

Speaker 1 ([00:00](#)):

Um, I first joined Kaiser Permanente really to get my master's degree and, um, health services administration. So I went to the San Francisco medical center. So about three months into the program, I got involved helping to open the open heart unit in San Francisco. Uh, and then one day the executive asked me to go in and do this massive assessment domain, all these great recommendations. She said, really good job. Now go implement. And I literally started a conversation with her and say, you know, it'd be very hard to implement this as a resident, but as a manager, I can make it happen. So I got hired as the management, by the way, this executive was the chief executive officer. They call it the hospital administrator of a ISER in San Francisco. She also happened to be African-American. So he gave me that first break. And the reason why I talk about it is throughout my journey in as a Permanente while she was there, she was both a mentor and a sponsor.

Speaker 1 ([00:57](#)):

Hopefully in your careers, you will have both a mentor is a relationship with an individual in which you can feel free to basically reflect on who you are, what you're trying to accomplish, how you behave, you know, you can lay out situation. Did I handle that correctly? How could I have done it differently stuff that doesn't feel right? Those kinds of things. I always tell people that I mentor that all I'm doing is putting a mirror up for you to look at yourself. And that's the way I view a mentor sponsor is a person who speaks on your behalf when you're not there. A sponsor is a person who is in the room of power. And when a decision is about to be made, you know, who should we think about for this new job? The sponsor is the person that will say, well, you know, anyone to consider Morrison so that the sponsor represents you. I talk a lot about really everybody's should seek to have a sponsor. As you are moving through corporate America, it could be two different people or one in the same. I've had both, as I was being considered for the CEO. My mentor was a CEO of a major fortune 50 company who just really provided great mentorship and sponsorship, but how to think about the situation and the advice was valuable.

Speaker 2 ([02:21](#)):

The American heart associations mission is to be a relentless force for a world of longer healthier lives and our pursuit of that mission. We're having some amazing conversations along the way. Welcome to the special edition series on equity, honoring the life leadership and legacy of Bernard J Tyson. These are the stories of the relentless.

Speaker 3 ([02:44](#)):

Hi, I'm Tanya Odom. Welcome back to episode two, how equity impacts a seat at the table? I an aha volunteer. And my day job, as I said, is to work in the field globally of diversity, equity and inclusion. And the reason I sort of highlight that is because working in the field of diversity, equity and inclusion for over two decades, I could not, not have heard of Bernard Tyson. And so doing this series has been especially important just to think about and learn more about his legacy and how he's impacted these conversations. So I'm looking forward to today's conversation. I just want to say before I begin to introduce our next guest, that it was so interesting to hear Bernard Tyson talk about this distinction between mentorship and sponsorship. I seen the importance of sponsorship in my career, and we know from the research how important it is, particularly for women and people of color, who don't always have a sponsor and who may not always sort of distinguish the difference between a mentor and a sponsor.

Speaker 3 ([03:48](#)):

So I love that language is, um, a sponsor is a person who speaks on your behalf when you're not there. And I think that's good coaching that Bernard Tyson's giving to all of us even now. So today we're recording and discussing how equity impacts a seat at the table. And we'll talk about some critical issues such as breaking the barriers of structural racism, unconscious bias, professional development, and growth and mentorship and sponsorship. If we heard Bernard talk about joining us to discuss lessons learned and how Bernard J Tyson led the way open the door and broke down barriers in these areas is his long-time special assistant Sherri buoy and president of at and T West Ken McNeely, who was Bernard's colleague and friend. Welcome to you, both Sherry. We heard Bernard speaking at the opening of this episode about mentorship. You worked with him for a very long time and know him better than most professionally. How long did you work together? And how was he as your boss?

Speaker 1 ([04:50](#)):

I was with them for 23 years. I started his administrative assistant in 1987. I became a special assistant in 2013. So as a boss, Bernard was very eager, very eager to succeed. And he was a perfectionist together. People compared us to George Jefferson and Florence Johnston, the sassy housekeeper, and he would shoot out a command and he, and I would knock it down and remind him that he's not my father, but as a boss, he was very charismatic. Everybody would stop and listen to anything he had to say. And he was sometimes funny and sometimes serious. And he was a great boss. You're not only was he a mentor. He was a friend and he was family. When I came into the organization, he taught me a lot about leading and was successful. So as I, and I acquired a team of seven assistants and he said, you can't go in here and think that you're going to run this place. You have to understand that this is a part of your team, and you have to be a part of a team before you can lead a team. So he taught me the importance of being a team player and making sure that everyone's included, you're not successful if your team's not successful.

