

The
CRAFT of
MENTORING
with **Marie Oh Huber**



The Moment You Feel Settled, It's Time to Stretch Into Something Harder

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Marie Oh Huber, Board Director and Chair of the Nominating, Governance and Sustainability Committee at Portland General Electric, and a mentor and coach at The ExCo Group, shared candid insights with Adam Bryant. Key themes include using outsider trust to surface hard decisions, the risk of assumed trust after an internal promotion, and treating comfort as a signal to seek harder challenges.

Bryant: What is your approach to mentoring and coaching executives?

Huber: Because we come in as experienced operators, not as the leader's boss, peer or direct report, we have the freedom to ask sharp questions that the leader either can't or won't ask themselves. There's almost always a decision sitting on the table that the leader knows they need to act on, a tough people decision, a call about which initiative gets the resources, or simply the project that keeps getting pushed to next quarter. Our job is to help them see it clearly and find the courage to move.

When I'm working with someone, I appreciate knowing something about their background, so the conversation doesn't feel transactional when we get to the problem at hand. I'll start with some pretty broad questions and see where they lead. I'll also share something about myself to show openness and vulnerability.

Bryant: Is there a particular framework or tool that you like to use when you start working with someone?

Huber: The lifeline exercise is effective, what have been the highlights and lowlights of your life so far, both professionally and personally? I also invite people to draw or bring pictures that resonate with them. They don't need to be artists. But what people choose to draw or share is remarkably telling. It gets at what they're passionate about and what feeds their soul outside their professional work.

If you can get to know the whole person, then you can better help them figure out their professional journey. So I'll ask a lot of "how" and "why" questions to go beyond the "what" of the experiences they are sharing with me.

Bryant: Is there a challenging conversation that you had with a client that ultimately landed in a good place?

Huber: One pattern I come back to often is the leader who's been promoted internally. When that happens, you have real advantages because you know the people, the business, and the industry. But there's a catch that comes with it.

The catch is that you think you have more trust than you actually do. And you don't get the benefit of being seen as the fresh, bright, shiny object. People have seen you in a more limited role. Now, you have to show up as a more strategic enterprise leader, maybe in front of the board, shareholders, customers, and regulators, with whom you haven't engaged at that level before. And the hard truth is that trust doesn't transfer automatically with the title.

The challenging conversation is when someone doesn't yet see that gap. Part of my job is to hold up a mirror without making them defensive and help them build a concrete plan for driving the organization more broadly.

Bryant: What's another theme that comes up often when you are working with leaders?

Huber: The moment you feel settled, that's a signal, not an arrival. It means it's time to stretch into something harder.

Getting comfortable with being uncomfortable isn't just good advice for early-career leaders. It applies at every level. It means being willing to learn an entirely new role or subject matter, to walk into rooms where you're not the expert, to take risks that don't come with a guaranteed outcome. The leaders I most respect have done that repeatedly. And they'll tell you that the discomfort never fully goes away.

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

Huber: As I've heard from many experienced leaders who've been through real ups and downs, and John Donahoe said it as plainly as anyone when we spoke at Stanford, we are not our titles. And that cuts in two directions.

The obvious: Don't rely on your title to do the work of earning trust. Even if you're the board chair or the boss, you have to work to build trust, followership and respect every day. The title doesn't do that for you.

But the flip side is just as important: Don't be hindered by your title either. Don't wait for permission or seniority to lead, to speak up, or to act. Some of the most powerful leadership I've seen has come from people who had every reason to defer and chose not to.