

The **CRAFT** of **MENTORING** with **George Napier**



Beware the “Illusion of Communication”

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George Napier, Board Director at On Course Foundation, LLC, and a mentor and coach at The ExCo Group, shared practical wisdom with Adam Bryant. Key themes include how adaptability and actionable advice drive mentoring impact, the power of reframing difficult situations to unlock better decisions, and why great leaders must resist measuring others by their own standards.

Bryant: What is the secret sauce of mentoring for you?

Napier: I'm not sure there's a "secret sauce," as every engagement is unique and we need to adapt to the dynamics. That said, there are common themes to driving impact and unlocking potential.

Both of us need to be fully engaged, responsive, and accessible. The best clients know where they want to go, in their careers and with the business and team they're leading.

The best clients are transparent. They come to meetings or calls prepared. They see the partnership we have as an investment in their future, not as a distraction.

And on our side, as mentors, we have to be adaptable because the work we do is not cookie-cutter. We don't dispense theories or things we read in a book. Our advice has to be actionable in our client's context. We need to figure out what they can do so that their actions and words have an impact in their culture. So I don't know if that's secret sauce or just an effective formula.

Bryant: Are there any tools or frameworks that you find tend to lead to the best unlocks?

Napier: I like using two-by-two grids to help clarify issues. For example, when we go through a team assessment or priority ranking or stakeholder mapping, it's useful to see who fits into which quadrant and what priorities are really high impact. Quite often, the plotting reveals things that a list doesn't capture.

I also use time-allocation modeling because I find that to be a challenge almost everyone faces--are they spending their time on the right activities, or are they using their time and energy for work that doesn't drive their most important priorities?

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

Napier: There have been many instances where something has happened at work that upset one of my clients, and they feel so frustrated they want to quit. In those instances, I try to dig into what's really important in that situation, and whether they have done everything they could do to fix it or make it better.

I try to get them to focus on what matters most, rather than what's gone wrong in the moment. Sometimes reframing the situation allows it to be seen in a better light, which then helps them find a better way to approach the problem.

I've also had plenty of conversations with clients about the talent on their team. If a client is concerned about a weak link on their team, for example, I'll probe to understand what that person's weaknesses are and what they could do differently. Is it an attitude problem or a capability issue? Is there a development plan in place?

That conversation may lead to the difficult conclusion that this person needs to go, but the situation has been clouded by the fact that they've been at the company a long time or they've done good work in the past.

So we might open the aperture a bit and talk about the impact this person is having on team morale or on how that reflects on the client's leadership reputation. Or even worse, is that person holding them back from being effective themselves?

These conversations have led to tough decisions being made. And in every case, the follow-up has been, "I can't believe it took me this long to do it. The team is so much better without them." It's a consistent theme and a strong reminder that the status quo is not always a good place to live.

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

Napier: One is not to measure others by your standards. I learned this lesson when I was running a company division, and the chairman came to me and said, "You're very demanding." He didn't say it in a bad way, but he went on to say, "Most people are not going to be able to live up to those expectations."

And I said, "Well, that's their problem." He responded, "No, it's your problem, because they're not going to live up to your standard, and you're going to start losing good people. So don't lower your standards but learn to accommodate the fact that different people have different aspirations, and they can still be really effective."

That helped me a lot, and I use it with my clients if they are complaining about people on their teams. Maybe my client is asking too much of them, and they're never going to be satisfied with the work their people are doing.

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

Napier: One is "common sense is not so common." Don't assume that just because something makes sense to you that it makes sense to everyone, because it often doesn't.

In the same spirit, I often talk about the "illusion of communication." Because you said something, you can easily think everyone's got it and they're moving forward. But many people probably didn't understand you or even hear you.

So, you have to make sure, and you can do that by asking questions like, "Was that clear? What did you take away from that conversation? Just to make sure we're on the same page, what do you see as the next steps?"