

## THE CRAFT OF MENTORING



# The Most Important Leadership Lessons Come From the Heart

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**Akira Hoshino**, auditor for CARE International Japan, former CEO at Century Medical Inc., and coach and mentor at The ExCo Group, speaks with Adam Bryant about the foundation of trust in mentoring relationships, why the most important leadership lessons come from experience rather than textbooks, and the wisdom of approaching change with the flexibility of water.

**Bryant: What for you is the key to effective mentoring?**

**Akira:** The most important thing is to build trust with your mentee. Unless they trust you, they will ignore whatever you ask them to do. They won't listen and they won't care. But once you build that trust and respect, things change. They will listen to what I'm saying. They will want to understand what I'm saying.

**Bryant: How do you build that trust?**

**Akira:** It starts with listening carefully to the stories they share about how they were brought up—their families, how they were educated, the challenges they've faced in life. You need to understand them at a deeply human level before you start mentoring. And that includes being able to put yourself in their shoes if they are having trouble with something. You want to show empathy and some degree of sympathy, as if you were one of their siblings.

**Bryant: What do you find is the biggest difference in how coaches and mentors operate?**

**Akira:** Experience is very important, and this is a big differentiator here at ExCo. A lot of coaches are professional consultants or college professors who have never led a business themselves. So they may be book-smart, but the most important lessons about leadership come from the heart, and you only get that through experience.

**Bryant: Is there a particularly difficult conversation you had to have with a client?**

**Akira:** With one client, my mandate was to make him the next CEO of the company. But when I tried to mentor him, he said, "I don't want to be CEO. I never want to be CEO." Because I had been a CEO myself, I was able to tell him all the good and exciting things about being a CEO, as well as all the hardships that you are going to encounter.

Despite his initial resistance, he ultimately did become a CEO, and he said he was grateful for the advice I gave him about all the good things about the job—that you can have the control and freedom to do what you believe is right. That freedom and that authority is good. If you have some purpose or goal in your life, it's the best position you can have to realize your goals.

**Bryant: What's the best lesson you learned from one of your mentors over the years?**

**Akira:** Earlier in my career, I was facing a tough decision, and I really felt unsure about which choice to make. And my mentor at the time said to me, "Whichever path you choose is okay. And once you choose it, don't look back, and just move forward and believe that your choice was right." That was a good lesson.

**Bryant: What's the wisest thing that you've ever heard, read, or said about leadership?**

**Akira:** Given how fast the world is changing, it's important to be flexible. And someone told me once to be like water, because water can change its form in any way. Accept changes that may happen.