Speaker 3 ([06:00](#)):

So what did it mean for Bernard to have a seat at the table?

Speaker 1 ([06:03](#)):

I heard this story all the time from Bernard and how important it was because he was also a sponsor of nasi and national association of health services executives, or, um, African-American students would come in and they would intern at Kaiser and then he would meet with them at the end of their internship. And one year I put them in the multipurpose room instead of the board room. Cause they always met in the board room when he met with those students. So he tells me that is important that these students come to the executive boardroom because they need to understand that they to consider in a role that I have and lead and make a change. So it's important. They get that experience. So boys put this meeting in the boardroom and for him, whenever he had to fill a leadership role in the organization, it would take Kaiser a long time and people would complain that it takes forever to fill a leadership role.

Speaker 1 ([06:53](#)):

That's because Bernard took his time to try to find diverse candidates for those roles. And he would get excuses from search firms that say the pool for diverse candidates is very thin or there they're not out there. And he would challenge them saying that they're not looking in the right places that the candidates do exist and which, but are stood by that in which I believe that's why Kaiser Permanente had a very diverse board and leadership team because of Pam. So the mentor and sponsorship that

Bernard got when he came to Kaiser was ms. Alba Wheatley. And she was African-American she's to this day and we have a close, personal relationship. She hired him in right out of school. She said he was a young ripper snapper came in that he was just going to take over the world. Sometimes she said, he forgot who he worked for and who was the boss?

Speaker 1 ([07:41](#)):

They had a relationship for over 30 years and she retired, but she helped them along the way. And sometimes he would accuse her of not paying him enough. As I came to work for him, she would tell me to tell him the same thing. But then I think Dennis Chanel was one of his biggest mentors when he was trying to become CEO. Because when I came to work for Bernard, one of the things he asked me, what was my aspirations to do when I came to work at Kaiser, I said, well, my hopes and aspirations were someday to support a CEO. He's a little great that's in line with what I want to do. I want to be the CEO. So you might get that opportunity. 16 years later, he would become the CEO.

Speaker 3 ([08:19](#)):

That's remarkable. The story of you both speaking into existence, something that happened after 16 years and knowing that he wanted to be a CEO. Um, and you saying what you wanted to do, which is actually a good time to bring in Ken McNeely, president of T Western region overseeing 19 States. Can, what do you think about Bernard Tyson's focused ambition?

Speaker 4 ([08:45](#)):

I didn't know that story knew early on. Certainly Bernard had shared that. I mean, he was a man on a mission, so I'm not surprised about that, but having such an incredible CEO like Ken Chenault be a, be a mentor too was, I mean, gosh, you know, two peas in a pod. I mean, it's, it's great to see that Ken reach back and saw what we all saw in Bernard and reached out and motivated him to do the same thing. And Bernard's done the same thing with, with other young executives too. So,

Speaker 3 ([09:16](#)):

So Ken, how would you describe your relationship with Bernard and the impact that he's had on your life? I mean,

Speaker 4 ([09:22](#)):

It's the giving tree Bernard was my mentor. It grew into that. I mean he knew me as a young black executive multinational, and I think he gravitated to me. I mean, I was first introduced to Bernard through his wife, Denise, I'd known Denise from her work at the museum of the African diaspora and the relationship that H and T had there. And after their marriage then got to socialize with them and, you know, gradually Bernard was sharing these nuggets that I hold. So dear to me now, and I use the red, your Lily and my leadership and my management, and, um, just been a great experience. I mean, his legacy lives on Bernard. And I talked a lot about difference about those little things that, that make you unique when he came into Kaiser, how he would try to tamp down all of those things that kind of a Bernard Bernard to fit in.

