

The **CRAFT** of **MENTORING** with **Niek Jan van Damme**



Don't Solve Your People's Problems for Them. Enable Them.

June 30, 2026

Niek Jan van Damme, former Board Member at Deutsche Telekom A.G., and a mentor and coach at The ExCo Group, shared candid insights with Adam Bryant. Key themes include why trust is the foundation of effective mentoring, the discipline of listening for what is unsaid to find the real problem, and why great mentors enable people to solve their own challenges instead of solving problems for them.

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

Van Damme: It starts with trust. If the trust isn't there, then mentoring won't work. An important part of building that trust is making clear that helping my client is the top priority and comes before anything else.

We also play an important role in helping them put things in perspective. Yes, some issues are serious and should be taken seriously. But there are many other things that they shouldn't worry so much about.

We have to really understand the issues that they are dealing with, because very often the surface-level challenge is not the real problem. So I listen deeply to what people are saying and also to what they are not saying, what is between the lines.

It's about peeling back the issues to understand what the core challenge is, rather than quickly trying to offer solutions. It's always more impactful, of course, if they come up with a solution, because they are more likely to own it and figure out how to implement it.

That said, there are times when I will share what worked for me when I encountered a similar situation. Clients who are in the C-suite, or close to it, don't like to waste time, so they often want to get to solutions quickly rather than talking about how they feel.

Bryant: Is there a difficult conversation that you had to work through with the client that landed in a good place?

Van Damme: I started working with one client who told me early on in the engagement that he wanted to leave his company in a few months. I spent a lot of time with him trying to understand why he wanted to leave. He said that he felt that he wasn't being heard, and that he had been in his position a long time without getting promoted.

We went through the issues one by one. He acknowledged that there were some things he had not yet delivered on in his current role, and so it was not completely unfair of the company to say that he was not yet ready to be promoted.

We also discussed the fact that, when you get to these very senior levels, there are fewer positions at the top of the pyramid, and they do not open up very often. You have to be patient. The good news is that, after two years, he is still at the company, and he's been promoted.

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

Van Damme: Earlier in my career, I worked at Procter & Gamble, and I had an excellent boss. One thing he taught me that I've repeated to others over the years: Don't solve your people's problems for them but enable them to solve them by giving them the budget, the moral support, the people, the machinery, the space, the freedom to do it. Because once you start solving their problems or doing their work, they won't develop new skills themselves.

Bryant: What new topics are coming up in your conversations with clients?

Van Damme: Artificial intelligence is of course a big topic. How will it impact business models and structures of organizations? How will it change the people they need and the skills they need?

But another big theme is communication. Often my clients will have a plan that they want to execute, but they don't spend enough time thinking about how to communicate it effectively so that everyone feels motivated to contribute.