



Giving up on Perfection as the Standard

Amanda has transformed her love of travel and living abroad into a lucrative career as the creator of a digital platform that celebrates Black expats. But her rigorous efforts to represent the full spectrum of the Black experience have started to feel like a burden. Stevon helps us avoid the pitfalls of perfectionism by sharing practical tips on how to worry less about the "how" and focus more on what we want to accomplish.

Stevon Lewis:

What's up everybody? Welcome to How to Talk to High Achievers About Anything. I'm Stevon Lewis, a licensed cycle therapist. Today we welcome Amanda. Amanda is a digital storyteller and founder of the platform, the Black Expat. Her work in writing is inspired by her experiences living abroad and her enthusiasm for helping others to do the same, but her high expectations lead to perfectionism, which inevitably gets in the way of her larger goal. Let's get into it.

Amanda:

Hi, I'm Amanda Bates and I'm creator and founder of The Black Expat, which is a multimedia platform focused on the experiences of Black folks living abroad and also the host of the Global Chatter podcast, which is an offshoot of telling Black and brown stories and all its crazy twist and turns while living overseas.

I am the child of two individuals who depending on who's using the term expated or immigrated to the US, grew up in a cross-cultural household with two parents who came from two different tribes from the West African nation of Cameroon. And so identity has probably been at the core of my story from the day I entered the planet. And when I was 10, they made the decision to repatriate to their home country. If you know anything about Cameroon, it is bilingual English and French. My family is part of the English minority, they moved to the French majority. And so now you've got a 10 year old American kid who was a Black kid who was a minority in the US who was now looked like the majority, but was still a minority in a Black country. So that was my childhood, navigating the spaces and trying to figure out where do I fit because I understood a lot of spaces, but I didn't perfectly fit into any of them.

So with all those experiences, The Black Expat was formulated as an idea in the fall of 2015 and when it was first launched, I will be honest, it was throwing spaghetti on the wall. I just wanted to have pictures and stories of Black people living abroad, wasn't really sure because I was going for representation. It has changed over the years as we have seen media change where we still have inspirational stories and these people are amazing who are doing this, but we've also pivoted towards more advice and counsel because as we've grown, people have grown and they now want to know, okay, I'm seriously looking at this how do I do it? So we moved away from just the, you can do it to practically, this is how you do it.

One of the challenges is something that is as big in general, it's trying to make sure all the voices are represented. And I know that that's not necessarily the case when you look at other media, but for me, I feel a heart for that because as someone who's been privileged to have their foot in so many different cultural landscapes and so many different communities, I feel it is very important to honor and represent the different voices and experiences, even if they're different from mine. And so probably the biggest weight I feel is to always have a disclaimer and say, okay, we are telling this story or we're giving this advice but I recognize some of us are speaking from passport privilege, some of us are speaking from language privilege, some of us are speaking from financial privilege and making sure that we honor that. Because if you're going to have a term that says it's Black, it has to be inclusive.

I think when you are someone who has a very big vision for everything, there's this idea of how perfect it should be. You want things in a certain way, you want them to look a certain way. I know that I'm very visual. I want to capture things in a way that reflects what's in my head. But I think the reality is that there are times where you have to accept and I have to accept that it's not always going to be perfect, but you can still get the message across. And that can be a challenge when you're someone who not only do you have high expectations, but when you're the only one or the first one doing something.

And so if you have already set a bar where folks are like, I've never seen this before, and everything you do is amazing, there's this fear of disappointing folks and not doing things to the standard of which they have become accustomed to or the way you've perceived they've become accustomed to. And I think that's one of the things that I go back and forth all the time, it is a constant struggle between staying aligned with the mission and goal of what I want to do with The Black Expat. And also being like it doesn't have to be perfect.

