



Control the Controllable But Leave Space for the Possible

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Jim Fielding, Board Director at Xcel Brands, and a mentor and coach at The ExCo Group, shared his approach to the art of mentoring with Adam Bryant. Key themes include the power of truth-telling in effective mentor relationships, a 5 Cs framework for building lasting team culture, and the discipline of leaving space for thinking amid a full calendar.

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

Fielding: I think the secret sauce of mentoring is truth, and sometimes that means sharing hard truths. I believe in leading with kindness, but kindness does not simply mean being nice. The most effective mentor relationships I've been in, whether I was being mentored or doing the mentoring, involved truth-telling. That direct, honest feedback can sting, but you have to be willing to accept it.

Bryant: Is there a favorite tool or framework that you use?

Fielding: I like to ask my clients how they think about the 5 Cs of building a high-performance, team-oriented culture: curiosity, communication, collaboration, commitment, and celebration. Can they look at their own team and say that they have some element of those 5 Cs? And if not, why not? How do they build culture?

I'm open to different ways to build culture, but I always start with curiosity, because to me that's the foundation. What makes them curious? Are they a lifelong learner, and do they then create that in the teams they manage? We'll go through the framework, and I'll ask them for examples of each. The goal is to build a culture that can last, that has some legacy to it, that lives beyond them.

Bryant: Is there a difficult conversation that you've had to work through with a client?

Fielding: I did work with a client who did not have great self-awareness. He had a big job in a very large company, and he led teams in multiple countries. But there was misalignment with mission and vision on the senior team that he reported to, his boss and his boss's peer group.

Ultimately, my client chose to leave his position, and that's not necessarily what you want as a coach. But it became obvious that my client was never going to achieve the level of success he wanted in that environment. He was a very talented individual and ended up landing a very good job somewhere else that was a better fit.

That was tough, because when you start working with someone, we want to make them successful in their position and help them move up. But the signs kept coming back that there was some real fundamental misalignment in the organization. Sometimes the fit is just not there. But the good news is that I still work with that individual in their new company.

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

Fielding: Andy Mooney was my boss for 11 years at Disney. He was known for his phrase, "blaze and graze." He was a master, as a leader and a mentor, of being hyper-productive and hyper-focused and hyper-present at work, to blaze. But he was also able to turn it off and be hyper-present and hyper-focused in his personal life, to graze.

For example, he would take two-week vacations and tell everyone that he was not going to be reachable except for real emergencies. He would tell us, "I have all the confidence in you as a team that you can handle anything that comes up." By doing that, he was also role-modeling for all of us that we should be able to go on a vacation and not have to check in at work. He was the master of setting boundaries.

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

Fielding: I read this idea somewhere, but I'm a big believer in hiring people who scare you in a good way. I spent most of my career in consumer-facing industries, including retail and media. In many cases, that meant hiring people very different than me, including generationally.

In my last couple of big jobs in retail, I was hiring so-called digital natives who would sometimes come into meetings and mention some new platform or influencer that I had never heard of. And I would often stop the meeting and start asking questions.

And so, whenever I had to choose from two or three candidates for a position, I would usually pick the person who made me more uncomfortable, but in a good way. Yes, they would have to check important boxes, do they have the technical skills, and are they good team players and problem solvers? But I was also drawn to people who asked interesting questions and who pushed the envelope.

Bryant: Are there any Jim-isms that you've repeated often over the years?

Fielding: So many, but I will mention this one: "Control the controllable but leave space for the possible." For a long time, I would just say control the controllable, because you learn, working in retail, media, and entertainment, that there were things beyond our control, including weather.

But as I got older, I added "leave space for the possible." As I planned out my time, I would always leave 20 percent intentionally blank to think or read. That's when the inspiration would come. And if I wasn't taking those breaks, I'd go home exhausted after a long day of doing but very little thinking.