

The
CRAFT of
MENTORING
with **Chuck Huebner**



Leadership is About Going Beyond What You've Been Hired to Do

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Chuck Huebner, former President, CEO and Board Member at Syng, and a mentor and coach at The ExCo Group, shared candid insights with Adam Bryant. Key themes include the role of authenticity and humility in effective mentoring, why self-awareness gaps are the hardest feedback to deliver, and how great leaders go beyond their job to make a lasting impact.

Bryant: What to you is the secret sauce of effective mentoring?

Huebner: It's very similar to coming into a new role as a senior executive. One of the most important things, right out of the gate, is that you're seen as a trusted expert. That really comes down to authenticity and saying what you mean. The goal in these relationships isn't necessarily to be liked, but rather to be respected and trusted. The trust is earned by delivering on the promises made between the senior executive and the mentor.

Humility is also a big part of mentoring, just as it is for being a senior executive. These are important qualities when you're trying to get people to rally behind you, whether it's as a mentor or as a CEO.

And you have to be able to work with people who are different than you. That's been a theme throughout my career. I've worked with everyone from Ivy League MBAs to grocery store managers. And I've worked in a lot of different countries and learned to appreciate the cultural nuances.

For example, if you spend time in Asia, you learn that it's very different than the United States, in that people don't speak up. People don't necessarily tell you the truth, and it's not out of dishonesty-it's more that they're very hierarchical and very respectful. So you have to work within that culture and establish with everyone that you're working toward the same goal.

The tools I use in those situations are the same tools I use in mentoring. I do a lot of careful listening. Before I talk, I always want to hear what other people have to say.

To be an effective mentor, it also helps to have a breadth of experience in different industries. Over my career, I've done everything from selling toilet paper for Procter & Gamble to leading global studios for Activision, the video-game company. Figuring out the key value drivers in any business is a critical skill. In every case, you have to be very analytical and objective. And you need to understand what the key metrics are for the business you're running. In addition to a breadth of experience, I am a voracious reader, so I am broadly knowledgeable about different aspects of business and domestic and global issues.

Bryant: Are there difficult conversations that you've had to navigate with clients?

Huebner: The Leadership Values Assessment (LVA) we use at ExCo can lead to challenging moments. In the assessment, we ask our clients to choose, from a long list, the words and phrases that they think best describe them. And then we ask the people who know our client best to choose the words and phrases from the same list that they think best describe our client.

It's surprising how often there is a big gap between how people see themselves and how others see them. It speaks to a lack of self-awareness, and very often they become defensive and say the data is wrong-even though perception is the only thing that matters here.

But if you're coming from a place of caring and wanting to help them be a better executive, that can go a long way in terms of getting them to hear you, even if they don't accept what they are hearing right away. Then the real test comes in-now that they've heard this feedback, what are they going to do differently and then helping guide them through the different strategies?

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

Huebner: One important lesson was leaning into what I'm good at, which is having the confidence to make hard decisions. Earlier in your career, there can be a tendency to want to talk to a lot of people to think through a decision before you make it.

But as you progress further in your career, you have more experience, which drives intuition. So you become faster at developing an inkling of a situation and being willing to act on that intuition.

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

Huebner: Leadership is different than management in many ways, of course, but to me, it's about going beyond the job you've been hired to do. It's about making things better. When you're hiring somebody, you want them to do a great job in their role.

But ultimately, a leader is going to take it beyond, make it better, and do so in ways that are going to last beyond their time in the chair. So when they move on, their impact is still felt.

Bryant: Are there expressions you've repeated often over the years at work?

Huebner: One is to focus on what you can control. People spend a lot of time working on things and worrying about things that are beyond their control. Doing that is a waste of precious time and energy. Better to put your efforts where they can have the greatest impact.

I also talk a lot about the importance of aligning expectations, because most disagreements at work and in our personal lives are caused by a lack of alignment. In business, everybody needs to understand what the common goal is. It ties back to the comment I made earlier about understanding the most important value levers. You have to make sure everybody is working toward a common goal.