

The **CRAFT** of **MENTORING** with **Karen Morris**



The Art of Deeply Caring, While Not Becoming Too Attached to the Outcome

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Karen Morris, former Senior Vice President, General Counsel of USAA's Property and Casualty Group (P&C), and a mentor and coach at The ExCo Group, shared candid insights with Adam Bryant. Key themes include the four essential ingredients of effective mentoring, using tools like the Immunity to Change model to build self-awareness, and the lifelong shift from performance to presence in leadership.

Bryant: To use a cooking analogy, what do you consider to be the secret sauce of effective mentoring?

Morris: There are four parts, and they all connect, just like a good recipe. Each ingredient has a reactive quality with the other ingredients. The first is listening. The second is allowing for silence and being comfortable in silence, for myself and my client.

The third ingredient is heat, which means being willing to challenge, to share observations, to offer different perspectives. That sometimes requires courage. The fourth one is "compassionate detachment." Even though I may be able to relate to what my client is telling me, it is their experience. I don't know what it's like for them, and there have to be limits to my compassion that allow me to stay curious and see them objectively.

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

Morris: One of the primary benefits of executive coaching is that individuals can gain self-awareness and uncover their blind spots, their limiting beliefs and behaviors. They then can shift those beliefs and behaviors and achieve sustainable growth and change.

One of the best tools for achieving self-awareness and supporting clients' learning and growth is the Immunity to Change model, developed by Lisa Lahey and Robert Kegan, and supported by data from the Leadership Values Assessment (LVA) and stakeholder assessment interviews.

The LVA and stakeholder assessments provide a lot of data that help clients see themselves clearly and identify the shifts they want to make. Then, Immunity to Change helps them uncover the source of their resistance to making those shifts. As they do that, they see the false assumptions that drive their current behaviors, and they're able to reframe those assumptions and take actions to make meaningful changes.

That said, not everyone reacts well to what they learn from the LVA and stakeholder data. One client who comes to mind felt really frustrated, misunderstood, and disillusioned about how she was perceived. She really personalized the data. So what we've been working on is ways for her to disidentify from the data and to see it as just data. It's not who she is. It simply provides insight into how she can be perceived in ways that don't align with the leader she wants to be.

So we are working on stepping back from the frustration and asking, what is this frustration trying to tell me? It's about learning from your feelings, while at the same time providing some tools to reframe the situation and tell yourself a different story about the feedback you've heard so that you can move forward more thoughtfully.

Bryant: That notion of disidentifying can be challenging, given how much of people's identity is wrapped up in these big jobs.

Morris: And I've had to learn that myself. My greatest learning edge continues to be moving from performance to being. I've been driven my entire life by a need to perform. And my version of that is to solve, to be the fixer, and to achieve. But what I've grown to understand is that my drive was really about me. It was about me needing the achievement, affirmation, and acknowledgement to confirm that I am valuable.

What I've been shifting to is more presence, just being, which helps me to focus more on others. Shifting that focus away from me has allowed me to listen and observe differently and have a greater impact.

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

Morris: One is from my mom, who passed away when I was a young adult. She would often say, "This too shall pass." She didn't coin the phrase, of course, and yet she said it often. It's related to this theme I touched on earlier of non-attachment. How can you care deeply about something and yet not be attached to it and the outcome?

Another phrase that can be helpful with non-attachment is "let it go." My version of that is "let it be." That notion and "this too shall pass" seem very connected. "This too shall pass" brings in the idea of impermanence. We can get so attached to what's going on in a given moment, and yet it's a given moment, and so you can let it go, and let it be. It's become so foundational to my own life and learning.