

Bold(her)

You Belong in the Room

Vivian Pickard:

In the back of my head was my mother speaking that, "You know what? You do belong. You can do this. You can do this. You do belong."

Lisa Bragg:

Like her mother did for her, Vivian Pickard is always cheerleading for other women. She has about 20 women at all times that she's mentoring. Giving back after the amazing mentors she's had herself.

I'm Lisa Bragg and this is Bold(h)er, stories of and for women who stand out brought to you by BMO for Women.

Vivian gives sage advice, things she's learned along the way, like keep reinventing yourself with purpose, and don't be afraid to start at the bottom.

Vivian Pickard:

I grew up in a little town in Mississippi, Sturgis, Mississippi. It's right at Mississippi State University, and in that city, you were successful if you were a schoolteacher. And of course, nothing against being a schoolteacher, but that was the track record for success. Most of the individuals that lived in the city, most of my relatives that were considered successful were schoolteachers.

So, when I left Mississippi at the age of 17 when my family moved to Michigan, and I started a co-op at General Motors in Flint, Michigan. And got an opportunity to be around others, women that were involved and doing things other than being a schoolteacher, but that was a part of "What you see is what you'll be and what you aspire to be". So, in Mississippi, I aspired obviously to be a schoolteacher or something in administration because that's what my family did. Being at General Motors in the city of Flint, being a supervisor, or a supervisor in the plant, or a supervisor in administration was a big deal.

So, when I became involved at General Motors and started as a co-op student, I saw individuals there that were very low-level. The women were not very successful in terms of leadership, but there were a few females that were supervisors. So there, I aspired to be a supervisor with General Motors in the Accounting Department, which is where I worked. So, I come back every summer. Then, when I was hired as an employee in the Finance Department, my goal was to be a supervisor because that's all that I saw and probably the highest level that I saw.

I got transferred over to Personnel. When I got transferred over to Personnel, the personnel director became a great mentor for me. He thought I could do anything, and he pushed me to do anything. When an opening became available at our divisional level, he supported my... taking that position. When I moved to the division, of course, I saw women with even more responsibility in higher levels. Again, what you see is what you'll be. So, when I saw that, I said, "Mm, I think I can do this. I don't

think she's any smarter than I am." So, when they gave me increasing levels of responsibility at the division, and as I saw more and more women in higher-level positions, and in going to lunch with them, being around them, I started thinking, "I think I can do what they do. I don't see them as being any smarter." But I think those two instances really taught me it's important to be exposed to different levels of leadership so that you can see that you can do it as well. When I was promoted to our headquarters, and being around then a higher-level of female leaders, and seeing even more so, I don't think they're too much smarter than I am. I think I can do this. I am as smart as they are. I developed more confidence the more I was around individuals of more and more... higher-level leadership, I should say. The more I was around them and exposed to them, in my mind, I thought, "They're not any smarter. I can do this." So then, again, I think it was truly leadership exposure and realizing that you can do it. So, I think it's important, really, really important to make sure that people are... that especially women are exposed to women of leadership so they understand you can do this.

Lisa Bragg:

So often, it's like, "Ah, are they smarter than me?" Then, they show up, and it's like, "No, and I can do this." I love that.

Vivian Pickard:

The very unique thing about my career is I have to say I never asked for a position. I never pushed for a position. Any position that I had at General Motors were positions that were individuals saw something in me that I didn't see in myself, even going back to the plant. I made it a practice to just work as hard as I could and do the very best job that I could. Obviously, in my family, being ethical was always very important. So, that was one of the things that I always maintain, being ethical. My mother pushed us to be very authentic, to be yourself. I grew up in a family of nine siblings. If you were around us, we all have our unique... very uniqueness. My mother taught us to be very strong, very different from each other, very opinionated, and also, most important, my mother always taught me that you belong. So, in the back of my head and moving from these leadership roles, in the back of my head was my mother speaking that, "You know what? You do belong. You can do this. You can do this. You do belong."

