



Michael Mathieu



### Leading in the B-Suite

Powerful conversations about life, race and leadership

## "I Have An Opportunity To Effect Change In Every Conversation I Have"

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*Michael Mathieu, CEO of **Prox**, an online platform that connects experts with audiences, shared powerful stories and lessons with me and **Rhonda Morris**, the chief human resources officer of Chevron, for our interview series with prominent Black leaders. Subscribe [here](#) for future Leading in the B-Suite interviews.*

### **Morris: Who were the biggest influences early in your life?**

Mathieu: Certainly my parents. My dad is a Haitian immigrant. We lived in Canada, where I was born, before we came to the United States. He's a doctor, and my mom went to school here, as well. They just persevered. Think about the challenges they would have faced here 40 to 50 years ago.

He always taught me that if you have the opportunity to show people who you are, you'll have success. Don't focus on the negatives or the excuses. Focus on how can you effect change in a positive way, and that's always been his mantra. I have an opportunity to effect change in every conversation I have, whether it's with employees, clients, or investors. I try to change their perception, and to learn from everyone I talk to.

### **Bryant: How do you do that?**

Mathieu: My goal is to be connected and show that vulnerability. I want people to know who

I am, and I want to be connected to that person in a conversation, and I want them to know that I heard them and cared.

Too many people celebrate multitasking. I think it's a terrible thing. You can always tell when somebody's reading their email when they're talking to you on the phone. But what's life about if you celebrate multi-tasking? I try to do the opposite and have a real conversation where you exchange ideas, respect the other person, and learn from each other.

**Morris: What was the most important big break in your career?**

Mathieu: The big break is always tied to somebody taking a chance on you, including venture capitalists who gave me a shot to be a CEO. I always believed in myself. I'm a New Yorker, so I'm gritty, I'm persistent, and I don't take no for an answer, unless you tell me no 20 times.

My career's always been shaped by a belief that you can do what you believe you can do, rather than worrying if you're qualified. I know I will be successful. I'm also super-focused on learning and reading. If I want to get smart about something, I'm going to get smart pretty quick, and I'm going to seek out the people who can help me get smart.

My success has always been tied to being a coach. There are some teams that do unbelievably well, regardless of the particular players on the field. It's about getting people to achieve beyond what they normally would do. It's always been my calling card — how do you create a place where you can get the best out of people? Part of that comes from people knowing that I would take a bullet for them. That means a lot to people.

**Bryant: How do you stay positive in the face of what I am sure are some challenging headwinds as a Black man in America today?**

Mathieu: There are days when it is not easy, no question. And you have to do more. But that's what leadership is. You need to persevere. All you can do is be present. If you dwell on the challenges, it is daunting. But if you focus on waking up every day thinking, hey, it's going to be a great day, I'm going to have positive interactions, let me be present in that moment, then it's not daunting.

*If you dwell on the challenges, it is daunting.*

But that doesn't mean you're not going to feel that weight, because you do. There are days where this is hard. Then you go back to what's important and you reset. One of the co-founders of my earlier startup, YuMe, has a great line. He said, "Michael, on a given month in 30 days, I have four really good days, and 26 days where I'm getting my ass kicked."

That's the world we live in. If you have that attitude, you'll stay positive. You might not get to your destination, but you'll learn a ton on the way and you build resilience.

**Morris: What are the specific headwinds you've faced because of race and what tailwinds helped you navigate through them?**

Mathieu: Most of the venture capitalists in Silicon Valley are White men, and that's not changing. So you have to show that you're better than everybody else. I love meritocracies. I'm a performance-driven guy, and I will compete with anyone. If you give me the opportunity, I will perform.

The way I handle a headwind is to think about it as a challenge I need to overcome, and I will come up with a plan to overcome that challenge. Whenever I go into a pitch meeting, I want people to think that if they're associated with me, they will be more successful.

So if I can convince even one person that if they associate with people who look like me, they will be more successful, then that's a win. It's just about being able to take that headwind and turn it into a tailwind.

I raise money in Silicon Valley. The last ten years have been venture-backed startups, and knock on wood, I've had success. I'm always proud that I've never lost investor money, and my investors do make money, but the numbers are quite stark here. For the top 25 venture firms, out of 18,000 investments that they've made over the course of their lifetimes, 39 have been to Black entrepreneurs.