I do think that part of the desire for perfection comes from the fact that I think particularly when I think about Black women and I think about Black women in this

space, and I really think about women of color and marginalized women, it's that this idea that we often hold ourselves to an even higher standard because not only are we doing something that may look different in our own communities, but we're also doing something where, I hate to say it, but if we're measuring against the majority, we want it show up and we want to look professional. And the truth of the matter is that to a certain degree, I got to let some of that go because I'm still hitting the goal even if in my mind I'm like, well, it's got to look like this. But then I've got to question why do I think it needs to look a certain way anyway if that measure wasn't inclusive of me in the first place?

Stevon Lewis: Thank you for sharing your experience with us, Amanda. What stood out for me as I listened to Amanda's story is how she's kind of made a career out of her life. That was awesome to hear that she's, by her own kind of terminology, an expat. But also interestingly enough is the child of immigrants grew up in America, but then is going back to her parents' kind of home country of Cameroon. And so that was a really interesting take on her story of how even when it may look like you fit in and not really having that feeling internally aligned with that.

One of the first things I noticed, and this is very common in my work with high achievers, is Amanda's language around perfection. So if you listen to the way she speaks about things, I have to be all inclusive. I got to tell everyone's story and she goes out of her way in her work to make sure that she's not leaving anyone out. Capitalize, all caps, anyone. Here's what Amanda said.

Amanda: Always have a disclaimer and say, okay, we are telling this story or we're giving this advice, but I recognize some of us are speaking from passport privilege, some of us are speaking from language privilege, some of us are speaking from financial privilege and making sure that we honor that...

Stevon Lewis: Part of me made this connection that for her, if she's someone who is kind of been in different environment and doesn't always feel like she might fit in, then the way to kind of hide the difference is to be perfect. And so I think her perfectionism is a result of that. It is an attempt for her to disguise or to put a veil over or a facade up around whatever this difference is. Part of that also then suggests that for her, she's kind of connected difference with being unpleasant or negative, and difference just means not the same.

The problem with most high achievers is that they get stuck in focusing on how something was accomplished versus what was accomplished. I think that's the part that we've got to teach them how to let go of. If I want to make breakfast, it's important that I have the ingredients, the utensils and stuff to make a nice breakfast. I can make the eggs and make the bacon and make the toast, turkey bacon for all my people, but it's about, it's not getting caught up in that part of it.

And that's what I did with the perfection I've got to have now, it has to be turkey bacon, it can't be pork. That's kind of the road that they go down, did you make a good breakfast or did you make the perfect breakfast? Were the eggs? Just right? Did you make all the eggs the way each person wanted them? What bread did you use? And you get caught up in how something is happening as opposed to did people get fed? I think it's important to say, did I address the issue, the hunger?

One of the things I teach the people I work with, the high achievers that I work with and I think this will be helpful for the people listening, is the concept of scaling. You want to accomplish something and when you focus on the how you are accomplishing something, you are saying, then I have to accomplish it at a 10. When I introduce the concept of scaling, I'm saying, You mean to tell me then that if you did it to a 9, it wouldn't be okay or a 9.5 it's unacceptable or an 8.9. And so getting them to start thinking about how low or how far from perfect could something still be acceptable and good to turn in. When they think about it that way, they have to acknowledge that, well, I want it to be a 10, but it doesn't have to be a 10. I wouldn't throw it out if it were a 9. Then okay, did we get it to a 9? And if they're able to say that, then it's like, okay, move on. We don't need to keep pressing to get to a 10 because it doesn't really change that much what we've accomplished already.

So I really am strategic about getting high achievers to think in a way that perfection isn't really attainable. And if you do get there, it's not sustainable. You can't live there. If that's what we're holding onto kind of what I call defaulting to perfection, then what you've done is you've created this definition of success that is so narrow that most everything else will be a failure. And if you do that, then you are preventing yourself from enjoying what it is that you've accomplished. And so there becomes this kind of fear of success because it's not ever as good as it could be for high achievers when in reality it's already leaps and bounds ahead of where most people could ever dream of getting to. And you're so focused on what didn't happen that you can't be okay with what did happen.

