



Eric Kelly, CEO of Overland Tandberg



**Leading in the B-Suite**

Powerful conversations about life, race and leadership

📧 Biweekly newsletter

---

## "How Do You Make Sure That You Fit In But You Stand Out?"

Published on April 20, 2021

---

**Adam Bryant** 

Managing Director at Merryck & Co.

---

***Eric Kelly**, CEO of **Overland Tandberg**, a data-storage and archive-solutions technology firm, 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: As you were growing up, who were the biggest influences for you?**

Kelly: My parents put the entrepreneurial spirit in me early on because they had their own business. They really instilled in me that you can do whatever you want. They always said, "Don't be a follower, be a leader." I started to stamp out a vision for success because my parents ran their own company. They had an automotive center for 40 years, so I just grew up around business.

That's really what inspired me to do what I do. Their employees were also like family. We got to know all the employees, their kids, their grandkids, and it really empowered me to say I want to do that, but on a bigger scale.

It also made me more fearless because I knew what it took for him during his generation to have his own business, because a lot of people didn't want to be customers of a Black-owned business. The challenges I was going to face were going to be minor compared to what they encountered.

I also grew up in Oakland, and the diversity in that environment was just fantastic. My friends were just as diverse as the city, and I learned how to navigate all sorts of different worlds. It was just kind of the norm. And that allowed a lot of people to adapt, to understand different cultures, and to learn that people have more in common than they do differences.

For me, it was even more prevalent because of sports. I was captain of the golf team in high school, and I also skied and ran track. I was kind of an enigma to my friends in the neighborhood and even to my teachers. But it allowed me to really understand all these different worlds.

**Bryant: What was the big break that set your career on a different trajectory?**

Kelly: I was lucky to start my career at a great company, IBM, and they gave me the foundation to really develop my business and technical skills, and to understand what company culture meant. Back then, they had a program specifically for minorities, so they were way ahead of their time in terms of how they promoted and showed respect for all individuals.

During my time there, I also learned the soft skills that you needed to navigate the corporate world. I saw first-hand the assumptions that people make about you. If we were at an offsite at a country club, people would be surprised that I knew how to play golf. Or they would be surprised that I know how to ski — I was a ski instructor for a while. I often saw the gap between how people saw me and who I am. I started thinking more about how to get people to understand that the assumptions they make are often not right.

I eventually left IBM. I was a vice president at Dell and the president at a number of other public companies, but I never had what I call completeness. I looked at my journey and my parents having their own business. I really felt that I should continue that and have a bigger impact and add more value as an executive of a Black-owned technology company. I can do a lot of things now that I couldn't do within some of the parameters that I ran into earlier in my career.

**Morris: What are some of the headwinds you've faced because of your race, and what are the tailwinds that helped you navigate them?**

Kelly: The headwinds early on in my career were from people being confused about how to work with me just because I didn't look like them. So the headwinds are about trying to fit in while also keeping your diverse identity. How do you make sure that you fit in but you stand out?

And how do you make sure that you are getting the benefits and the opportunities that everybody else receives? Because it's very clear when you're passed over or someone's getting preferential treatment. I saw some of my mentors hit the glass ceiling because of those corporate games.

*I still feel the headwinds as the CEO of a public company.*

I still feel the headwinds as the CEO of a public company. You can imagine that as I go around Wall Street with my executive team, it's often not until the last handshake with a new group that they realize that I'm the CEO. They assume that everyone else is the CEO before they get to me. And because my last name is Kelly, they think I'm Irish.

The tailwinds came from my approach of trying to get everybody to feel comfortable that diversity was a benefit. Part of it was because I was able to fit in that world very easily. Again, my background playing golf helped, particularly when you go to retreats at resorts with golf courses.

It played into my promotions at IBM. I remember moving to the regional staff and playing golf with the vice president all the time. It was the perfect environment to get to know each other, learn how the corporate world worked and demonstrate my business acumen.

What's interesting is that I didn't know those were going to be my tailwinds until I got into corporate America. I later said to my parents, "I'm glad you put me in ski school and you taught me how to play golf." Those are the soft skills that not everybody has a chance to learn.

**Morris: How do you not get angry when people don't assume you are the CEO in those meetings you described, and other incidents like that?**

Kelly: I look at it as a moment for me to educate them. And they will never do it again. I'll give you an example. We were having our annual tournament at my own country club. I was walking into the parking lot and someone handed me a \$5 bill to get their golf clubs. I could be angry, but I put the \$5 in my pocket and continued walking into the Pro Shop. The person was so mortified that he will never do it again. You have to educate.

**Bryant: As you've gone through your career, how did you decide when and whether to have conversations about race?**

Kelly: I've always felt that it was important to have that conversation with my colleagues. What I've found is that if I start the conversation, you can kind of see a sigh of relief. Because I introduced the elephant in the room, then we can all talk about it.

It wasn't combative. It was just a conversation that we should have, whether it was in the boardroom or at the executive leadership level. I always felt it was one of my responsibilities to make sure we have a complete conversation. That was one of the reasons why I wanted to build a Black-owned technology company because it gave me a platform and ability to have that conversation on a much broader level.

