

COFFEE WITH KEITH

by Nan Holley

LEAD360 Magazine is honored to sit down with Mr. Keith Wyche for a cup of virtual coffee with a side of reality. We named this article based on Keith's habit of making his executive presence available to all levels of his staff. Here, Mr. Wyche takes the time to share his thoughts on leadership and organizations. He communicates his vision for both to every individual in a clear and consistent fashion. We expected nothing less from our interview with Keith. And, of course, he delivered.

No-nonsense executive, renowned author, and sought-after lecturer—thought leader Keith Wyche's career path stands proudly as evidence of his skillful application of garnered knowledge and insight. With more than 30 years of experience in the corporate arena at companies such as Cub Foods, AT&T, IBM, and Pitney Bowes, Keith has successfully broken the code into the c-suite. He honors Lead360 by sharing some valuable thoughts for our next generation of leaders as he provides some unspoken rules and realities that all minority leaders need to know to take their career to the next level.

Specifically, we explore with Keith this timely question:

Undervalued, underestimated, and marginalized — how can future Black leaders attain and retain their position in the c-suite? The National Leadership Consortium appreciatively takes this opportunity to sit down to coffee with Keith.



LEAD360: What events occurred between the time you wrote *Good is Not Enough* and *Corner Office Rules*?

Keith Wyche: What made me write *Corner Office Rules* came from a different motivation. *Good is Not Enough* was really written for that entry-level, new[ly]-enrolled executive, maybe five to six years in corporate America. What I found later was when I saw folks trying to move from middle management to senior management, our numbers were falling off. So much of it was because we, meaning African American executives, weren't really understanding how the rules change the higher you [get] in an organization. *Good is Not Enough* could probably take you from a new job to mid-manager, but if you really want to crack senior VP and those higher roles, [you] really need to understand that the rules change at that level. I've seen too many of us failing because we didn't grasp the new realities.

Has the climate changed to allow minorities to move into the higher-level roles?

The rules have changed a bit. The goalpost has moved. Too often we are still undervalued, underestimated, and marginalized relative to our contribution, so the struggle continues. If you look at the realities now, it's even more so. There are probably fewer African American CEOs than there were in 2008 when I wrote the book, so the struggle continues. Over those years, I've done some consulting [for] and I've worked with corporations who were well-intentioned, wanting to value and grow diversity and inclusion.

I was a little disappointed to find that some didn't have the appetite for what they really needed to do. It was more of a lip service. At the end of the day, we need to carry forth and go on. Those who are in positions of influence, power, and persuasion need to leverage that.

How does one leverage that voice? What are some best practices that you've learned over the years, being in some of those roles of influence, power, and persuasion?

I'll go back to a time when I served on a board and we were looking for some key roles to fill. I raised the question, "Do we have a diverse slate of candidates?" And it was like, "What do you mean?" And I said, "Everyone on this slate is someone that everyone in this room recommended, and so if we only go on who we know, it's a finite pool. Let's make sure we look at a diverse slate of candidates. We are going to hire the best person, but if we look at a diverse slate of candidates, we are opening up that pool from which we are fishing." It was eye opening. So, to this day, I still look and push that. Let's make sure that when we are looking at promotions and jobs we are looking at everybody and we present a diverse slate.

I'm involved in the succession planning process at my current company. What do you see as the wins and the drawbacks for succession planning?

I'm a big proponent of succession planning. There are a few challenges to it. Number one: There is no one in the room representing you or wearing your t-shirt. It's just a process that you are not a part of in that room. I've done one [suc-

cession] recently where I said, "Hey, let's look at the slate of candidates that we said were high potentials. Does anything look strange about that slate?" You have to have the courage when you get in that seat. Too often we get invited to the seat, and to me, when you get there, you've got to say something — don't just be happy to be in the seat, which happens too often. You raise the question, and you do it respectfully and out of a sense of transparency. You can say, "Hey, that slate looks interesting, but when you look at the low performers, what do you notice about that?" Don't be afraid to have that voice.

What do you see as the biggest challenge to African Americans in senior leadership?

We are still undervalued, underestimated, and marginalized. It goes from our former president down. To me, that was very eye opening. You have the most powerful man in the free world, [in] this day, being in that [same] situation. We will always have the "black tax" [of] having to do twice as much. It's hard for me because we are in a season, in my mind, where diversity and inclusion are no longer en vogue or are being looked at differently — where other cultures can check that box, and if we are not careful, we get left out of that box.

What are some of the most relevant competencies that senior leaders should have but don't?

First, a compassion for people. I, for instance, have 30,000 people reporting to me in my current role. I can't get anything done without compassion around people — not only for who they are but for their development and growth. That to

me is number one. Secondly, you have to be someone who can develop a vision and create follow-ership. It's one thing to have the title, and it's another to be in the role effectively. Whatever the initiative is, I try to get people rallied around it at the seat where they sit in that vision. It's about connecting the dots. The guy bagging groceries in my grocery store sees where he connects to the overall vision of where we are trying to go. That's something a lot of leaders don't do.

If you had to add one more "corner office rule" to fit into today's political environment, what would it be?

It would be in knowing that everyone wearing the same jersey isn't on the same team. In tight economic times or in times of uncertainty in organizations, some people tend to go into their silos and go into a "what's best for me" mode as opposed to [considering] what's good for the organization. Not that I want people paranoid while walking around, but you have to be aware that there are times where everyone that has on the same jersey ain't on the same team.

What can we do to combat that?

You need to make sure that you are someone that is always adding value and delivering [it] both for the overall good of the team and for the overall organization. Companies are still looking for those who are adding value. The better you are at doing that and articulating and defining what that value is, they will always find a spot for you on the team.

