

The **CRAFT** of **MENTORING** with **Jeff Stiefler**



When You Have a Good Leader in Place, Anything is Possible

June 17, 2026

Jeff Stiefler, Board Member at OneSpaWorld, and a mentor and coach at The ExCo Group, shared powerful insights with Adam Bryant. Key themes include the foundation of trust in effective mentoring, the role of radical personal accountability in driving results, and why acting decisively on leadership changes is essential to organizational success.

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

Stiefler: A big part of what constitutes good mentorship is providing an unvarnished third-party perspective. We bring a fresh point of view, and we can provide some structure for these important conversations. We can share experiences we've had in our careers that are relevant to the challenges our client is facing. We also provide some accountability by following up on the goals we establish with our clients.

What makes all that work? It comes down to establishing trust and a safe space where the client feels free to talk about anything without judgment or consequence. You build trust in part by taking a genuine, authentic interest in your client. You're curious, and you listen more than you talk. You're vulnerable yourself, and you share your own experiences. If you can't do all that, you'll be limited in what you can deliver for your client.

Bryant: Is there a particular tool or approach that tends to lead to the biggest unlocks?

Stiefler: There's not a universal tool that's applicable in every situation. The people we work with bring different things to the table. Some process information quickly and are impatient with anything other than fast dialogue and conclusions about what should be done. Other people come to the table with different levels of acceptance of feedback and commitment to the process. People have different levels of comfort and confidence with themselves, and very different propensities to trust or mistrust.

Bryant: What is the best lesson you learned from one of your mentors over your career?

Stiefler: Early in my career, I worked for a company called Boise Cascade in their real estate development division, and I was Chief of Staff to the CEO of the division. We had probably 30 major real estate projects all over the country, and for each project, we had physical maps with multiple pages to describe the project in different dimensions.

We were sitting in the conference room, and my boss was meeting with the CEO of Boise. We were talking about a project called Hidden Valley Lake. All the maps were in a file system in the map room, and my boss said, "Jeff, can you get me a map of Hidden Valley Lake?" So I went upstairs, and I looked everywhere, but I couldn't find the map.

I went back down and explained everything I did to try to find the map. And my boss said, "Apparently you didn't understand the assignment, Jeff. The assignment was: 'Get the map.'" I share that story all the time to describe the level of personal accountability you need to be successful. And yes, I did go back upstairs, and I eventually found the map.

More often than not, I find that people stop short of what they really can do. If they approach an assignment believing that failure is not an option--not always, but most of the time--then they can usually accomplish a lot more than they think they can accomplish. There are a lot of people who don't even push that hard, and I have zero patience for that.

I tell people all the time that your life gets so much easier if you assume you're responsible for everything. I don't mean that literally, but you should approach life from the perspective that you're responsible for the outcome of whatever you're confronted with. And if you don't like the outcome, then you have the power to change it. There are so many people who give up their power because they make excuses and they don't hold themselves accountable, and their life gets more complicated as a result.

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

Stiefler: I'll give you two. The first one is that when you have a good leader in place, anything's possible. And when you don't have a good leader in place, almost nothing is possible. I've seen this time and again in my career.

In one role I had running a 10,000-person sales and marketing organization, we organized everything into regions, divisions, and districts, with the divisions--of which we had 175--being the most critical units of operation. I found that we could take a manager from one of the top 10 divisions and put them in one of the bottom 10 divisions, and that division would be a top-performing division in 18 months or less. It didn't matter what the market was, and it didn't matter what the local economic situation was. They would turn it

around 100 percent of the time.

The second thing I say to people is that I've either orchestrated or witnessed thousands of leadership transitions, and the next one that happens too soon will be the first. Nobody acts fast enough to move out people who are under-performing.

People hesitate for a number of reasons. They don't want to hurt the person or to deal with the upheaval that comes from making a change. Or they convince themselves that the person will get better. All of which are understandable, but I've never heard anybody say that they made a change too soon. So I'm constantly counseling people and pushing people to take action on a conclusion they've already reached but that they just don't have the courage to execute.

At the end of the day, you've got to have a team of people who share your values and your aspirations, and if you don't fundamentally have that, you're constantly dealing with compromises that affect the entire organization.