

THE CRAFT OF MENTORING



You Have To Manage The Narrative. Otherwise, Everybody Will Create Their Own Narratives.

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Saar Gillai, former CEO of Teridion and Senior Vice President at HP Cloud, and a mentor and coach at The ExCo Group, shares his wisdom with Adam Bryant. With over 30 years of experience in the technology sector, Gillai explores three key themes: building trust as the foundation of coaching, helping leaders define their personal brand, and the power of imagining perfection before working backward to reality.

Q. What are the keys to being an effective coach?

A. You've got to build trust. And you do that in part by sharing stories about yourself, so that they see you as human and as someone who's dealt with similar challenges and made mistakes yourself along the way. Once that trust is established, people tend to open up and share a lot more about themselves. I am friends with all the people I coach. It doesn't mean I don't hold their feet to the fire. But having them see me as a friend is really important.

You also have to keep things real. Sometimes people are dealing with situations, like a bad boss, that are just not going to get better. There's no magical skill you're going to use to fix their particular situation. There's not always a solution, and sometimes you just have to help them manage through it.

As a coach, you also have to be able to give people tools that will work for their personality and for the context in which they operate. We work with people who are very successful. They're not going to become a different person. But you've got to give them a tool so that they are aware in the moment that they need to take a different approach. As Mike Tyson says, everyone has a plan until they're punched in the face. So how do I get them to remember to do the right thing when they're under stress? You've got to give them tools.

Another important conversation we have with our clients is about the leadership brand they want to have and how that may be different from how people perceive them. The delta between those two is the opportunity. People need to figure out why there's a difference between the brand they want and the brand they have, and then how they can start to work on closing that gap.

One way I have this conversation is to talk about the right hand and the left hand. It's based on the fact that you're born with your preferences—usually also the things you're good at—and the things that got you to where you are. Those are your strengths in the same way that, say, your right hand is dominant. However, in coaching the emphasis is usually on identifying and working on the “left hand” skills that you haven't focused on as much in past. Perhaps they need to be better at strategic planning. Or perhaps they need to stop micromanaging their team. It's about helping people become more balanced.

Q. What do you consider the most challenging aspect of being a mentor?

A. You have to stay balanced yourself and make sure you don't suffer from Stockholm Syndrome and become too sympathetic with your client. Yes, you're on their side. But at the end of the day, you've got to keep the bigger picture in mind and give them a dose of reality. You have to be able to tell them that they are not taking the right approach. Your job is to make them better.

Q. What are the best lessons you've learned from a mentor yourself?

A. You've got to manage the narrative, and you have to create a narrative that everyone will understand. When you're dealing with complicated issues, and with tens of thousands of people in large organizations, you have to create a very clear narrative. If you don't, everybody will just come up with their own narratives. You can't assume that people understand what you're up to. You've got to put it in simple terms. What's the three-point plan?

My former boss Ron Sege, who was COO of 3Com, used to say to me that you have to know when you are facing a decision or a dilemma. With decisions, there's usually a right answer. But sometimes the situation is dynamic, there is no right answer, and doing more analysis is not going to help you. Those are dilemmas, and you just have to make a choice and move on. Some people have a very hard time with that.

Q. Other advice you often share with your clients?

A. One approach that I tell them to use when they are going through any transformation is to stop thinking about constraints or challenges and to imagine what perfect look like. You should start there and then work backward to the realities you're facing. Then you at least have a model in your head of what might be possible if you stopped thinking about constraints.

As one example, if you're running a 20-year-old company and thinking about integrating AI more, why not start by asking, if we were building an AI-native company from scratch, would it look like? Now that may not be realistic for your context, but at least you have a model about what is possible. That approach helps people think outside the box.

It's also a useful approach for any leader to push beyond the information they are getting from the people below them. After all, people are good at creating narratives and putting the most positive spin on what they are doing. And I've seen leaders whose undoing was due in part to the fact that they believed a lot of what they were being told when they should have been more skeptical.

So I always tell my clients, before someone starts giving you an update, have a clear idea of what the best story would sound like and then compare it to what you are hearing. If you're in a business review, you want to hear that sales are exploding. And so you'll be more skeptical when somebody uses starts saying that there's a lot of momentum in sales. So be clear on what you want to hear, and then you'll be more attuned to what is missing. That way, you're controlling what you're looking for, as opposed to being at the mercy of their storytelling.