control; no one can take that away from you." That's one reason my father chose to be a dentist. He really valued independence and determining his own fate. He told me, "You need to determine what constitutes success for yourself and not determine it based on what other people think." His advice has served me well.

How do you achieve success? How do you "run fastest?" Through my career, I have distilled some principles that have guided me.

First: Personal integrity. My earliest lesson about this is still clearly etched in my memory. I think I was in seventh grade. I was taking the advanced math course they had for kids in our district, and there was a summer basketball tryout at the exact same time. I think my father knew what I would be tempted to do, and he said to me beforehand, "Sometimes you need to make trade-offs. . . ." That's all he said. I decided to trade off the math class and go to the basketball tryouts.

It was a situation in which if you did well at the first tryout, you went to the second stage, then the third, and so, I had missed the math class for about three days. Then one afternoon—you know how you sort of *feel* somebody's presence?—I was in a game, doing very well, and then I just felt it. I looked up and saw him watching me from the stands. Ordinarily, he would have called out, "What is the deal?" and pulled me out of the game. He did not do that.

He waited until the game was over, then he called me over and said, "You played very well, but you've really disappointed me. One reason is that you intentionally went against what I said. More importantly, you made a trade-off that made sense in the short term, not the long term. What you don't even see is that, ultimately, you could have done both."

He went on to say that it was all about character, and that I really needed to think about the fact that I was able to operate like that for three days. And there was, of course, punishment. I was grounded for two weeks or more. But he was so disappointed, and that really hit me very hard.

Personal integrity is a very big thing with me. Don't sell yourself to the highest bidder. If you don't believe in the product or ideals of a company or organization, don't accept the job. Dedicate yourself to a core set of values. Without them, you will never be able to find personal fulfillment, and you will never be able to lead effectively.

Second, always try to associate with the best and brightest people. Don't allow yourself to be intimidated by someone's reputation for being hard and tough. A professor or boss who demands excellence from you will generally be a fair person. Believe in yourself, and never be afraid to challenge yourself. In other words, stay away from stupid people.

Third, don't overestimate the importance of networking. Whether in school or in business, your main focus always needs to be on completing the job at hand. Having a good set of friends in the classroom will not help when the bluebooks are passed out. If you're already in your career, don't expect a network of strangers or acquaintances to lay the path to your success.

Execution—performance—is the bottom line measure for everything we attempt to do. To be successful, our EQ, or execution quotient, must equal our IQ. This is something I stress to American Express employees around the world. Network off of your performance.

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Fourth, although security is nice, don't shy away from organizations in chaos. In business, the greatest opportunities often lie in companies experiencing rapid growth and in those companies forced to reinvent themselves because they are in bad shape.

For African Americans, I think this is especially important, because a company undergoing crucial change is more willing to promote on merit than to hold back to serve old prejudices. American Express is a company that has absolutely thrived on rapid—even aggressive—change. Does it make things more difficult? Yes, at times. But it can also make the environment, and your role in it, far more stimulating.

Fifth, recognize that being one of the only blacks—whether in a classroom, in a department, on a workteam, in an organization, or just in a meeting—automatically makes you very visible. Use this to help yourself. Look at it as an opportunity, and leverage that opportunity by making a visible contribution.

My first job at Amex, in strategic planning, offered me an opportunity to attend meetings with senior management. Many folks would have dropped everything for a chance to meet with the CEO, but often, I passed up the opportunity. I decided to attend only meetings where I was reasonably confident that I could make a contribution. I knew that, as a very visible employee, having the boss see me meant nothing. Having him see me solve his problems meant everything.

Sixth, remain open to life's possibilities. I was actually fine when I was practicing law and, if you had asked me at the time if I was going to continue practicing law, I probably would have said yes. Then, I had some interviews with this consulting firm, Bain & Co., and I started to feel a level of excitement that, even at the time, I didn't realize was missing from the legal experience.

Just two and a half years later, when a search firm called me and asked if I'd be interested in coming to American Express, I said I didn't think I had a strong interest in working for a large company. I thought, if anything, I was going to go into venture capital because I liked the analysis and deal-making aspects of it. But after meeting with [former CEO] Lou Gerstner, who also came from a consulting background, I was enticed by his emphasis on change and accountability.

Seventh: In my late 20s, I started to do something that made a major difference for me. It's something I learned from my mother: Active lis-

tening, to be really open about different perspectives and to always go through the pros and cons. Whenever I think about an issue, I always argue the opposite side of it. So, when I ultimately decide on a course of action, I've already been through all the conceivable scenarios, and I'm going to go for it.