It's been some time since you wrote *Good is Not Enough* and

***Corner Office Rules*. What epiphanies would you change or add since you wrote those books?**

This thought came after I wrote those two books: Generally, we view diversity and inclusion from a company perspective, as like the "secret sauce." D & I initiatives are great, but they don't go far enough. D & I mean nothing without EO. Diversity says I get invited to the party; inclusion says I get a seat at the table. But unless there is EO — equal opportunity for promotion and equal opportunity for advancement — then I come to the party hungry, and I leave hungry. If I don't get that equal opportunity, then I am still left wanting. That's where I've seen a lot of D & I efforts stop—whereby they say, you're in the room, you've got a seat at the table, you should be happy. If you don't have D & I plus EO, then one might get a hotdog on his plate and another person, filet mignon.

How do aspiring Black leaders grasp the big picture when they are stuck in a D & I culture and don't have the opportunity for the big-picture vantage point?

A lot of that is on us. There is a lot of information out there to be retrieved from cyberspace on company websites. If no one is feeding you, you can feed yourself. You've got to be continuous learners and have intellectual curiosity. [I] may work in one phase of the company, [but] I owe it to myself, particularly if I am looking at the big picture in terms of my career [and] my growth, to say, "Although I am in marketing or finance, I have to seek info on what is happening in the industry and what is happening in the company." Those are some of the big-picture things that you have to keep in mind. For example,

there was an article just today in *USA Today* that was talking about how the grocery store industry is changing. If I'm someone who is working strictly in grocery retail, I've got to read those tea leaves. I've got to see that brick-and-mortar stores aren't necessarily where this industry is growing. There's online this and online that, so it may change where I work in my company. The point is, you can't look at your world through your small lens. This is extremely important when you are looking at a new role. The worst thing you can do is get a great job at a horrible company. Examples [are] present-day Sears, and several years ago, Blockbuster Video, who no one thought was going anywhere. You have to have a bigger picture about what is going on in the world. Expand your lens.

Fill in the blank: "If you are _____, then you will end up _____." What advice do you have for those aspiring to senior leadership?

If you are not true to yourself and your purpose, then you will end up serving as someone else's puppet.

Please explain.

We are all put here for a purpose. For me, life became fulfilling once I found out what that [purpose] was. You have to stay true to who you are and your core beliefs and your purpose in life. That [truth] may cause you to say no to certain things and certain opportunities, and yes to others. But don't disregard your purpose and your passion for a paycheck or a title. Don't lose who you are in your purpose because, at the end of the day, the job won't love you back. It's a tool and can be part of your purpose. I've seen so many people — par-

ticularly in my generation — who are the worst, with the big house and material things. That is not what it is really about. It's about helping that next generation. It's about helping others. The measure of true success is helping other people become successful.

What two things — one internal and one external — need to take place for African Americans to begin to win by 2020?

Internal: We've got to have a stronger commitment to education across the whole socioeconomic sphere. We as a culture have gotten away from that. My parents may not have given me everything, but they said, "Get that education, and once you get it, they can't take it away from you." We have morphed into a consciousness that education doesn't necessarily hold the value that it used to in our community. I see it when I talk to teachers, principals, and the like. Our community is more concerned with why you took their child's cell phone rather than having a discussion about missing homework.

We've got to commit ourselves to education and continuous learning. We've got to recommit and refocus on financial literacy and financial stewardship. We've got to stop being the world's biggest consumers and become better stewards of our money — be more concerned about what's in our heads and less concerned about what's on our feet.

We've got to look at entrepreneurship as [a] means to uplift our people. As long as we are only looking for a job, very few of us will get wealth from the job. Entrepreneurship is not for everyone, but for those that it is for, it needs to be embraced.

External: Companies and organizations need to be truly committed

to diversity, inclusion, and equal opportunity, and we have to have an honest dialogue about micro-inequities that are really out there. In this world, to be successful, you've got to manage your performance, your exposure, and your perception since we know [there are] people who have preconceived ideas of who you are based on your name or your background. We need to have that honest conversation, and I know this country has never had an honest conversation about these types of things. Until we do, we are always going to have what we have.

Why do you think that is?

On one hand, no one wants to acknowledge guilt on either side, so for me to have that conversation there should be some acknowledgment of culpability on both sides. Al Sharpton [said], "If I come off this stage and kick your chair and you fall down, that's on me. If I come back a week later and you are still lying there, that's on you." [And in] etiquette, the way you show up at a job interview and the way you show up at a club should be two different looks. If I cannot distinguish between the two, then there is a problem.

Do you have any other thoughts that we didn't discuss today that you feel are significant for the next generation?

They are the brightest generation in history, and they were raised with technology at their fingertips. My only fear — somewhere I feel that I may have failed — is that we were so eager to give them the opportunities and the stuff that maybe we forgot to give them the struggle. A lesson to other parents is that we can provide the stuff, but don't forget the struggle.

ABOUT KEITH

Keith Wyche has a new career advice book, *Swag is Not Enough*, co-written with daughter Alana Wyche.

MEET LEAD360's BRAND STRATEGIST



Nick F. Nelson is helping NLC WIN ANYWAY. Nick is an award-winning brand strategist, creative executive, and CEO of BRANDPRENUER, the Southeast's premiere brand strategy, development and digital storytelling firm. BRANDPRENUER specializes in helping people, products, and organizations GET NOTICED by those who matter most to their brand through digital content, social media, events, publicity and influencer relations. Nelson is an innovative force in brand marketing and throughout his decade-long career has produced targeted marketing and communications strategies for leading consumer products, and entertainment brands, most notable include Disney, General Mills, HBO, NBC, STARZ, Warner Bros. Pictures, and Walmart.