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No Ranting and Raving Is Permitted

By ADAM BRYANT

*This interview with **Robert L. Johnson**, founder and president of the RLJ Companies, an investment firm, was conducted and condensed by **Adam Bryant**. Mr. Johnson is also the founder of Black Entertainment Television.*



Earl Wilson/The New York Times

Robert L. Johnson is the founder and president of the investment firm RLJ Companies and the founder of Black Entertainment Television. Mr. Johnson says he doesn't get angry and believes that anger is inappropriate in business.

Q. *Was it a difficult transition for you when you became a boss for the first time?*

A. No, it was easy for me because I've always taken the approach that the more disclosure you have with somebody, the more comfortable the relationship is, the more they know what your primary responsibilities and concerns are. It makes the relationship between you and the person who's working for you that much better because the lines of communication are frank, unfiltered and open for the most part.

Q. *Where did you learn that lesson?*

A. I grew up in a family of 10 kids, and so I learned that I have to share things that I'm trying to do. You've got to communicate with people because otherwise people say, "Well, I didn't know you were thinking about doing this." And so you have to be able to interact with a lot of people. So I got comfortable interacting with a large family. And the key to that was you just had to tell people what you

were doing or else you'd come home and think that you had set aside something for your lunch but it's gone because you didn't tell anybody. Or you have to tell people I'm going to use the bicycle this week. So that was part of it.

Plus I think it's just my own belief that the more you trust people, the more confidence you place in people, the more they're empowered to do things. And I've never been one that was afraid of having people who could help me by giving me their advice. The more they feel comfortable that they're part of your mission and they clearly understand the mission, whatever you're doing just becomes easier. You have to give people an opportunity to have an opinion about what you're going to do.

I've always been very good at seeing both sides and not really getting exercised over one or the other. So I tend not to wear my passions on my sleeve to the point of excluding others' points of view. I just like the idea of a lot of give and take.

Q. *But has it always been that way, throughout your career?*

A. Early on — and I think any entrepreneur will tell you this — you're more like a tribe. You're like hunters and gatherers. You say what you want to do. There's no formal structure. You're not big enough to have offices or subordinates. And somebody's the chief of the tribe. And as long as people believe in the chief they're O.K., they'll stay around, but there is always infighting. And what you tend to do in that situation is to have this kind of primitive reaction — you try to force people to your will. And because you're afraid that people may not do what you want them to do, sometimes you do it for them. And they never get a chance to grow because you're basically telling everybody what to do, when to do it, how to do it.

That's what happened when I started BET — I used to do everything. People had to do it the way I wanted it done because I had done it before. It had seemed to work. I was insecure in letting other people do it their way.

You don't let that control go away until you begin to see the business take shape and get a bit of lift to it. And then you feel a little more comfortable giving people the authority and the responsibility to do things their way — which was different from the entrepreneurial way, and my way.

Over time, that's really where I've sort of been able to see a change in my culture of running a business. Now I'm able to step back and say, "O.K., you got it. You run it. I've got confidence in you. If you got a problem, call me."

Q. *Let's shift to hiring. What are you looking for? What are the questions you typically ask job candidates?*

A. Usually people have prescreened them, and because I'm willing to let people run their own show, I have a presumption that they're hired. But what I want to find out is, why do you want to work here? You know, life is short. Why are you going to take a part of your life and put it in my hands? What is it about you that makes me want to spend time with you? And what is it about me that makes you want to be a part of what I'm doing? And if they answer that question in the right way, then I'm confident that the vetting process has worked. And to me, they've got to paint a vision of why they want to be in my company at this time.

Q. *And what do you like to hear?*

A. What I like to hear is that it goes like this: "Mr. Johnson, you've done this. I want to know how you did it. I want to know how you can help me do what I want to do. You know people I don't know. You have access to things I don't have. I'm willing to learn. I'm willing to work hard." But what they're really saying is, "I want to put my life in your hands. And I want you to help me do what I want to be better at what I'm trying to achieve for myself, my family and for my community at large. I want that connection with you."

That's what I look for. And you might call that sort of advanced loyalty or advanced confidence. But no one should work for anybody who they don't have confidence in, and nobody should work for anybody if they don't think they can be loyal to them over a long period of time. Even if they disagree on things, there should be confidence that any disagreement is not rooted in any kind of personal attitude about each other or their character. Instead, it should be about different ways of doing things. That's what I look for in executives.

Q. *What about the culture of your companies? Anything unusual?*

A. The one thing is that I just don't want people to get angry. That's the one thing. I just will not get angry, and I won't let people get angry and lash out at somebody personally. I just don't understand anger and conflict in a business. If you think about it, in a business you're working to make money for somebody — either yourself or your shareholders or somebody. How could you get angry about trying to figure out how to make money? If we're not angry, and we work together, we make more money. If we get angry and we have conflict, we make less money. So let's not get angry. Let's just work it out. It's not like if you get angry with somebody all of a sudden the stock is going to jump 20 percent. Either you've got a business or a product that people are going to buy or they're not going to buy.

Q. *Can you talk more about this?*

A. I start with the notion that if there is something that's broken, I can fix it. So there's no reason to get mad at somebody. I'm always starting with a certain amount of trust for anybody I'm dealing with. And by the way, even if you do get angry, it's not going to solve the problem. All it's going to do is reverberate around the office that so and so made a mistake and so and so is angry at them. Then a whole cloud of frustrations and anger pervades the office. And so all of a sudden you get a breakdown in the culture of cooperation and collegiality, and the common mission goes out the window. And it'll take you a week or so to get everybody back together.

Q. *Have you always felt this way about anger in the workplace?*

A. I've never had the emotion of anger. Some people think I'm sort of not passionate or I'm kind of cold or disinterested because I don't rant and rave and everything else. I don't do that. And I think it's a simple rule — more insecure, more anger; more secure, less anger. I think really great companies are populated by people who are confident, secure and less fearful.

Just think about companies that really stay at the top all the time. They don't have a lot of turnover. There's a lot of continuity because the environment is conducive to people wanting to be there, and they want to stay there.

Q. *Can you elaborate?*

A. Culture is like a circle, and great companies won't even tolerate a superstar going outside the circle. I can have the greatest sales guy in the world, or the greatest marketing manager. If they go outside the circle, they've got to leave because it is a direct threat to the cultural confidence you're trying to build. And you can't carry out a vision or go on a crusade without the total confidence of everybody who's going on that mission with you.

If you really want to build something that's going to be around for a very long time and be stable and grow, culture has to be paramount. People have to know how your culture operates and works. And once they get it, they adopt it, and it becomes second nature to them that certain things are not done in this company. And that, to me, is one of the attributes of really great companies. The culture is almost like a religion. People buy into and they believe in it. And you can tolerate a little bit of heresy, but not a lot.

That's why I think it's easier in that kind of culture to introduce new products and new technologies or new services. When the culture breaks down, it's real hard to be innovative. It is very difficult to be innovative because you've got built-up barriers to interpersonal communications. And if you've built up barriers to interpersonal communications, you've certainly got barriers to new ideas because that old zero-sum-game mentality sets in, where somebody might think, "Well, if you guys are going to market it this way, my distribution chain is going to lose power. So I've got to protect my part of the company. And, by the way, I don't like you anyway." So innovation slows down, and changes don't happen as rapidly as they should and you get that rigidity.

At the end of the day, people make up companies. And if the culture allows for a lot of interaction and a lot of free-flowing ideas that are not considered threats to anybody, that company will be more innovative.

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