Lisa Bragg:

That is a gift in itself, "You belong," and that you can say, "I have..." whenever things are getting tough because I'm sure things weren't always easy. It's great that doors were open for you, but I'm sure... It's almost over-talked about, but it's relevant that a lot of people have imposter syndrome. But if you say, "I..."

Vivian Pickard:

Especially as a Black female. People say that their mother was probably the strongest person around them. My mother, she truly was very strong, and my father... Some people send their daughters to school, to college to find a man. My father's philosophy was that each one of his daughters had to go to college because he wanted you to be able to take care of yourself. His thing was he never wanted his daughters to be dependent on a male. He said, "It's okay if it happens, but I want you to be having the background that you can do it yourself."

Lisa Bragg:

You mentioned earlier that you didn't have to apply for promotions, that doors opened for you, but what do you think the secret sauce was to that because doors don't just magically open? Do you think it was that you connected with the right mentors and sponsors, that you were doing something else because I think. We say, "Put your head down, do good work, and your work will speak for itself." But for so many of us, it doesn't necessarily happen. What else were you doing besides doing awesome work and being ethical that helped to make doors open for you?

Vivian Pickard:

I have often asked myself that question, Lisa, because I know so many individuals out there and especially within the company that I was associated with that worked. Their educational background may have been better than mine. They may have done... worked just as hard as I, and I have often asked myself that same question, but again, I just... I worked really, really hard. So, I've been, over the years, trying to figure that out, the "Why me?". Even back in 2008, 2009, doing the big crash, and the bankruptcy, and all, when everyone was leaving, my philosophy was, "Oh, I'm ready to go," and I was told that, "We want you to stay. We have something bigger for you," but I was prepared to stay. But even with that, it's like, "Okay. Why me?"

I don't know. Maybe I just drew the lucky straw. I don't know, but I don't classify myself as being any greater, any brighter than many other women there. But I'm thankful that I was really selected for a lot of roles that I had no intention of ever applying for, but things just happened. I have to say that I've enjoyed every position that I had within my company. There's nothing I would do different. Every role that I was placed in, I learned a lot, and I enjoyed, and I always try to do the very best that I could.

Lisa Bragg:

I think there's a little bit too that you were ready for it. You would say, "I'm smarter than this. I'm smarter than them." So, you're getting that confidence up through each different level to stand out.

Vivian Pickard:

Well, my admin said to me... She said, "Vivian, the thing that I like about you more than anything is that you treat everybody the same. You don't treat the admins any different than you treat the CEO. You showcase that we are just as important as the CEO." I had so many people tell me that, including the janitor. The janitor was one of my best friends, and I tell the story often of how one day I was coming back from a meeting in the building. When I got to the 27th floor, the elevator stopped at 10:00 at night. I'm pushing buttons, and pushing buttons, and pushing buttons, and nothing is happening. So, I said, "Oh my God, I guess I'm just going to be here until tomorrow morning." So, about five minutes later, the elevator goes bam, all the way down to the first floor. When I get to the first floor, the janitor is standing there, and he goes, "Vivian, what's going on?" So, I tell him what happened, and he goes, "Oh, no." So, he says, "I'm going to take you back upstairs so you can get your briefcase." He knew that I was very upset, walked me to my car, and just made sure that I was okay. But that act of kindness was because I had treated him with kindness, but my mother always taught me... and maybe that was a part of how I treated individuals because one reason why I was successful is that not only did I consider the individuals on my level and higher important, I befriend at the admins, the janitors, everybody. So, when everybody else was trying to get meetings with the other VPs or whatever, the admins always took good care of me because I would take good care of

them because... and my thing has always been everybody is important, and that's how my mother treated everybody.

