

THE CRAFT OF MENTORING

The **CRAFT** of **MENTORING** with **Randy Walker**



Everybody is a Customer. Everybody is a Client.

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Randy Walker, former IBM executive and a mentor and coach at The ExCo Group, shares insights with Adam Bryant on the power of deep listening, building trust through vulnerability, and mastering time management as a senior leader.

Bryant: What for you is the secret sauce to effective mentoring?

Walker: It goes back to experience. I was very lucky in my career in IBM. I worked for four great CEOs who were all very different, with different super powers—one who was focused on strategy, one who was incredible at operations and globalization, one who built our consulting business and was incredible with clients and partners, and one who is a brilliant technologist and visionary.

You learn from working for different leaders that it's not one-size-fits-all, and that you have to be who you are and know your strengths. But you also can learn from every successful leader and take the best parts of them to build your leadership style. That's a lot of the work we do with our mentoring clients to help them raise their game as leaders.

I also learned an important lesson about listening that I reflect on a lot in my coaching work today. I had always believed that I was a great listener, and I thought it was one of my superpowers. But when I was at IBM and a client of ExCo myself, I got feedback from colleagues who said that I used

to be a great listener. But after I became CEO, I became very busy and simply gave people answers. They wanted the old Randy who would listen to them. And so I changed my approach.

A lot of mentoring is about really listening and taking the time to understand. It's not about just giving someone the answer, but helping them come to their own answers. To me, that is the secret sauce.

Bryant: How do you quickly build trust?

Walker: It's about taking time early on to get to know each other. That's a two-way street. I need to be vulnerable and share my biggest success and failures, both personally and professionally. And I need to learn about the client's history through the lifeline exercise, where they share their highs and lows.

You have to take the time, up front and face to face, to build that mutual trust. Because I want to be my client's trusted advisor, and I want them to feel that they can tell me anything. After all, we're only here for one reason, which is to make this leader as successful as they can be. There are no other agendas.

Bryant: Which tools or frameworks lead to the biggest unlocks for you with your clients?

Walker: One is a discussion about time management. Usually the clients we're mentoring are stepping into a new role, often in the C-suite. And I have found that everybody tends to be really bad at managing their time. The only thing that we can control is how we manage our time. It's the tool that we use to decide what we drive ourselves, what to delegate, and what to ditch.

I spend a lot of time on that, because even people who think they manage their time well tend to do too much firefighting and they don't spend enough time thinking about long-term strategic impact.

So I will go through their calendar with them and ask, why are you doing that yourself? Why can't you delegate that? Who would you delegate it to? That conversation in turns leads to a discussion about the quality of their team, and whether they are good enough to delegate to.

Another common discussion I have is about the fact that a lot of what helped them get promoted—having an open door and being friendly and accessible—can become a negative at a senior level. You don't have the time for people to come in and do that.

At the highest levels, your job is not to be liked. Your job is to be respected. Because senior leaders have to make hard choices and then have hard conversations, including whether to let people go.

Bryant: Is there a tough conversation you had to have with a coaching client that ultimately ended in a good place?

Walker: I was working with a very senior leader at one of the investment firms. He was not self-aware, and he was breaking glass and causing a lot of issues. I always say that if a leader

is self-aware and they're willing to change, then we can do anything with them. So I asked this leader, "On a scale of one to 10, how open are you to change?"

He said, "I'm a 12. I'll do anything. I'll change anything." He also considered himself very self-aware. But the feedback from his colleagues was that they considered him rigid, inflexible, and not self-aware. So we had a very hard conversation, and he was very resistant to what the data in the

feedback was saying. “I don’t know where this came from,” he said. “This is not me. I don’t believe any of it.”

We basically agreed to take a break for a couple of weeks, because I felt that we shouldn’t go forward if he wasn’t willing to accept the feedback. Ultimately, he did come back and say, “You’re right. This is me. But I don’t like what I see in the mirror. This is very uncomfortable. But I’m willing to do the work.”

Bryant: What is a common “Randy-ism” that you’ve repeated a lot over the years?

Walker: Everybody’s a customer. Coming from sales and consulting like I did, you learn to always put yourself in the shoes of your customers and clients so that you understand their point of view. How are they feeling? What are they looking for? What are their questions?

In business and in our work as mentors, you really have to put yourself in your client’s shoes. And it’s true for everybody you work with. Everybody is a customer. Everybody is a client.