Eighth, wherever you are, whatever challenges or opportunities you face, *know who you are*. Approach your career and conduct your business in a way that makes it clear that you do. This seems like a simple concept. But I've seen many people too often lose sight of it, and suffer as a result.

For me, nowhere was that better illustrated than at Harvard Law School. My experiences there taught me how to deal in an environment where my initial view was that everyone was an incredible superstar. It was one of the very first things that struck me. It was not a fear of whether I belonged, but more, where do I stand with this group?

What I see as the danger in any high-powered school—or highly competitive situation—is that you can very quickly be made to feel that you are inadequate. That can happen in the classroom; it can happen socially. It can happen repeatedly as you advance in a career.

At Harvard, there were so many people who professed that they knew exactly what they were going to do. If you go into a situation and you don't have that singular focus, it sets you off balance. At the end of the day, very few people essentially have that, but those who do can really start to dominate the environment. I saw too many people who allowed themselves to be distracted by the attitudes and reactions of the people around them.

And so, what I got from Harvard that has been very, very helpful throughout my career is the importance of having a strong sense of self. Without it, not only can you not lead, you risk being consumed by all sorts of elements that don't reflect what you're about. If you lose that, you will not be able to radiate the self-confidence that rallies people to a winning message. You will not have the inner strength to carry your ideas forward, no matter what your place in the corporate hierarchy.

Part of being a leader is pulling people from disparate backgrounds together. If you're not clear about who you are and what you represent, you will not have the ability to do that.

You have to maintain your sense of balance and perspective. I look at

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other people who have been in prominent positions. From what I've seen, some of the hardest challenges they face are how to maintain balance; how to keep to certain values; and how to prevent what is happening in their careers from engulfing them.

More and more over the last five to eight years, I've tried to make sure I keep in balance what my beliefs and values are. I do this in a variety of ways. One is to try to stay close to my roots, which are defined as family and some of the friends I knew back when. Human nature is human nature, and once you're very successful, even those people will treat you differently, but they will still speak some of the truth to you. And they will generally give you their perspective—not necessarily on what you're dealing with professionally—but on life in general.

Also, I try to seek out nonbusiness experiences and people who are outside the business realm, to get a different perspective. And, especially over the last year, I frankly just try to fight for some time when I can step back and think a little bit.

People can compartmentalize, and everyone does that, but there is an uncertainty about what's going to happen in your personal relationships and in your family that is both thrilling and scary. It doesn't matter how successful you've been or how much money you've made, there are things that can happen, such as illness and death. I think recognizing how precious the family experience is, and that it can be taken away at any time, helps to keep me grounded.

Finally, we, more than others, must give back to help our community and to ease the way of those who will follow. I believe very strongly in the power of an individual to bring about change, but then I also believe in the influence of events. Sometimes you get the right timing, and match the individual with the event, and amazing things result.

It doesn't take much to make a great change in a community. You can do it by reading to a child. You can do it by volunteering at a soup kitchen. You can do it by visiting an older shut-in. You can do it by cleaning up a neighborhood. You can do it by mentoring, getting involved, setting an example, having a positive impact on a child's life.

As a teenager, some things just came naturally to me, like the ability to motivate people, to get them moving in a certain direction. But what really fed my self-esteem was that teachers, friends of my parents, and even kids I grew up with, kept sort of reinforcing the idea that I

had a lot of potential and that by staying focused, I was going to be able to do a lot.

Too many children have no direction. No one tells them why it's important that they do their homework, or takes them to a ball game or to a museum; no one says to them, "I love you." No one says to them, as people said to me, "I know you will do your best. You're going to be able to do a lot."

It is easy for successful people to become self-absorbed. To some, life is about spending money, acquiring things, restricting their social circle, celebrating themselves. Their only effect on others is envy and cynicism. If our best become self-absorbed, if our most successful look out only for themselves, then the difficult lessons of the old millennium will haunt us forever.

I've always been really fascinated by history. I can vividly remember, when I was five years old, my parents used to get these *Life* magazine Books of the Year, and I would look through them and really try to imagine what it was like to deal with those situations. That's how I learned to read.

To this day, history just fascinates me, especially in the form of biographies. We can learn a great deal from those who went before us, who broke down barriers so that we could step forward.

Frederick Douglass said that the destiny of the black in America is the destiny of America. At long last, America is beginning to show signs of recognizing that. As barriers against us fall, we must not fail to move forward.

I happily extend my hand to the young people who will follow me and outachieve my efforts. I really do believe that the future is theirs for the taking.