We had individuals that worked for my uncle's. My mother had them at her table and treated them with all the dignity that she treated my cousins and all. So, I have always had that philosophy that you treat everybody the same. So, I don't know. Maybe that was a part of it, the fact that everybody saw me as one that didn't treat people different based on their levels. I was very comfortable with the CEO, and the CEOs were very comfortable with me. Maybe it was because I wasn't treating them like they were God, that I was treating them as if they were equal. People are people, and I don't think... I don't care what level or whatever you are. People are still people, and that's how I treat them. That's how I was taught to treat them. So, maybe that was a part of it. I don't know.

Lisa Bragg:

I think that's part of your secret sauce for sure.

Vivian Pickard:

Yeah.

Lisa Bragg:

People pick up on that, and they want to be around people that acknowledge them and make them feel seen and feel heard at every single level, and you have that. You have that gift. I think it's interesting too because we hear and we see stories in media and like even old movies about how women were in the '70s, '80s, '90s. It's only one seat at the table. I even wonder if we still have it today. I think some of us are really trying to change that, but there's only one seat at the table, and so I'm not going to help you. But you didn't have that experience. You had a lot of women open doors for you and become mentors for you. Tell us about that and your story of Dr. Height.

Vivian Pickard:

Dr. Dorothy Height was someone who... She advised every president, from President Roosevelt through President Obama. She was the President and CEO of the National Council of Negro Women founded by Mrs. Roosevelt. I recall the day when Dr. Height called me and asked me if I would serve on her board of directors. After almost getting off the floor and with tears in my eyes, I said yes. But to think that someone of her caliber would think that I have anything to offer was like a day of an amazement to me that she would think so. I worked with her and served with her throughout the years and was at her foot, learning all that I could learn throughout my years of working with her. She was amazing. She died in 2008 at the age of 98, and I had the honor of speaking at her service. Another individual obviously was Rosa Parks, someone that I admired. So, I had the opportunity to also be around Rosa Parks, and probably the highlight of my life was when Congresswoman Debbie Dingell and I, who was also one of my biggest mentors, when we had the opportunity to plan the funeral, the Detroit funeral for Rosa Parks, and at the beginning of the funeral, to say that we wanted to thank Debbie Dingell and Vivian Pickard for having us to plan the Detroit funeral was probably one of the proudest days of my entire life.

So, being around women such as that, first of all, to learn from them, but also to know what my expectations are or what they expect from me as a Black female. Obviously, one of the expectations

was to make sure that I care whatever for... that I mentored others, which is also very, very important to me. With Dr. Height, and Debbie Dingell, and many others who mentored me, I feel an obligation to do whatever I can when someone feels as if I have something to offer other women.

So, I probably have about 20 women on an ongoing basis that I mentor. My admin at General Motors used to say, "Vivian, you're going to go broke taking women to lunch, dinner, or whatever." But I would say to her, "This is something that I must do." I would run into women, and they would come up to me, and they would... They're in awe that I would have a conversation with them, and I would give them my number to call, and then I would answer my phone. My direct line, I would answer it myself. If I gave somebody my direct line, I would answer it myself because I always felt if you have my direct line, then I know you're calling to talk to me. So, there's no reason my admin need to be bothered. So, I would say to them, "Okay. Hold on. Let me transfer you to my..." after I have a conversation with them, "I'll transfer you to my admin so we can schedule something," and they'll go, "Oh my God, I was told that you would do this." They would be in awe that I would do it, but I have a number of young women that call me their fairy godmother. There was a couple that worked for me at GM. One, of course, that I... She was so, so talented, but I had to push her, push her, push her. I told her, "You're going to be an executive whether you want to or not, and I'm going to push you to be one." To this day, she's left General Motors. She has her own PR firm, major clients all over the country, and she says, "I wouldn't be where I am today if it was not for you, Vivian, pushing me." I said, "Well, you know what? I saw the talent in you, and I was never going to let it go." I have many of those.

Lisa Bragg:

How does that make you feel at the end of the day when you hear those things, and you carry that in your heart?