Speaker 4 ([10:20](#)):

But Nard would often share with me that it was often those differences that you try to tamp down that really made you who you are. And he would share with me off and, uh, you know, going into a boardroom and preparing himself to fit in and, you know, and he realized that at the end of the day, he

was expending quite a bit of energy to fit in. And he came to realize after a period of time, that the very thing that he was trying to hold in to try to not share that may Bernard Bernard might be that very trait, that very characteristic that the organization needed to Excel the next level, that in fact, your secret sauce as he called it might be your value add. And he told me that, which was very powerful to me as a, as a gay black man executive in corporate America. You know, I too went through those same things where I try to hide the kinds of things that really make me unique, the very value that I can bring that energy, that difference. And I realized through Bernard's

Speaker 3 ([11:32](#)):

Counsel that it was maybe

Speaker 4 ([11:34](#)):

That very, that very identity, that very lived experience that the organization needed to take itself to the next level that I was trying to take down my secret sauce, my true value add. And he said lean into your difference, bring it and celebrate it because that, that could be the very lived experience. That's not represented around the table. That might be the very lived experience that that organization needs to take it to the next level. And, you know, and I, and I really embraced that and understood that. And I take that with me on a daily basis as I lead my teams and sure enough, it's that lived experience that really allows me to think outside the box and to bring something new to the table that's not represented. So if I were trying to hide that and hold it back, the organization wouldn't be as richly diverse as it is today. So it was so incredibly valuable. And I referenced that all the time to people that I mentor I have about 30,000 now in the West have for at and T about 30,000 employees.

Speaker 1 ([12:42](#)):

And many times when Bernard would travel to different board meetings, be sit on boards for, of course your organization, the American heart association, world economic forum. And he would find himself looking around the room to find other people like him, what Ken said, he made the way for others to sit in those seats at the table.

Speaker 4 ([13:04](#)):

Absolutely. And, and he gave us permission to be ourselves. I remember I actually, um, had invited Bernard to Dallas to speak to a number of executives. And, and that was maybe four days before we lost Bernard. I had the opportunity to meet him for breakfast that morning and to chat with him and to introduce him to some ATNT T executives. And then later he sat on a panel that we put together and the topic of the panel was supposed to be about technology and the new millennium and how technology was going to change everything. But Bernard being Bernard found a way of inserting his journey. And Andy talked about his experiences and the great need for folks leaning into their authenticity. And it really got the panel to turn and it pivoted, and it ended up being a panel, a really richly, uh, developed panel, a discussion around how do you harness the best of you and how do you bring to the table, uh, your true and authentic self.

Speaker 4 ([14:22](#)):

And that truly is what's going to move corporate America. And he ended that discussion with a standing ovation from the audience, and he had taken it at a totally new direction, but one that was so appreciated by the audience and was so authentic and genuine that, uh, people really, really appreciated it. And that's the kind of person that Bernard was. I mean, he, he, he truly not only believed

that he lived at, I mean, he lived that authenticity. He was, he was Bernard and he was unapologetic about it. And he was, and he reveled in his brilliance, but he was so modest about it. Think about, but not as that, you always got Bernard. I mean, there was no, but nod was sure, but there's little Fanny pack and I'll, you know, and, and he was halo exists. I would kid him about it and he was just Bernard and he would just lay it out there and he didn't change. And he was just, he was just a straight shooter. And I mean, I've learned so much about the real power of not putting up your finger and trying to see where the winds are blowing. But to really truly be a leader is to be, is to be authentic, is to be yourself and to not ebb and flow with the gym of the day or whatever he was consistent. And that was so appreciated.

Speaker 1 ([15:46](#)):

He had that Fanny pack with him everywhere. He went and you had to be very trusted by him in order to hold it for him.

Speaker 4 ([15:53](#)):

That's right. That's right. That was his man bag. He had it. And he had his things in there and he, uh, you know, that's, that's the way you were.

Speaker 3 ([16:00](#)):

So what would surprise most people about Bernard being the major chairman and CEO of a multi-billion dollar corporation?

Speaker 1 ([16:08](#)):

When the letters would come in from the members of Kaiser, he had to read every single one of them. And they went into a special envelope for him every evening to take home, to read the ones that came in and he couldn't address them all. He would address some of them, but if a member call and they call late at night, maybe six o'clock and most people have gone home or he's there in the office. And that member gets him on the line. A lot of people are going to hear about it the next day. And he would try to solve so many members issues on his own. And the one particular one that I recall is when a patient couldn't, he couldn't get a bed and he'd said he would take care of it, make sure Kaiser took care of it. The attorneys that called Nass me Kaiser's attorneys, could I stop him from answering the members calls when we couldn't get the bed for him?

Speaker 1 ([16:54](#)):

Bernard took it upon himself to get it himself because he told the gentleman that he would, and he did that, not only for that member, but for other members, but for him to take the time out of conquering huge issues, I've mental health and disparities and care took the time to help little people when he could, the legacy he left behind for Kaiser Permanente was he put Kaiser Permanente on the world stage where no other executive before him dead people in Europe knew who Kaiser Permanente was because Bernard took a stand on mental health, not only for America, but for the entire world.

