

The **CRAFT** of **MENTORING** with **Patrick Gournay**



Leaders Are Like Athletes, And Their Muscles Have To Be Balanced

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Patrick Gournay, former CEO at The Body Shop International, and a mentor and coach at The ExCo Group, shared his approach to developing leaders with Adam Bryant. Key themes include why transition moments are the most fertile ground for mentoring, how leaders can leverage strengths to compensate for weaknesses, and the evolving ambitions of executives rethinking the cost of the CEO role.

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

Gournay: The first step is to understand what is most important to my client. After all, they take on these challenging leadership roles for a reason, and it's important to get to the bottom of what's driving their ambition.

I try to specialize in mentoring people who have just taken on, or are about to take on, a major new assignment, such as the CEO role or another position on the C-suite team. Those are very fertile moments for mentoring, because what made them successful in the past will not make them successful in the future. The need for change is obvious.

I feel like I'm training athletes and preparing them for the race, and there is a stretch component to this. You are helping them build new muscles, but there needs to be a balance in their muscles.

That said, building on their strengths is often more important than trying to correct a few of their deficiencies that are not likely to change. It's about developing your brand, which means reinforcing the reality of what you are good at in a strategic way.

Bryant: Are there themes that are coming up more in your mentoring conversations than they have in the past?

Gournay: One is around the big question: what do I want to do with my life? Twenty years ago, most people would say that they wanted to be a CEO. But that's not true anymore, because people don't want to be the CEO at any cost, particularly the trade-offs they must make in their personal lives-for their families, including their kids and perhaps aging parents. They are wondering, what's the right balance?

Another reason they are questioning the goal of aspiring to the CEO job is that they see how much time that a chief executive has to spend on governance and working with the board. People want to be challenged and have an impact, and they see that the CEO role will take them further away from the actual work of the company.

Bryant: What's the best leadership lesson that you learned from your bosses or mentors over your career?

Gournay: I started out as a psychologist, in charge of training programs in HR. That gave me the opportunity to be in contact with a lot of different aspects of the business. That exposure led me to think that I wanted to shift over to more of a business role.

I moved over to the marketing department, which in turn led me into a sales role, and I eventually moved up into a VP of sales role. I had a boss who was looking out for me at every turn, and he did that because he believed in training. Our sales organization was a real training school, and the core skills it taught us were how to communicate and how to ask good questions.

That leader I worked for always said that good salespeople ask questions to understand the client's problem-not to give the client the standard answer, but to provide the best solution based on the problem they are trying to solve.

Bryant: A big part of mentoring is sharing your hard-earned wisdom with your clients. What's an example of some powerful advice that you've shared?

Gournay: I've sometimes shared with clients the idea of using their strengths to help compensate for their weaknesses. For example, I worked with a leader who had strong sales skills. He knew how to connect with clients and was a rainmaker for his company. But he could be very impatient with his own colleagues because of what he saw as inefficiencies and a lack of urgency.

That created a lot of resistance from his peers, which in turn affected his credibility with clients. So I challenged him to use his communication and selling skills with his peers, listening to their concerns and sharing the success of their deals. It made a big difference.

Bryant: Leadership seems to be getting harder every day, given all the ambiguity and pace of acceleration. How do you think about navigating these current challenges?

Gournay: Everything is becoming faster, and one of the challenges of this moment as a leader is finding the right balance as you embrace these changes-you can't fall behind your competitors, but there is also risk in moving too quickly. That puts a bigger priority on being clear about your strategy. You have to know where you want to go, who you want to be as a company, and then move decisively.