

The **CRAFT** of **MENTORING** with **Howard Bubb**



Smart People Know a Lot. Wise People Know What They Don't Know.

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Howard Bubb, Board Member at Napatech, and a mentor and coach at The ExCo Group, shared candid insights with Adam Bryant. Key themes include the importance of pattern recognition over generic advice in mentoring, the “role, room, and requirement” framework for adapting leadership to context, and why wise leaders know what they don’t know.

Bryant: What to you is the X-factor of effective mentoring?

Bubb: The X-factor is not simply the experience or the advice we share. It's the interaction. It's the ability to see the patterns in a leader's behavior and judgment that they cannot see themselves.

Most senior leaders don't need more generic guidance or articles about leadership. They need someone who can help them understand how their instincts are serving them, and where those instincts may have become limiting factors, particularly for what their next level of leadership requires of them.

The best mentoring has to be delivered with trust and candor, and trust is built carefully over the duration of the relationship. The mentor has to have enough trust to create a safe space for honest reflection and dialogue, and also enough candor to push those boundaries for real growth. If the relationship is too comfortable, it becomes useless. If it's too critical, then trust breaks down.

The goal is to help leaders convert their experiences into their own insights through the candid dialogue and outside perspectives that we can provide as mentors. Ideally, we help them see patterns for themselves, which will translate into insights that they can carry forward the rest of their career.

Bryant: Is there a particular tool or framework that you find leads to the greatest unlocks?

Bubb: I like to use the concept of "role, room, and requirement." The first part refers to the role that my client has now or is about to take on. What does senior management want from you? What do your people want from you? What does the company need from you? If they're being promoted, what does the new role require that is different from their current role?

The second part, the room, refers to your audience, whether it's your board, customers, investors, or your team. Each of those audiences requires a different facet of your leadership.

And the third is, what is the requirement of the moment, whether it's a meeting you're preparing for or the particular challenge in front of you? People who come up in a function can sometimes be rigid about how they do things, and at the C-suite level, you have to be adaptable. You also have to maintain your authenticity, which is why it's so important to know your values.

Bryant: Is there a difficult conversation that you sometimes have to work through with clients?

Bubb: The discussion is often about how the strengths that got them to this point in their career may now become the issues that hold them back at the next level. As you move up in earlier stages of your leadership career, you are often the subject-matter expert in the specialized team you're managing. That is very different than leading a diverse global executive team, where each member has deeper knowledge in their particular field than you do.

And so the question for people in line for such jobs is not whether they can do it, but whether they want to do it? Because it can be truly disorienting for them when they consider that everybody on their new team knows more than they do about their respective field.

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

Bubb: A mentor once said to me, "Howard, you need to learn that the shortest distance between two points is rarely a straight line." Given my background in math and science, that thought was just completely foreign to my way of thinking.

But he went on to teach me that if you're going to be a leader, you need to bring people along. You need to help them understand the destination, and you have to trust their reasoning, perspectives, and knowledge to inform what might be a better route. That approach will also help make the team more motivated and committed.

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

Bubb: Smart people know a lot, and wise people know what they don't know. This applies to any leader who's been successful in their career. They think they're smart, and they are. And that's fantastic, but wise people know what they do not know, and they build a team of smart people around them to solve bigger problems than any one of them could solve on their own.