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Blackstone exec says elite Ivy League degrees aren't good enough—new analysts need to 'work harder' and be nice



Jon Gray, president and chief operating officer of Blackstone.
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A top Blackstone executive says that elite degrees will only get you so far—people with qualities like strong work ethic, an entrepreneurial mindset, and kindness are those who stand out in the long run.

In a recent LinkedIn post, Blackstone President and COO Jon Gray told new analysts they should not "kiss up to the bosses" or "sharp elbow" their peers to advance.

"Most of you went to elite universities. You did really well, you were in the top of your class. You are people who are successful by nature and hardworking," Gray acknowledged in a video posted to his LinkedIn account. "But when I look around at the people who truly succeeded at Blackstone, it's not the 'good enough' crowd, right? It's the people who are like, hey, 'I'm gonna make sure I get this absolutely right.'"

Gray said those who rise the furthest at Blackstone have the capacity to work well with others and "innovate to make the firm a better place."

"The mistake people make is they're like, 'I'm going to really kiss up to the bosses, and I'm going to be sharp-elbowed with the people side by side and the people at the bottom,'" Gray said.

He urged analysts instead to "be as nice to everybody you touch inside the building, outside the building," calling kindness "an amazing superpower to have."

To succeed, Gray told employees they should "work harder and care more; this is not complicated." He also encouraged them to think like entrepreneurs and "treat people in a really great way, the way you would like to be treated."

The importance of skills-based hiring

Gray's comments come as young Americans navigate a tough job market. Newly revised data from the Bureau of Labor Statistics released Tuesday show the U.S. economy created nearly one million fewer jobs over the past year than previously thought.

The weak labor market has some Gen Z workers questioning whether a college degree is worth the cost. A recent survey by Indeed found that more than one-third of recent graduates say their degree was a "waste of money," citing soaring tuition and the impact of artificial intelligence on business.

Gray comments come as businesses place more importance on emotional intelligence, or EQ, a skill increasingly seen as essential for executives. A 2024 LinkedIn report found a 31% increase since 2018 in C-suite leaders highlighting soft skills on their profiles. The most commonly listed skills included giving effective presentations, strategic thinking, communication, strategic vision and conflict resolution.

Aneesh Raman, the chief economic opportunity officer at LinkedIn, previously told *Fortune* that "these people skills are going to become more and more core to not just how someone becomes an executive, but the work of executives: Mobilizing teams, and building a company that is human-centric."

The shift to skills-based hiring is growing globally as more companies implement artificial intelligence into their workflows, according to Great Place to Work CEO Michael Bush.

"The overwhelming focus of the last five years—and among companies on our [Fortune 100 Best Companies to Work For] list—is around skills and skills development," Bush told *Fortune*. "They're not even talking about degrees

now. They're talking about skills. What skills do you have and what skills are going to be needed in the future?"

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