

The **CRAFT** of **MENTORING** with **Leslie Bradshaw**



Be a “Do” Leader, and Always Stay Close to the Work

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Leslie Bradshaw, former Board Member at Hyper Island, and a mentor and coach at The ExCo Group, shared powerful insights with Adam Bryant. Key themes include how effective mentoring starts with understanding a client's "why," the importance of protecting time for deep thinking, and why the best leaders stay close to the work itself.

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

Bradshaw: When you first get into a mentoring relationship, it's usually under the auspices of helping someone who has just moved into a new role or helping them get ready for a promotion. Often, you find that people at these senior levels have a strength that is overplayed--they are really good at execution, for example, but they need to be more strategic.

That said, you have to really dial into the most essential part of someone and peel back the onion through mentoring to help them understand themselves better. I always say that I seek truth and I speak truth. So I try to create an environment that is comfortable and safe enough for my client to be as truthful as possible.

Do they really want the promotion? What are they seeking in their lives right now? Understanding their "why" then drives the rest of the mentoring engagement. Why people are the way they are, and even the way people think about why they are the way they are, ends up being the work itself.

Bryant: Is there a difficult conversation that you had to have with a client that ultimately landed in a good place?

Bradshaw: Because life doesn't stop for our clients, I've had a few who didn't make the time or space for coaching because they are so busy. So I've had conversations where I've had to say to them, "This is one of the few hours in the week that's entirely yours, and it's a chance for you to step back so that you can step forward. You can decide to continue to be the hero and make every meeting and hop on every plane, but you're not going to be seen as the hero. You're still going to be dinged for these things that you need to work on."

That tends to help them understand the need to make our time together more of a priority. As a leader, you can't just be reactive. You have to protect your time to do the deeper thinking.

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

Bradshaw: I've been a chief operating officer three times. After working with me in that capacity, someone said to me, "You're not a number two, you're a number one." And I thought that was a beautiful thing to say. I really felt seen in that moment, and it allowed me to operate a little bit differently as a leader going forward.

I also came to understand over the years that I tended to be the firefighter at work, and that to be successful in the long run as a leader, I needed to focus more on setting the vision and inspiring people.

Some of the firefighting is just the nature of the early-stage companies where I worked. You've got to wear a million hats, and you're just running as fast as you can. But once you get the right structures, people, and models in place, then your job is to set the vision, get people excited, and help them be the best versions of themselves.

That was a really helpful insight that I've used with my clients--to hold up that mirror up to them and say, "I think you're stuck with a firefighter's uniform on. That's one kind of leadership, but if that's always how you're leading, your central nervous system is going to be shot. And you're never going to lead the hearts and minds of people if you're just going to be seen as the fixer."

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

Bradshaw: It's essential to stay close to the work itself and understand your product and your team. You don't want to micromanage and get in the way, but you still need to feel the heat of the kitchen. The insights you'll get from staying close to the work will help you to be more informed in the way you lead.

Another angle of that theme is that I look to hire people who are "do" leaders. I once made the mistake of hiring someone for a vice president role to oversee operations. They had a law degree and an MBA, and I assumed they were smarter and more capable than me. But all they wanted to do was push paper around and manage people. This person just really didn't understand the idea of getting the dirt under their nails.

There's something about being in the work that has definitely kept me sharp over the years, and something I encourage others to never lose sight of. It's a balancing act because people are always telling leaders that they have to get out of the weeds and be more strategic. But I know that I'm at my best strategically when I have insights from doing the work itself. That's how I lead, and that's how I encourage

others to lead, as well.