In her experience, Amanda becomes hyper focused on not offending or making sure that she's not dismissing or ignoring any individual that could possibly connect with a piece or a part of her story. Again, there's that perfectionism language. She wants to connect with everyone. She wants everyone to feel included. I don't know that she's that powerful to do that. And I think oftentimes what high achievers do is kind of create this belief that there is a way to get everything done and done correctly. And I'm using air quotes around correctly because for them there is a right and wrong, and for me there's more of a kind of subjective understanding of success or what's accomplished.

So I think that also when we talk about Amanda's story is that I think she overestimates how negative the response will be if she wasn't perfect in making sure that everyone was included. And I think that that's a thing that high achievers often do. Again, that worst case scenario, people will be so upset with me, they will be so negatively impacted if I do one thing imperfectly and that's not really the case. And I think letting go of that responsibility or that belief that the worst case scenario or worst possible outcome is going to happen will allow you to be more free flowing and natural and authentic in ways that people can connect with and identify with.

The last thing I'll say is that for Amanda and for high achievers like her, one thing I've also found is that when you are operating kind of in your gift, is people want to see you succeed. And so they are kind of overly sweet when it comes to how you are doing what you're doing. They are rooting for your success. They are kind of championing your ability to accomplish things. Think of it like going to a comedy show. I don't think most people go to a comedy show so that they can boo the person off of there, they're hoping that the comedian isn't funny. They're going primed to laugh. I am ready to laugh at something when I go to that show. I am wanting you to say anything, so I'm ready to laugh at whatever it is you say. You can come out and say, hey, you guys look really tired. I'm going to fall out laughing because it's so funny. So it's easier for you to be successful when people are already on your team, and I think you've got to remind yourself that most people aren't really against you.

And that's a wrap. Thank you so much for listening to How to Talk to High Achievers About Anything. We have really big plans for our show and we want you to be a part of it. We want to hear about your successes and challenges, your sacrifices, the ways you've celebrated and what's ahead as you grow. Send our producer Virginia an email and we'll get your story on the show. She's that virginia@lwcstudios.com. How to Talk to High Achievers About Anything is an original production of LWC Studios. Our show is produced by Virginia Laura, editing and production support from Jordan Cowling. [inaudible 00:13:43] Antigua is the creator and executive producer. I'm Stevon Lewis. On Twitter and Instagram at Talk To Achievers. Bye everybody.

Chandi: I'm Chandi Guntupalli and I'm a nonprofit fundraiser. I'm based in New Jersey, but originally from Michigan, and currently, I am a donor relations manager at a nonprofit organization that works with farmers in 10 different countries across the world. But I started off my career as an advocate for survivors of sexual assault and domestic violence. So, I was a programs person that fell into nonprofit fundraising by chance. And I was a grant writer for many years and now I have moved on to the individual donor relations side. I was born in India and I am an Indian Canadian who's about to become an American. I've lived in four different countries. I grew up in India, Kuwait, Canada, and the US. It's been an interesting journey being a person of color, specifically a South Asian woman in the nonprofit industry in the US.

So, most people in nonprofit fundraising, and especially in senior positions, are white. When you do see people of color, they are usually mid-level employees or even lower-level employees. Which is really shocking because the beneficiaries of the nonprofit services for the most part are people of color. The most striking example of when I realized that I was different or I was a minority, besides obviously not seeing many people in the industry who look like me, I was at a networking event in New York City and it was a room full of women. It was specifically a women in nonprofit fundraising networking event. I was probably the youngest or one of the few youngest women. And one of the two South Asian women, the other one was a board member of a nonprofit. And then you have me.