Vivian Pickard:

Very, very proud, and then it just makes me want to push them even more because I know there's more out there. I tell her all the time. She'll say, "Well, you know what? I don't know if I can take out anymore." I said, "Just hire more staff. You can do this." I said, "But just be strategic in how you move forward." I said, "Just like others started these major firms, you can push to be that too." I said, "Just be strategic as to how you move forward, but you can do it. Okay?"

Lisa Bragg:

How did you turn into a mentor? Did people come knocking on your door?

Vivian Pickard:

You know what? I'm not so sure if it started with someone reaching out to me or if it started with me owning it with women. I think it was more of my owning it with some women that worked for me and just saying, "This person is very skilled and can do so much more," and my pushing them. So, I think it started out as me really pushing a few, and the word got out at GM that, "You know what? This is something Vivian is very passionate about. If she's in your corner and will push you, then you might have opportunities." I mean, I would always take the time if they called me because I was obviously one of the few Black female executives there.

So, when they called me and asked me if they could have lunch, dinner, or whatever, if they were not happy in their positions, then I'd try to find a way of maneuvering them into something that they may find appealing. I used my connections there to help as best I could. For some, it worked out very, very well. When I see the work that some of them are doing right now, either internally and externally, I'm very, very proud. I think it started with my push instead of them pulling.

Lisa Bragg:

What is your main advice for people you mentor?

Vivian Pickard:

One of the main things I always tell them is that when you walk into a room, when you're presenting, if you're in a meeting, if you're there for an interview, whatever you're there for, walk-in as a 10. I tell them the whole package has to be 10 from your walk... the way you walk with the level of confidence, the way you talk with the level of confidence... the way you show up whatever it is. If you're showing up for... being a contractor, if you're showing up to be a firefighter, whatever you're showing up, you're showing up for the role of the CEO, whatever you're showing up for, you got to come in with that whole... the whole package that I am... If I'm interviewing for the CEO position, I'm walking in as that CEO, the whole package from the way I'm dressed, from my confident walk, from my confidence... speaking, whatever. I'm showing up as a 10, and what I say to them, "You have to show up as a 10. If I show up as a 3, if my package is a 3, then I am going to have to work to build up to that 8, 9, or 10. But if I come in as a 10, visually, then hopefully I can stay a 10 or definitely not move beyond an 8 or a 9. The visual component is important. Whether we like it or not, it is important, and we're all that way.

I mean, think about it. It's just common. Whether we want it, whether we like it or not, it's just the way we operate psychologically. So do not underestimate the fact that you have to walk-in as a 10. I don't care what it is. You got to walk-in as a 10. If it's a reception where you're trying to meet people, you got to walk-in as a 10. You have to. People are drawn to 10s. If you walk-in at a reception, people always want to know who that 10 is. They don't want to know who that 3 or 4 is, but they want to know who... that woman that walks in with a whole 10 package. People are always wondering, "Who is that? Who is that?". Everybody is going to try to find out who that is. They're never going to try to find out who that 3 or 4 is, right? So, you'll be walking out unnoticed, untalked to, or whatever, but that 10, everybody is going to be around that person.

Lisa Bragg:

So, many of us struggle. We know we want to bring ourselves as a 10, but sometimes being a 10 means a different look than what other people have, and that look might be that tattoos, or we hear a lot about friends who are Black women and their hair is an issue for some people or was an issue for some people. Can you talk to us a little bit about that? How do you balance that showing up as your authentic self with the expectations of what the corporate world either was or is?

Vivian Pickard:

This is a very important subject, especially for Black women. 20, 25 years ago, I recall saying to a Black woman that, you know, who wanted to be her true self that unfortunately, in this corporation, we're so traditional, you cannot be your true self. Unfortunately, 25 years ago, that was true. But I

wouldn't dare say that to an individual now because now, with hopefully all of the training that's going on in these corporations, we have to all first understand when somebody walks into that room, I can be a 10 with my tattoo. I can be a 10 with my hair however. As long as I'm walking in neat, clean, dressed appropriately, I can wear a nice business suit with a tattoo on my hand, a tattoo on my leg. I can look like a true, authentic businesswoman with a tattoo on my leg, with locks in my hair, with braids in my hair.

