

THE CRAFT OF MENTORING



Nobody Can Take Away Your Integrity. Only You Can.

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Josh Walden, former Senior Vice President and General Manager of Intel's Product Assurance and Security Group, and a mentor and coach at The ExCo Group, shares insights with Adam Bryant on enterprise-level thinking, building future-ready leaders, and the critical need for human accountability in AI adoption.

Bryant: What are the common themes that come up in your mentoring work with clients?

Walden: A big one is making sure they are thinking at the enterprise level, and that means breaking down silos and thinking about what is best for the corporation overall. That can be challenging because many companies are downsizing as part of their transformation efforts. I'm seeing some executives trying to hold on to longstanding business models, rather than shifting resources to potential areas of growth and innovation inside their organizations.

Another topic is the importance of building leaders for the future. Do you have the right leaders, and are you able to make tough decisions about people who may have been successful in the past but likely won't have the same impact in the future? That doesn't necessarily mean that the person should be let go, but they might be in the wrong role for the future. It's difficult, and I've had several clients who recognized that they had to make a change, but they didn't do it fast enough.

Bryant: What are some other challenging conversations that you've had?

Walden: I always try, early on in an engagement, to get to the core of what motivates a person. I've had clients who say they want to be a senior vice president or the CEO. Sometimes I will ask them, do you really want that job or do you just want the title? I've had clients who get promoted because the board thought they were ready to move up, but maybe that's not what my clients wanted for themselves.

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

Walden: Nobody can take away your integrity, only you can. Unfortunately, I've seen too many people who have chosen to lose their integrity. And once it's gone, and people see it, the trust is gone.

Bryant: What are some forward-looking topics that are coming up in your conversations with clients?

Walden: Every company says it needs to use AI more, and they make the assumption that they will need fewer people because AI will have such an impact in terms of efficiency and effectiveness. But I often warn clients that the people who are utilizing AI tools need to understand how the AI tools work and what they are doing.

What if it breaks? Do they know how to fix it? What if there are software outages? Employees are being told to be more effective and efficient, but they're not doing the quality checks that they used to do.

Companies need to both hurry up and slow down. Everyone is talking about AI and how they need to use it. There are so many different tools out there, and yes, they're pretty incredible. But the capabilities are evolving quickly, and it's important to remember that they are pulling from large language models and data that's already out there.

And in some cases, it's not objective. It's subjective. It's just using the data that's there. Most of the leaders I work with recognize that. But the people they're hiring need to really understand these tools, their impact, and take ownership of them.

That includes putting a robust process in place for accountability so that people test these tools and understand what they are doing. How are you making sure that you will get what you're asking for? And what are the unintended consequences of these tools not giving you what you want or expect? You need to have your eyes wide open as you're utilizing these tools and understand when not to use them.