

The **CRAFT** of **MENTORING** with **Marty Holleran**



Always Surround Yourself with People Who are Smarter Than You

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Marty Holleran, former President and CEO of Electrolux Home Care Products NA, and a mentor and coach at The ExCo Group, shared candid insights with Adam Bryant. Key themes include building trust through vulnerability, staying composed under pressure by pausing before reacting, and surrounding yourself with people who are smarter than you.

Bryant: When you start working with mentoring clients, how do you establish trust and chemistry early on?

Holleran: I believe the trust and credibility begin with the fact that I have sat in the chair and have gone through much of what they are going through.

I will then share some stories about my own career, including wins, losses, and some of the funny things that have happened to me over the years, to build the chemistry. I want them to be comfortable, so that they feel they can share everything about their business and personal life. You have to build trust early on, and a big part of that comes from being vulnerable with each other.

Bryant: Have there been tough passages that you had to work through with a client that ultimately ended well?

Holleran: I worked with a CEO who was a classic General Patton-style leader. He was tough and straightforward. During our many discussions, he talked often about wanting to become more of a General Eisenhower-style leader.

One afternoon, I got a call from him, and he was livid. He said, "Marty, I just got off the phone with our chairman, and he is yelling at me about the most nickel-and-dime issues I've ever heard in my life. We just had a board meeting two weeks ago, and everything went well. All of a sudden, I feel like I'm back in the third grade."

My client then said that he took all the issues that the chairman had brought up and addressed them in an email that he had drafted. But he paused before sending it because of our conversations about him wanting to become more of an Eisenhower-style leader.

He asked me for my suggestions on how he should handle the chairman. I said, "First of all, don't ever have an argument via email. It's in black and white, it could be misinterpreted, and it's forever." Instead of sending the email, I suggested that he wait four or five days before reaching out to the chairman, and then bring it up as a side note in the context of another topic.

Five days later, this leader called me and said, "Marty, I called the chairman and before I could say a word, he said, 'First of all, let me apologize for that call last week. I came out of a bad meeting. I took all my frustrations out on you. You're the best CEO we've ever had. Please accept my apology.'"

And then the CEO said to me, "You know, had I not called you for advice, I would have sent that email and probably fractured my relationship with him forever."

Bryant: Is there a favorite tool or framework that you like to use with clients?

Holleran: My favorite tool is the lifeline exercise, in which people share the highs and lows of their life, starting at a young age. It not only gives you a clear sense of where they've come from, but it also serves as a road map for where they are going to go. It helps a lot in planning out our mentoring program.

Interestingly, because of the lifeline exercise, I've also found that, in a lot of cases, the senior executives I'm working with have more problems balancing their personal and professional lives than they have with the business issues.

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

Holleran: The best lesson I learned is that if all you do in your life is sit in the audience and look up at the stage and never get up on that stage, where you're inevitably going to stumble a few times, you're not going to succeed.

You have to get up in front of people and show them what you can do. It sounds simple, but I've found that most of the world sits in the audience and looks at what happens on the stage. They don't get up there because they are afraid to stumble, so they rarely succeed.

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

Holleran: To succeed in business, always surround yourself with people who are smarter than you and let them do their job. Business is not so complicated when you do that.

Bryant: What are some new issues that are coming up with people you mentor?

Holleran: AI is a big topic, of course. But I always like to ask, with all of the data that's being generated today, does it help you or does it complicate your business? Because having all kinds of data can complicate things.

You've got to find a way to maneuver through all the data to get clarity on what you're trying to do. You have to understand why you showed up for work today, what you're trying to get done, and not let all of this data pull you in 35 different directions.