



Leaders Have to Build Time into Their Schedules Just for Thinking

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Dave Goebel, Board Director at Jack in the Box, Inc., and a mentor and coach at The ExCo Group, speaks with Adam Bryant about the power of silence in coaching conversations, why leaders consistently shortchange their recharge time, and the courage required to deliver tough love. The conversation explores how effective mentoring balances deep listening with direct accountability.

Q. What is the secret sauce of effective mentoring?

A. For me, it starts with probing by asking really good questions and then listening deeply and being present. The next steps are clarifying and confirming. Did I hear you right? Are we on the same page? Once we are, we know what we have to deal with, and then we shift back to probing again.

Then I will often say, what do you want to achieve here? And I'll pause and let the silence do the heavy lifting. It's so important to give the client space to think about ways to solve whatever challenge they are facing.

Once they share their answer, I'll ask, what is one step you could take this week? Let's start to eat the apple one bite at a time, rather than just seeing it as a multi-month challenge. During that entire conversation, I'm watching their eyes to understand what might be brewing in the back of their mind that they would like to discuss.

Q. How do you establish trust quickly?

A. Trust is established in part by sharing, when appropriate, stories from my personal and professional journey, including the highs and lows. And when I start any new engagement, I share with the client that there are two very simple rules for the work we do together.

One is that our confidentiality is inviolate. And for the second, I'll tell them, "My commitment to you, and I always ask first, is that there will be times when I need to kind of whack you with a two by four, and I will do that because that's what you've asked me to do at the right moments. It won't always be easy for you, and it won't always be easy for me. But that's my commitment."

Q. Is there a tool or framework that often creates the greatest unlock for you?

A. I always use the time-allocation exercise, and I do that with a broader lens on them as a whole person, not just for their career. I'll start with a flip chart that will say 720 hours—which is how much time we all have in a 30-day month. Then we'll get more specific about how they spend their time, including time with family and the things they need to do and should do to take care of themselves, including exercise.

Then we'll translate those categories into a percent of total, and we'll put red or green arrows next to each to signal whether they want to spend more or less time doing that. What is very consistent through that exercise is to see how frequently leaders shortchange themselves with the time they need to get away from work to recharge their batteries and think because the thinking our clients do is the real added value they provide to their organization.

Q. Is there an example of a difficult conversation that you had with a client that ultimately landed in a good place?

A. Another exercise I often do focuses on the leader's organizational chart. I'll ask for their opinions on two questions about each person. First, give me a letter grade in terms of their performance—A-plus to D-minus. Second, rate them high, medium, or low in terms of their potential.

When I did this with a client, there was one person on their team who they rated a C-minus, with low potential. I told the client that this meant one of two things. One, that it's an all-hands-on-deck moment to give this person all the development help they need to shore up their shortcomings.

And if that doesn't work, then you need to make a call and move this person off your team. We put a date on the calendar to make that call, and then the client went beyond that by about 60 days. I circled back with my client to say, "You've asked me to hold you accountable. Let's take another lap through that same exercise we did months ago."

When I saw that he gave the same C-minus to the person on his team, I said, "This is not going to be pleasant for you to hear, but why is that person still in your organization?" Three weeks later, they were gone, and the client wrote me a note saying that it was one of the most valuable things I could have done for him, because it gave him a much clearer picture of where the bar needed to be set for that particular role.

Q. What's the best lesson you've learned from one of your mentors?

A. I learned the importance and value of delivering tough love when you have to deliver tough love. I'm a relationship guy. I love building the foundational aspects of strong relationships and trust. He taught that there are times when you have to have a tough, direct conversation, but it's got to be matched by love and the strength of the fundamental relationship that you've built.

Q. What is the wisest thing you've ever read, heard, or said in the context of leadership?

A. There are three important pillars of effective leadership. One is to always be grounded in your principles. Number two is to be crystal clear about what you stand for—let people know what you expect and where you're going. And three, be consistent, so that your behavior is aligned with your words. When a leader does those three things, I find people will run through walls for them.