Chandi: I remember it felt like they didn't really want to know about me or they didn't want to know my perspectives. I was sitting at the table and I had some paper or I had a book and I left because I needed to use the restroom. Clearly, I was sitting there. So, when I came back, this older lady was sitting in the chair and my book was off to the side. You know how they say that it's important to be at the table making the decisions? I was at the table then I was pushed off. I didn't talk to my boss about it because I really thought I would be coming across as dramatic. But I think if my boss was a person of color, I would've been more comfortable telling her about this experience, and I didn't.

I had an imposter syndrome before, but it just got so much more heightened. Nonprofit fundraising is stressful in that it develops this kind of turnover for people. So, with this front-facing role that I have interacting with donors, I am in a way the face of the organization and it makes a difference in terms of my confidence. And so, thinking about this incident and figuring out what I want to do with my life, I did want to leave the industry at some point, but I was able to find a great organization called Women of Color in Development and I felt like I found a place where yes, I can be myself. And I think it's just great that when you do find your niche or you find your people, it makes a difference.

And also, my current organization that I work at full-time is amazing and I have never really felt as valued as I have. So, I think it's really important for people of color to be in nonprofit fundraising positions because we are able to provide a different perspective. I mean, I'm not lumping people of color into one, but it is important to understand and realize where we're coming from in this industry. If funders are interested in racial equality, there's a lot of foundations that have made statements about it, that's great and that's important, but that should also carry on to the nonprofits fundraising team. The beneficiaries of the organization need to be a people of color as well.

Lewis: Chandi, thanks for coming on the show and sharing everything that's been happening with you. So, as I was listening to Chandi talk about her story, she is very, very well-traveled, lots of experiences having grown up in multiple environments and countries. I think part of that is the idea of trying to also learn to fit in when we go to those different places. And I can't help to think that she's taken or bought along with her part of that story when she discussed being a Southeast Asian woman and working in an environment where there aren't a ton of people that look like her in the room. What came up for me is this feeling of not being seen or maybe being dismissed. And she corroborated that with some of her story and her experience.

Lewis: For high achievers, there's this thing of wanting to fit in and feel like, "I belong in the room." And I think that there's a disconnect between our experience, especially when we're talking about being a person of color and being in a space that is majority white, that we take on the feeling of not belonging and it's not ours. And what I mean when I say not taking ownership over, not feeling like you belong in the room, I'm saying you have to be critically aware of whether or not people are used to someone like you being in the room versus you telling yourself you don't belong in the room. And to me, those are two different things.

So, the way I think about it is if I'm, let's take a sport like hockey, there aren't many Black people that play hockey, that doesn't mean that I'm not supposed to play if I have the talent, abilities, and skills, we're just not used to seeing many Black people play it. And so, don't take ownership over the fact that there are few in number as a determinant that you shouldn't be doing that thing you're doing. So, the way I think about it if I were to try to get Chandi to think about her deservingness in being in a space, and recognizing that me as a man has a different level of privilege to be able to maybe speak up for myself, even though that might be limited by me being a Black man, thinking about the safety for being able to speak up and what that will mean, I try to get people to think about the idea that if you're in a room, then you're supposed to be in that room.

Lewis: And so you can't think of it like it's a privilege for you to be there. So, instead of saying like, "Thank you for letting me be here," it's more of a, "You're welcome that I am in this space." And I think if you have that energy, it changes how you navigate. And so, if you're in a room that you belong in, that is yours, that is for you, like if you were at your aunt's house, or your uncle's house, or your grandparents' house, you feel comfortable, you feel at home. So, you wouldn't let a stranger come in and tell you how to behave in your own house. That doesn't mean that we have to be rude or we have to be offensive, but it's saying that, "Hey, I'm comfortable here too, just as comfortable as you are, and so I'm going to act and behave in that same way."

So, if the person who moved her books and her belongings was comfortable enough to do so because they felt like, "Hey, this is my place and my position," I can politely tap them on the shoulder and say, "Yes, my stuff was here. You need to recognize that and respect that so I would politely ask that you would find another place to sit because I was sitting here and we can deal with that discomfort together." Because our tendency is to shrink, right? We don't want to be the troublemaker or the cause for bad vibes or anything like that. Here's how Chandi put it.

