

THE CRAFT OF MENTORING

The **CRAFT** of **MENTORING** with **Laura Yecies**



Are Boards Evolving Quickly Enough For This Pace Of Disruption?

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Laura Yecies, CEO and Board Member at Osteoboost Health, former CEO of SyncThink, Catch, and SugarSync, and a mentor and coach at The ExCo Group, shared her approach to developing leaders with Adam Bryant. Key themes include the power of empathetic listening as the foundation of effective mentoring, why defensiveness is the enemy of growth, and how helping clients confront their fears directly — rather than going over or under them — is often the only path to real change.

Bryant: What do you consider to be the keys to effective mentoring?

Yecies: The first one is empathetic listening. I'm always listening very carefully to understand what is behind the issue that they're bringing to the table. What assumptions are they making as they try to navigate a challenge? What are their fears? I have the ability to get underneath what they're sharing and get the answers to those key questions.

When someone truly listens to you, it is a very special experience, especially because it's so rare in most people's daily lives. So when they experience it, I think they know immediately that something is different. The conversations I have with my clients are different from therapy, of course, because our focus is very much in a business, organizational, and leadership context.

I also bring deep business experience to the table, because I've led in large and small companies, and I've run technical teams and business teams. So I understand the contexts they are operating in, and I have first-hand experience in dealing with the nuances of their challenges. That combination of deep empathy, getting behind the issues, and business application is incredibly impactful.

Bryant: Are there certain difficult topics that come up regularly in your mentoring work?

Yecies: I often have conversations with clients about how a relationship with a colleague is not working for some reason. For example, maybe they got the promotion they wanted, but they're not meshing with their new boss. Maybe they have to change something about the way they work. But change can be hard for a lot of people, especially when they become defensive.

Defensiveness can get in the way of trying to figure out how to solve a problem or improve a relationship. It's a very hard change to make, but when someone lets down their defensive guard and decides to approach a problem with curiosity and more constructively—often by imagining what it's like to be in the other person's shoes—it can be a real unlock for them. I believe that most relationships can be improved, but not all of them are going to be as productive as we want.

Bryant: At a tactical level, what else do you say to clients to help them get through the changes they need to make?

Yecies: The big question is, what is underlying their resistance to change? If the resistance to change is a skill issue, then we can work on the skill. If the resistance to change is fear, then the only solution is to look the lion in the mouth.

It's like the kids' book, "We're Going on a Bear Hunt," where the family keeps encountering obstacles and they repeat the mantra, "We can't go over it. We can't go under it. We've got to go through it." Another way to work through their fears is to keep asking what would happen if their fears were realized. How bad would that really be?

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

Yecies: Earlier in my career, I was leading a big group of a few hundred people at Netscape when we were acquired by AOL. There was a lot of stress and angst because everyone wondered what the acquisition meant for their jobs.

I was about to go on a trip to do some business development, and I talked to my former boss about all the anxiety that people were feeling. He said to me, "When people are stressed like this, they really need you to be there with them. They need that in-person attention from you."

That stuck with me, and I've thought about that conversation many times when I've been working with teams. When employees are stressed, you might start looking for ways to avoid them because they're going to ask hard questions, particularly if they are concerned about their job security.

But you have to be present in those moments, give people focused attention, and listen to them. It doesn't mean that you can change what might happen, but being present helps them stay focused on tasks and be productive.

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.