As long as I am neat, and I am dressed appropriately, and I walk-in with the same kind of confidence. It shouldn't matter about my hair. It should not matter about my tattoo. But I think we, as people that are receiving that person, we have to say in our mind, "Let me get that bias out of my head and look at this person as an individual that's being very authentic." Hopefully, that's what companies are looking for, are individuals that are truly, truly authentic. I wouldn't dare provide that advice to anybody now that you have to do this, you have to do that. Be yourself and I... as well as others, I think you have to first just understand in your mind, we are all biased. I don't care who you are, and anybody that says you're not, then you're lying. We all have our biases. We all do, and I don't care if it's the hair, the nails, the way you dress, whatever it is. But we all have to just understand that we have our biases, and just take that out of your head and say, "You know what? This individual being their authentic self. It may not be me, but this person can be very, very smart and have a tattoo all over his or her body. This is just what they choose to be."

I mean, I've talked to individuals where obviously they may have had so much tragedy in their life with their mother, their father, their siblings, and their tattoos are reflective of the pain that they have had in their family. So, I think we just all have to drop our biases and realize, "You know what? This is an individual. Let me forget about the tattoo, the hair, or whatever, and look at the authentic person and get past the crap."

Lisa Bragg:

Get past the crap. I love that because you even try on a different church now to get out of your comfort zone because we so often get into a comfort zone and then we're in this area, but it's really about how do we meet and talk to different people. Tell me a little bit about that.

Vivian Pickard:

I am a trustee in a very traditional Baptist church where you have to be dressed appropriately. The dress is very formal dressing, if you will, in terms of church dressing, if you will, with the hats, the suits, the whatever. The whole service is very traditional. So, during the early part of 2019 or so, obviously, I've been through a lot of bias training. So, in about 2018, a friend of mine asked if I would come over and visit her church. So, I said, "Oh, yeah," and I was surprised that she and her husband were now very active in a church. So, I said, "Okay.". So, I decided, "Oh, I'll go over." So, when I went over, I went overdressed in my traditional fashion of the Baptist church.

I felt like a dodo because I stood out because everybody there was very... young people, very casual. Some of them with jogging suits on, but I thought about this, and I said to myself, "If I saw many of these individuals on the street, I would be fearful of them, but they are here in this church with their families and their babies. They're standing up, and they're praising God, and they're worshiping as a family," but they have their pants hanging. Some of them have their pants hanging down a little bit. I said to myself, "This is truly, truly biased thinking, and everybody should just come in here and see these individuals that are here in the church is the true meaning of being biased."

I use that example very, very often of how I had to really check myself and understand that, "You know what? We have to forget about basing individuals on appearance or thinking about individuals on appearance, of how they look because it's important for us to go beyond that, so." Now, I go to that church often. I wear my jogging suit, throw my coat on, and go. I don't have to worry about getting dressed, and I love it. So, I probably go there now—I will not tell my minister—but more so than I go to my church because I feel more comfortable there. These individuals would never feel comfortable in my church.

Lisa Bragg:

Vivian, you've moved from being in corporate. You had a 40-year career in corporate, and now you're an entrepreneur. Tell me about being an entrepreneur. And you're an investor. You're not just an entrepreneur, you're also an investor. Tell me about the transition into this new life for you.

Vivian Pickard:

Well, I am having fun as an entrepreneur. I grew up obviously in a very... My father was an entrepreneur. My ex-husband is a big entrepreneur. So, I always was in that environment. When I retired from General Motors, I was going to golf and have fun, but the CEO of a company called me and asked if I would do some work with him, some consulting work with him. Then, I received a call from a couple of nonprofits, and they were willing to pay me and put me on a retainer, and I'm thinking, "Wait a minute now. Maybe this can be some kind of a business."