Chandi: I was at the table then I was pushed off. I didn't talk to my boss about it because I really thought I would be coming across as dramatic.

Lewis: I think that's, again, unfairly taking ownership over something that's not mine. I didn't do anything. I didn't move anybody else's stuff, my stuff was moved. Something was done to me and it's okay for me to acknowledge that that happened. If we don't act like we belong and we continue to shrink or we take ownership over someone else's behavior because we don't want to make them feel bad, the message they'll get is that their behavior is okay. I think it's really important for high achievers to understand that it feels good and empowering to see other people that look like them or that are operating at the same level that look like them when they enter into different spaces and environments. The thing I caution against is making that a requirement. I know it feels lonely. I know it feels like you're on an island.

Also, don't discredit yourself, or diminish your abilities, or how you're able to show up in what you can accomplish because you aren't seeing a model for that in front of you or ahead of you. And oftentimes, what I hear in my work with high achievers is that the self doubt starts to come in because they're saying, "There isn't anyone doing what I'm doing," or, "I don't have a model to follow." And that might be true for some people that they need someone to go before them for them to be successful. Some people are really good at not having a model to

follow and still finding a way to reach success. And so, I don't want high achievers to kind of discount that ability in themselves.

Lewis: And I do recognize that it feels better when I walk into a room and I look around and the first thing I do is scan to see, are there any other Black people in the room? And then once I notice that, it's like, are there any other Black men in the room? Because I want to see how safe I feel in being able to show up as me. Also, if there isn't anyone in the room that looks like me, so they don't check those two boxes, that doesn't mean I'm leaving, it just means that like, "Okay, well this space isn't designed for Stevon Lewis, a Black man, but I'm going to stay in here and this space is going to learn to be ready, and prepared, and accepting of me. And I'm going to find a way to make that happen."

And so, for Chandi in the work that she does, it seems like she's going to frequently be one-off in a room and not one of many, but one of one or one of two, a very low number. You have the right to show up as yourself just as the other people are showing up as themselves. We hope you also have that same privilege and that same right to be able to do that unapologetically. I also think that it's important for you to know your worth. That if you've made it into that room, it's because you've done a lot of things right. Not one thing, not two things, but several, a multitude that to get to a level where you are an executive or very high up in an organization, you had to work your way through things and accepting that and knowing that you bring value to the spaces that you inhabit.

Also, kind of being really clear about when those spaces don't feel affirming and when those spaces don't allow a lot of people like you or that look like us in, then it's not a matter of something being wrong with you as an individual, there's something wrong with that space, that that space has been designed in a way that it hasn't allowed for more individuals that bring what you bring to the table to be in. And that's a loss on the environment, not a loss on you. High achievers, high achievers of color have to kind of grapple with and learn to accept that the environments or the people who are in those environments that don't allow for a lot of us in the room or in that space, it's not our problem, it's theirs. And they need to kind of figure that out, but I'm going to sit comfortably like I'm at my grandma's house.

Lewis: And that's a wrap. Thank you so much for listening to *How to Talk to High Achievers about Anything*. We have really big plans for our show, and we want you to be a part of it. We want to hear about your successes and challenges, your sacrifices, the ways you've celebrated, and what's ahead as you grow. Send our producer Virginia an email, and we'll get your story on the show. She's at virginia@lwcstudios.com.

How to Talk to High Achievers about Anything is an original production of LWC Studios. Our show is produced by Virginia Lora. Editing and production support from Jordan Kauwling. Mixed by Tren Lightburn. Juleyka Lantigua is the creator and Executive Producer. I'm Stevon Lewis. On Twitter and Instagram we're @TalkToAchievers. Bye everybody.

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ERASING THE MARGINS