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# I Was Impossible, but Then I Saw How to Lead

By ADAM BRYANT

*This interview with **Ruth J. Simmons**, president of Brown University for the last 11 years, was conducted and condensed by **Adam Bryant**. Dr. Simmons is stepping down at the end of this academic year and will continue as a professor of comparative literature and Africana studies.*

**Q.** *Do you remember the first time you were somebody's boss?*

**A.** Probably the first time I was a boss was when I was associate dean of the graduate school at the University of Southern California. I was in my early 30s.

**Q.** *Was that an easy transition?*

**A.** It was. If I had to ask myself why, I would say it's because I'd probably been building to the point where I was capable of doing those things without actually knowing that I could. And if you ask me how far back that went — this assemblage of skills and experience — I'd probably say that it went back to my childhood.

**Q.** *How so?*

**A.** I realized that I was an inveterate organizer from the earliest age. I'm the youngest of 12 children. And although I was the youngest, I tried to organize things in my family. When there were disputes, I tried to mediate. And I intervened in school as well to tell teachers what they were doing wrong, or at least to tell them what I didn't like about what they were doing. I intervened sometimes in classes to take a leadership role. By the time I got to college, I was impossible.

**Q.** *Why impossible?*

**A.** I was impossible. I thought that it was very important to take a principled stance about various things, and some of them had meaning, and some of them probably didn't mean very much.

I think somehow this sense of myself came from my mother, who instilled in us very strong values about who we were. And this was quite essential at the time I grew up, because in that environment, in the Jim Crow South, everybody told you that you were worth nothing. Everybody told you that you would never be anything. Everybody told you that you couldn't go here, you couldn't go there. She would just constantly talk to us: Never think of yourself as being better than anybody else. Always think for yourself. Don't follow the crowd. So we grew up with a sense of being independent in our thinking.

**Q.** *And what about your siblings? What did they think of their confident youngest sister?*

**A.** They didn't like it very much. They thought I was not normal, because I was very different from everybody else in my family. My oldest sister went to my mother one day and said that she thought there was something wrong with me, and that something needed to be done.

**Q.** *But at some point, particularly when you became a manager, you realized you couldn't be so impossible.*

**A.** It was living, frankly. And the experience of understanding that the ways in which I was trying to solve problems and to interact with people were getting in the way of achieving what I want. And that's what did it for me. Ultimately, I came to understand that I could achieve far more if I worked amiably with people, if I supported others' goals, if I didn't try to embarrass people by pointing out their deficiencies in a very public way. So I think it was really experience that did it more than anything else.

**Q.** *When the college promoted you into a management role, was it something you wanted?*

**A.** I was stunned, and a little skeptical. In my early career, I learned to be very leery of people asking me to perform in these higher-level positions.

**Q.** *Because?*

**A.** Because this is coming out of the civil rights movement. The idea of taking somebody off their path to do something that is useful to you, as opposed to thinking long term about what they might contribute to the profession, was something I thought was a bit odd. When

I was a Ph.D. student at Harvard, I was asked to drop out of my Ph.D. program and become a full-time staff member at Radcliffe. I was, first of all, the only black student in my Ph.D. program, and they wanted me to drop the program in order to become an administrator. So I just thought that was very odd, and I always remember that. I was skeptical of letting others create that path for me.

In the end, however, because there were so few African-American faculty at the time, I realized that I would see very few minorities in my classes. And that the only way I could influence what was happening with regard to minorities was to take a central position. And that's why I ultimately did it. It never occurred to me that this would be a path that I would stay on or that I would accomplish anything at a significant level.

**Q.** *What do you consider some of your most important leadership lessons?*

**A.** I had some bad experiences, and I don't think we can say enough in leadership about what bad experiences contribute to our learning.

**Q.** *Can you elaborate?*

**A.** I worked for someone who did not support me. And it was a very painful experience, and in many ways a defining experience for me. So having a bad supervisor really probably started me thinking about what I would want to be as a supervisor. That led me to think about the psychology of the people I worked with. And, in some ways, because I had exhibited behavior that was not the most positive in the workplace myself, it gave me a mirror to what I might do that might be similarly undermining of others. So I think at that juncture that's really when I started being much more successful.

**Q.** *Can you talk more about the leadership lessons you took away from that experience?*

**A.** It's not all about you. It's very important in a leadership role not to place your ego at the foreground and not to judge everything in relationship to how your ego is fed. And that seems to be all-important if you're going to lead well. The other thing is just how unpleasant it is to work in an environment where you're demeaned or disrespected.