So, with that, I decided that I would do it because all of the opportunities really did sound intriguing and sounded as if it really was not working. It was something that I would enjoy doing. So, I took those on, and since then, my business has continued to grow. I am really, really having a ball with enjoying, learning about new businesses, and really helping with business development, business strategy, fundraising, the things that I enjoy doing, and somebody seemingly think that I'm pretty good at it. So, I'm having fun, but also have the opportunity with owning my own business of doing also being able to golf as often as I want to and spending as much time as I want to with family and friends. So, one of my girlfriends keeps telling me that, "Vivian, you need to write a book on how to retire because you're doing a great job at it." I said, "But I'm having fun. I really am having fun."

Lisa Bragg:

You're also very busy because you're giving back in so many big ways, and giving back to the world has been foundational, a pillar for you. Tell us what projects you're working on right now.

Vivian Pickard:

It's the Motown Museum, and we're raising money for a 40,000-square-foot expansion. It's a \$55 million project. You, ladies, have to come and see it when you're in Detroit, I'm telling you, it's amazing. We're taking the old... When Motown was originally built, all of the music that came out of Motown. Those buildings are still very much a part of it. Those are still in place, and they're going to be built into the Motown Museum.

The good thing about this, Lisa, is that from a social justice perspective, which is so key right now in really the whole world, Motown had a social justice component even back in the '70s. It was one of the few organizations that brought everybody together. I mean, if you could look at all of the music

back in the '70s, red, black, green, and yellow, they were all together, and they all produced music together. So that's one thing too that I'm very excited about of how hopefully the music, the showcase of music in Motown Museum, and all can help to bring our communities back together again.

Lisa Bragg:

Vivian, on Bold(h)er, we always ask these three questions. What's the boldest thing you've ever done?

Vivian Pickard:

The boldest thing that I've ever done was when one of my colleagues did some things. He saw me as competition, and he always tried to belittle me to elevate himself. So, when I heard of something he had done, I took him into his office and kind of... I was a bully. I bullied him. I blocked him and said some things to him that I probably would not have been proud of. I said to him that... after saying those things, and I said to him, "I will deny that I've said any of this." So, I think it was very bold of me to say that, but I think it needed to have been done.

And after that, I had no problems. He and I became friends. We were friends, but I think he saw me as this... because I was always happy and smiling as this lady that he could get away with doing stupid stuff to. So, I think I caught him really off guard when I approached him, and said to him, and basically said, "If you ever have any problems with me, come see me. Let's talk. I don't need you saying these things or doing these things to make...elevate your status. We can work together." But the main thing that came out of it is he and I became very good friends. To this day, we're very good friends.

Lisa Bragg:

When do you wish you were bolder?

Vivian Pickard:

I think I have a pretty good reputation. As a matter of fact, my reputation was always that I was always very candid and "don't ask her opinion if you don't want it because she's going to give it to you". So, I think I was pretty bold doing my career. Again, getting back to my mother, my mother was pretty bold, and she pushed her children to be pretty bold. Maybe there were some situations... Maybe there was a situation externally that I probably could have done more to stand up for someone that was caught in a bad situation, but I didn't because I didn't have all of the information that I needed at the time, and I felt bad. But of course, I didn't have the info that I needed to say the things that I needed to say, so...

Lisa Bragg:

Oh, that hindsight is always 20/20, isn't it?

Vivian Pickard:

Yeah.

Lisa Bragg:

What would you say to your 12-year-old self?

Vivian Pickard:

You can do it. Whatever it is, you can do it. So, all of the fear that I had from moving from place to place, starting out, thinking that everybody is so much brighter, they're not. To say to myself, "You can do it. Anything that anybody else can do, you can do it too. Have the confidence that you can do it."

Lisa Bragg:

Thank you Vivian for joining us today. That was Vivian Pickard of the Pickard Group. I'm Lisa Bragg and you've been listening to Bold(h)er, stories of and for women who stand out, brought to you by BMO for Women.

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