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which is not an easy thing.*

There's always this conversation about how everyone wants to do better. It's either they don't have the tools or they don't understand. You have to consciously change behavior, which is not an easy thing. And it's subtle. The problem is in networking. People decide that they're going to only invest in their friends from Stanford.

No Black entrepreneur wants any kind of special consideration. I'm as good as anybody who does this job. It's just about opportunity, a level playing field, and having access. We've got to work harder to get that access and to participate. The subtle things could be just as simple as the fact that they normally invest in people who have a certain background because that's what they're used to.

**Bryant: Can you talk more about how those dynamics play out in Silicon Valley?**

Mathieu: If you look at the entrepreneurs who VCs typically fund, they come from a background where they were able to start their business with the help of family who gave them the opportunity to not have to earn a living. They can be in that basement working because they don't have to pay rent. I didn't have that luxury, because I have to earn a living, as well.

If you look at a lot of the investments, many of them go to students who come out of feeder schools like Stanford, Harvard and a couple of other schools. That network is well-established. So if you're not part of that network, you certainly have to be more creative to set yourself apart. Who you know is critically important in what we do.

Once I get the meeting, I've always approached those conversations, especially with VCs,

by trying to ask the right question to understand that person's motivation and what success looks like for them. How can I really tie into what drives them? That's what I spend most of my time on.

But it's incredibly hard to just get started without any of that network. Once you do, you then have the opportunity, but it's still not easy. You walk into a room, and it's twelve 50-year-old White guys with maybe a couple of 30-year-old White guys, and that's it. You rarely see any women, and quite frankly, I've never pitched a venture firm that had a Black partner in the ten years I've been here.

We're starting to see participation, but it's slow going. People say they want to do more, but it just doesn't happen. You have conversations, and there's good intention, but there's a disconnect between good intention and creating actual programs to help. We want the proverbial level playing field, and I will compete. I may lose, but I want Black entrepreneurs to get an at-bat. That's what all of us want — an at-bat and an opportunity.

**Morris: Why are conversations about race so uncomfortable, and what suggestions do you have to make them more comfortable?**

Mathieu: The main reason is that no one believes they're biased. So by highlighting that someone should do more, it also highlights their shortcomings. Another is that it highlights a blind spot. It's subtle, and that's why it's so hard. Everyone wants to do the right thing, but nobody wants to be thought of as a racist.

I don't know what the right answer is other than more diversity in thinking. I went to City College in Harlem. I was an economics major, and in my classes there were people from all different backgrounds. It made the conversation and our work stronger.

I want the people in Silicon Valley to somehow experience that. We're going to effect change if they can experience what true diversity feels like. Somehow, we've got to figure out a way to make that happen.

*“If you walked into a conference room and there were twelve Black people, would you feel comfortable?”*

You've got to participate and get to know people and really truly understand the cultural differences. I use my ability to empathize and connect and bring people in. I use that to try, one person at a time, to get people to understand the shoes I walk in and the challenges and how they can affect change.

I sometimes say to my White colleagues, “If you walked into a conference room and there were twelve Black people, would you feel comfortable?” That's when the light bulb goes off. Because that's me every single day.

**Bryant: How do you decide when to have the conversation about race and try to educate people?**

Mathieu: Growing up Black in America, every one of us has had a police moment. All of us. I've had multiple, and it's unbelievably scary. I think it goes back to getting people to truly know who you are. I love Martin Luther King, but I'm no Martin Luther King. I've got my day job and what I have to do.

I go back to what I try to accomplish with every interaction — to get people to know me, to know my humanity and what I've kind of done, and so it's not always about me talking about those kinds of challenges.

You never want to highlight people's flaws. You need to highlight what we can potentially do together. Highlighting how bad they are is not going to effect change. If you make it the other person's idea, then it's a huge win. They pat themselves on the back and say, look at what I just did.

**Morris: What career and life advice do you give to early- and mid-career Black professionals?**

Mathieu: First, never take negativity personally. Always believe in yourself, invest in yourself. Take what people say to you with a grain of salt and be incredibly persistent and have a level of grit. You'll be surprised what you get from that.

I also say that everyone should learn salesmanship as much as you possibly can. The ability to influence and convince people will always help you in your career.