Speaker 3 ([17:28](#)):

So what have you learned from him? And what would you say is his overall legacy when it comes to having a seat at the table, which as you know, is the title of this particular podcast and interview.

Speaker 1 ([17:40](#)):

So his legacy left behind a footprint that I hope people remember and embrace. And for me personally, he saved my life. His legacy helped me want to be a better person and that I can make a difference. And I believe I am. What I want people to remember about Bernard is that he was a man of God. They generally fought to eliminate disparities in healthcare, not only in America, but for the entire world. And he and my mind turned the wheels in motion to get access to healthcare for everyone, not for political cause he did it because it was the right thing to do.

Speaker 4 ([18:14](#)):

The biggest legacy that Bernard left for me is, is how to be an empathetic leader. First and foremost, he gave me a mirror where I could see myself reflected because so often I didn't see myself reflected and the, uh, the highest ranks of corporate America. And so he, he really paved a path and really revealed that I could do anything. I put my heart in. And I think that, um, as a leader, he was one of the most empathetic leaders I've ever met. He led with not only his brain, but with his heart. And that's a rare leader who brings the thinking and the emotional intelligence to the table. But when that happens, it's a beautiful thing and wonderful things happen, not just for your organization, the organization that you lead, but really touching the lives of the people around you. And I think that's really one of the things that I learned from, from Bernard is that new can do both.

Speaker 4 ([19:26](#)):

You can lead, you can be the strategic thinker, but you can also be that empathetic leader. And that the combination of that working together would garner you the best results. We often think about our lived experiences as being a handicap. One of the things that Bernada and I often talked about was having a seat at the table that proverbial seat at the table. And I think that one of the central themes that would frequently come up was, you know, as we entered corporate America and as many executives of color think that our history, that our background, uh, is somehow a hindrance to our ability to reach the highest levels that those lived experiences, somehow aren't valued. And, and, and we tend to kind of hold them back. I think over a period of time and Bernard, and I would often talk about this was that times of experiences that we had as kids growing up as students, um, and college, uh, the kinds of experiences that we had with family, the kinds of experiences that we had and the faith communities, the kinds of experiences that we had growing up in our communities of color, you know, that those are the kinds of things that really informed our leadership style.

Speaker 4 ([20:54](#)):

And those were the kinds of things that really needed to be represented at the table. Those are the kinds of lived experiences that could really lift up our organizations and make and make the organization better. And in fact, we realized both at Kaiser and at my employer at and T you know, we really needed to have our finger on the pulse of the community. We really needed to understand the lived experiences of all of our communities, but especially those vulnerable communities, whether they needed healthcare, healthcare services, or communications or entertainment services, these were the kinds of things that we could bring to the table because we understood those communities better than anybody in our organizations. And by being around that table, we brought that lived experience that no one else had. And I think for the first time, in many instances could articulate and redirect and refocus our company's resources in a way that made them appeal to communities that had traditionally been overlooked.

Speaker 4 ([22:08](#)):

We chuckled often that by bringing these resources to our communities, by expanding the way we outreached to the communities, we spoke to these communities, we engage these communities, also engaged our companies in ways that they had never anticipated and allow them to grow and became our value adds to them at the same time we were giving back to our communities. And I think that that win-win was, um, was just a valuable experience. Certainly for me, you know, coming up in corporate America and looking at, uh, Bernard as a, as a great friend and mentor, thank you. This notion of the diverse places and lived experiences and valuing them, right? I think that's in fact, a piece that I'm hearing over and over in these interviews and that you're valuing the waste of community. You're valuing the lived experiences of people and the varied lived experiences of people. It's been an incredibly insightful conversation and we're not done yet. Let's keep the conversations around equity and leveling the playing field going thank you for being with us today.

Speaker 2 ([23:20](#)):

I used to argue early on that it was about equality that everybody has to be treated equally. And I later discovered that's not the right framework. That's not the right narrative is about equity. Everybody gets what they need to get the same outcomes. Thanks for being a part of the American heart associations Hitlist stories. Learn more about the Bernard J Tyson impact fund@heart.org Ford slash B J T impact fund. And if you enjoyed what you just heard, please press share, tell a friend and leave us a review. Your next episode is on the way stay tuned. As we discuss Bernard's impact on how equity impacts access to care.

Speaker 5 ([24:30](#)):

[inaudible].