

The **CRAFT** of **MENTORING** with **Karen Morton**



As a Leader, You Have to "Pull the Thread All the Way Through"

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Karen Morton, Board Chair at Bridge Over Troubled Waters, and a mentor and coach at The ExCo Group, shared candid insights with Adam Bryant. Key themes include building trust quickly by finding connective tissue, having the courage to navigate hard feedback conversations as a long game, and pulling the thread all the way through when making strategic decisions.

Bryant: What do you consider the secret sauce of effective mentoring?

Morton: A key ingredient is the ability to develop trust quickly. Much of it is intuitive. I listen carefully for "connective tissue" as we're getting to know each other. What do we have in common? Once you establish those connections, it creates a foundation for building a trusted relationship. And it's not just about having excellent listening skills. I also like to test what I believe I heard from the person, not to simply repeat back what they said, but to show that I've understood them. Once you set the foundation, you are better able to challenge appropriately. I like to set those parameters up front so that people aren't surprised or put off when I do it. So I might say, "Do I have your permission to challenge what you're saying and some of your assumptions once I make sure I understand what you've said?"

Bryant: Is there a difficult conversation that you had to have with somebody you were mentoring over the years that ultimately ended in a good place?

Morton: In one case, a leader had the technical skills to deal with difficult, substantive issues. However, a lot of people did not like working with them. That became a barrier for the leader to be able to influence others, even though they were often one of the smartest people in the room. The feedback I shared from colleagues was hard for this leader to hear. But it was clear that they had to start rebuilding relationships if they were going to have the impact they wanted to have. Rebuilding trust wasn't going to happen over one coffee. I had to explain that it's a long game.

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

Morton: I learned what it really means to be a servant leader. When I was very young, I ended up working for one of my mentors, who is now in his 80s and is still my mentor. He was always very comfortable in his own skin and sought out the opinions of people who had greater subject matter expertise than him. Whenever there was a tough decision to work through, he would bring in the best possible minds and experts to discuss and debate it. He made sure he heard from everyone, and he made everyone feel they were heard. It was clear that ultimately it would be his decision, but it was going to be an informed decision. He was the leader, but he was also the servant in terms of making sure he tapped into your expertise and perspective. I learned another important lesson from a different mentor, somebody who gave me advice as I was taking on a leadership role in a space that I knew very little about. During the interview process, she said, "We are not considering hiring you because you know how to do this. I can see from your resume that you do not have the exact substantive expertise for every aspect of this role. But we would be hiring you for your judgment, and that you will learn enough to ask the right questions and exercise your judgment in the best interest of this organization." That was powerful for me, and I've said the same to many others over the years when I've given them stretch assignments.

Bryant: Is there a particular expression or saying that you've repeated often over the years in your leadership roles?

Morton: I often talk about "pulling the thread all the way through." That refers to making the appropriate connections between things. For example, if someone proposes an idea, they should do it within the context of the broader issues, both externally and internally, as well as understanding the risks. With every step you take, you need to make sure you're thinking strategically.