



People Respond to Demonstrations of Leadership More than Titles

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Paul Block, former Chairman, CEO, and President of Revlon International, and a mentor and coach at The ExCo Group, shared his approach to developing leaders with Adam Bryant. Key themes include how trust and honesty form the foundation of effective mentoring, why leaders must become genuine team players before they can claim real power, and how to help clients stay grounded amid AI disruption and relentless uncertainty.

Bryant: What do you consider to be the secret sauce of effective mentoring?

Block: It's about quickly building trust, which is based on honesty and openness. It can never be based on posturing, duplicity, or having an agenda. It's about developing a personal bond, and that includes a willingness on my part to share my own experiences and challenges that I've had to work through. Part of our role is to also push our clients at key moments.

Bryant: Is this something you've learned over time, or were you always wired this way?

Block: It's what I've learned based on experience, through my many years as an operating executive and then into my mentoring work, which I've been doing now for more than a dozen years. Earlier in your career, you have a lack of surety, a lack of security, some inherent neuroses, and those can make you tentative in being able to assert with honesty what your feelings are.

But over time, you develop a track record that creates positive reinforcement. Success breeds confidence, and that confidence enables you to be more honest and straightforward. As mentors, we can draw on our experience from our personal careers and formulate a position that is open and honest and very easily defined to the client. So if you are questioning a path that the client is contemplating, you can provide a very good explanation and rationale for your thinking, because it's part of your experience.

Bryant: Are there some themes that come up often when you work with clients?

Block: One idea that I've shared at times is that our lives and our jobs are not a zero-sum game, and that we are essentially part of a large ecosystem where everything has to work well together.

Because of the early influences that shaped many high-performing executives, they tend to have a lot of reasons—that are core to who they are—to be more focused on striving for themselves. As a result, people can have all these defense mechanisms that they build up for self-protection but can get in the way of them becoming leaders.

So they have to learn how to be effective team players and then build from there. Because teams look for somebody to be a leader. There's an expression that "Power goes to those who take it." People usually do respond to demonstrations of leadership more than titles. And a degree of collegiality does not obviate the need or ability for someone to step up as a leader and take the power. Because nobody's going to give it to you.

Bryant: What topics are coming up more often now in your conversations with clients?

Block: AI is an obvious one. The key questions are, how do we use AI to build our top line, and how do we use AI internally to make our processes more efficient? The key point is to recognize the potential of AI, not deny it.

As Jamie Dimon, the CEO of JPMorgan Chase, said in an HBR case study from 2025, "While we do not know the full effect or the precise rate at which AI will change our business or how it will affect society at large, we are completely convinced the consequences will be extraordinary and possibly as transformational as some of the major technological inventions of the past several 100 years."

Organizations have to make sure that everyone around the leadership table is probing how to take advantage of AI to maximize the potential of their organization. Nobody should be panicking or over-reacting, and there has to be deliberate efforts to control the outcomes.

Bryant: How do you help your clients not feel overwhelmed and even paralyzed in this era of relentless disruption and endless crises?

Block: Grounding our clients and bringing them back from feeling stuck in emotional anxiety is hitting pretty high on the priority list when we start our conversations. It's about getting our clients to think, "We will survive this. We will figure out how to respond to it. We will take advantage of this moment."

This interview is part of our "The Craft of Mentoring" series, led by Adam Bryant, featuring ExCo Group mentors and coaches sharing their approach to developing leaders.