**Q.** *That bad experience you had with a manager clearly was pretty formative for you.*

**A.** I talk about this all the time with students. What I impart to them is that they should never assume that they can predict what experiences will teach them the most about what they value, or about what their life should be. And I would never have guessed that that

experience would be so defining for me. After all, if I look at it in the arc of my career, it was a tiny job, and in a place that hasn't really been that significant frankly to me. And yet that experience taught me so much that I carried it with me for all those years. So my lesson to my students is you have to be open and alert at every turn to the possibility that you're about to learn the most important lesson of your life.

**Q.** *What other key experiences did you have?*

**A.** Probably the most important experience I had in that regard was working at Princeton in the dean of the faculty office for a man named [Aaron Lemonick](#). He was an unlikely sort of mentor for me. He was Jewish and from Philadelphia. I was a Baptist from the South. But we had an immediate connection for a very important reason, and that is that he said what he thought, and I said what I thought. And the first time that we met and we spoke, we both understood that we'd found something valuable.

He was very focused on details, and it was the first time in my career that I had worked with someone who was so focused on every minor thing, or everything that I thought at the time was minor.

We couldn't have been more different, but he was very demanding of me, and he didn't patronize me. It was the first time probably in my entire career that I actually met somebody who did not patronize me as an African-American and a woman. The lesson of that, of course, is that as you're trying to help people, you can give very honest criticism, but if you do it in the context of genuinely wanting to help them, it makes all the difference in the world.

**Q.** *What were some of the messages you conveyed to your executive team when you took over?*

**A.** Initially, you have to say something about how you approach your work. I try to do it by speaking to principles rather than trying to give people a lot of detail about management style and so forth. I have always thought in leadership that it's much easier to convey to people what they should do in different situations if you convey the underlying principles.

I thought it was absolutely essential for all of us as a team to understand that we were there not for our own individual glorification, but to help everybody else thrive. And that meant working together well. I emphasized that more than anything, and I stressed that I would not have any tolerance at all for people who did not, in fact, strive hard to be a part of that team. It meant being interested in others' work. Being willing to facilitate their success.

Being willing to generate ideas as well as generate criticism of what they were doing. I wanted to establish an environment in which people were comfortable offering criticism, because others understood that underlying that criticism was a fundamental support for who they were, and what they were trying to do.

**Q.** *What about hiring? What questions do you ask?*

**A.** I like open-ended questions that give people an opportunity to go in the direction they want to go, because you learn a good deal more when you do that. You learn what's important to people. So if I say to you, "Tell me about your experience growing up," you get to choose anything you want to talk about.

If you reach down and talk about something that is deeply meaningful to you and not intended to impress me as a future employer, that's what I care about. That helps me see what your character is, what you're made of, how you were formed as a human being. You're trying to get at whether they will be a good member of the team. You're trying to get at whether they will care about people. You're trying to get at whether they will have very high standards for their job, or whether they will just be trying to please people.

I look for people who are supremely self-confident, very secure, but also profoundly interested in other people. And I look for signs of that. How curious are they about other people, and about new things outside their own area of specialization? If I'm hiring for a central role in the administration and I'm interviewing a physicist, I want to know whether the physicist reads poetry. Or perhaps they are interested in opera. I think something outside of their immediate sphere of interest would be very important for me to know.

I keep going back to this fundamental idea of being able to respect other people, especially if you're in a senior position. You can get a lot more done if people have a sense that you respect them, and that you listen to them. You would be surprised at the number of interviews I've done where the person never stops talking. If I'm interviewing someone and if they never stop talking, I will never hire them, no matter how qualified they are. If you cannot listen, you can't be the site of welcoming, nurturing, facilitating new ideas, innovation, creativity, because it really is ultimately only about you. So I look for people who listen well and can respect the ideas of others.

I look for people who are strong enough to be critical of things that are not very good. And more than being critical of things that are not very good, they have to have the capacity to tell people that. Because many people are critical, but they can't sit in a room and look

someone in the eye and say, “This idea is not very good.” In senior positions, you have to be able to do that.

I look for signs that they are ambitious. There’s nothing worse than a leader who lacks ambition. And if they don’t have some ambition to do more than what they’re doing, to go far beyond where they are, then that’s probably not a good sign when you’re hiring somebody if your organization is seeking to be better than what it is. And which organization is not seeking to do that?

**Q.** *When you talk about ambition, do you mean ambition for themselves?*

**A.** Not necessarily, because if somebody said, “I love what I do,” and I could see them doing this for the rest of their life, there’s nothing wrong with that. But I want them to be ambitious about something — ambitious for programs, ambitious to do things that are worthwhile and that will add to what we’re doing. I think that’s immensely important in leadership.