There is often fear on both sides about having that conversation. There's fear among Black people to bring it up because they don't want to be an outcast in corporate America. And there's a fear among White people to bring it up because they don't know how it's going to be received.

But when I've brought it up, I've never had anybody have a negative reaction. They've always said, "Well, tell me a little bit more about that," or "How do we improve it?" Diversity is not a bad word. It's not meant to agitate. It just is what it is.

*You'll see the words "global intellect and inclusiveness" on the walls at our office.*

There are so many opportunities, unfortunately and fortunately, to educate people and to highlight diversity. Sometimes the conversation is uncomfortable, but you go through it and we're all better for it.

I also have the conversation within my organization about what it means to be a culturally integrated company. You'll see the words "global intellect and inclusiveness" on the walls at our office. That's our vision because I believe a vision has to resonate with everybody. Global intellect and inclusiveness is how we run the company and how we operationalize it, and we're in over 100 countries today.

When you do business in China, it's different from Japan, different from France, different from Germany. I've been on trips where we would be in, say, Singapore and the Americans with me would call the Singaporeans "foreigners," even though we were in their country. That gives me the opportunity to have that conversation. I also tell people on my team that I want them to mentor someone who doesn't look like them.

**Morris: Why is it so hard to have these conversations about race in this country, and why has making progress been so slow?**

Kelly: These conversations are difficult on both sides. You have to be comfortable in uncomfortable situations, and most people aren't. Then you have the reality that people don't want to put their job at risk. You don't want to put people you work with in an uncomfortable spot where they might react by saying, "Why did you ask me that question?"

So you have to really have the desire and fortitude and be able to take the risk because you

don't know which way the conversation is going to go. It could be career limiting because your boss might not want to have the conversation or your colleague might not want to have it. But you brought it up, so now they don't want to be in the room with you because you put them in an uncomfortable situation. Because people don't know which way the conversation is going to go, they often play it safe.

*The best thing you can have is a mentor or a sponsor.*

In corporate America, the best thing you can have is a mentor or a sponsor, and most Blacks do not have a mentor or a sponsor. And those roles are totally different. A mentor is someone who is going to give you advice and tell you what you need to do to make it to the next level.

We need more sponsors. The sponsor is the person who is going to say, "I'm going to sponsor Eric to help him reach that next position." Because it's in those situations where there is actual risk. You may have someone who will coach you and tell you what you need to do, but when it comes time to get that position, they're not going to put their name on the line and say I'm going to sponsor Eric into that position.

When people don't have those mentors or sponsors, they're not really comfortable having those conversations. They don't want to ruffle any feathers or be vocal, and so you focus instead of on fitting in. I can share with you that as a Black CEO, I see more Black candidates coming to me just because they see me in this seat. In corporate America more broadly, just seeing Black executives in these seats makes people more comfortable about building diverse organizations.

**Bryant: What is your best career and life advice for young Black professionals?**

Kelly: They have to really embrace who they are. That's what makes them unique. That's what makes them stand out. I tell them all the time that if an employer is looking for a diverse candidate, don't leave your diversity at the door because there's a huge benefit to corporations, to the community, to other employees to have a diversity of thought and experience, and that means you have to be who you are.

And I hear people say all the time, "Well, I'm going to bring my whole self to work." And I always laugh and tell them, "Bring your Monday-through-Friday whole self. I don't want to see your Saturday and Sunday whole self."

Don't get carried away with the whole self. I don't want to know what you do on Saturday nights and I don't need you to bring that to work. Just bring your Monday-through-Friday whole self, because that's what people are looking for.

The other advice is to take advantage of the opportunities to educate. Don't use those moments to get upset or get mad. See it as education, because that's really the issue — most people don't know. Once they know and if they have a heart, if they have some semblance of compassion, and the mind set to respect one another, then there will be a bit of progress.

So use every opportunity to educate. And by the way, use the opportunity to get educated as well, because you don't know everything. So it's not a one-way street. It's both ways.

***Be sure to subscribe [here](#) if you want to receive all our future Leading in the B-Suite™ interviews! And check out our previous interviews with:***

- ***[Carlos Watson](#), CEO of OZY Media***
- ***[Ruth Simmons](#), president of Prairie View A&M University***
- ***[Mellody Hobson](#), co-CEO of Ariel Investments***
- ***[Robert L. Johnson](#), co-founder of BET***
- ***[Ursula Burns](#), former CEO of Xerox***
- ***[Ron Williams](#), former CEO of Aetna***
- ***[Don Peebles](#), CEO of The Peebles Corporation***
- ***[Lloyd Carney](#), former CEO of Brocade Communications***
- ***[Lisa Price](#), founder of Carol's Daughter***
- ***[Jessie Woolley-Wilson](#), CEO of DreamBox Learning***
- ***[Harry L. Williams](#), CEO of the Thurgood Marshall College Fund***
- ***[Sheila Talton](#), CEO of Gray Matter Analytics***
- ***[Gary S. May](#), Chancellor of UC Davis***
- ***[Lori Dickerson Fouché](#), former CEO of TIAA Financial Solutions***
- ***[Crystal Ashby](#), former CEO of Executive Leadership Council***
- ***[Michael Mathieu](#), CEO of Prox***