

The **CRAFT** of **MENTORING** with **Christine Elliott**



A Crucial Lesson: “Try Not to Make Enemies by Accident”

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Christine Elliott, former CEO of the Institute for Turnaround, and a mentor and coach at The ExCo Group, shared candid insights with Adam Bryant. Key themes include why mentors must ask uncomfortable questions rather than give advice, the power of a transition audit for leaders at inflection points, and why people resist loss, not change, especially amid AI driven disruption.

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

Elliott: It's three things. First, mentoring is not about giving advice or flattery. A mentor should care enough to bring up uncomfortable questions. That's the basis of a great mentoring relationship.

Second, the mentoring sessions are for the mentee. It's their agenda. Some mentors can be tempted to drift into endless sharing of their war stories. It can be helpful to have those war stories, but the best mentors ask the questions that make people hear what they're actually thinking.

Third, a mentor is often the only person in a senior leader's life with no agenda other than supporting that person. The higher you climb, the fewer people tell you the truth, either because they don't want to, they don't know what it is, or they don't know how to approach you.

A mentor should be a confidential thinking partner. It's possibly the one time that the leader doesn't have to perform. It's not a test. It's a conversation, and it's all about learning.

Bryant: Is there a tool or framework that you use that is particularly impactful?

Elliott: I regularly use something I call a transition audit. The people we mentor are often going through some inflection point. So I ask a few foundational questions: What is it that helped get you here that you need to stop doing?

Second, what do you need to keep and preserve at all costs? And third, what do you have to acquire, in terms of skills or capabilities, that you may not have at the moment? Leaders often keep on doing brilliantly what they did in the job they had before they were promoted. But that's not the role they've got now.

Then we focus on the key outcomes that the mentors want out of the engagement. They may have a list of 15 things, but you have to prioritize it and come up with three game-changers. You cannot hit 60 targets that happen to be moving in different directions all at once. You really need to home in on something memorable and worthwhile.

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

Elliott: I worked with a CEO who was renowned for being difficult and very political. Other people had tried to have a working relationship with this executive without really succeeding. Some board colleagues had tried to get him to change his behavior, and it hadn't happened.

I spent months getting to know the CEO and building the best relationship I could, and we did make significant progress. Most importantly, it was clear that I wasn't just trying to push him out. After six months, it was evident that there needed to be some changes in the senior team.

Then I asked the question that made all the difference: "What would you like your legacy with this organization to be?" And the CEO sat back and said, "I'm ready to have that conversation now." Those six months of developing the relationship set the stage for that crucial conversation, in which he could start thinking about a dignified exit for himself.

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

Elliott: I was on a board that was led by a high-profile chair who was a former politician. I was pushing to make changes in some board appointments, including moving off some honorary appointees that I thought were a waste of time.

I said to the chair, "We bring these people here and we entertain them. We're strapped for cash. Do we really have to do this? Why can't we just remove all of them?" And he said, "Christine, one of the lessons I've learned in life is to try not to make enemies by accident."

That changed my thinking. I dropped the issue and started wondering if I had overlooked some of the value in these relationships. They're not causing any trouble, and they want to be helpful, so why am I stirring it up?

I've never forgotten what he said. It shifted how I engaged with people who have very different views from mine. So instead of strengthening my opposition to a board colleague because of their views, I've done the reverse, and I've spent time trying to understand their position and see if that would modify my own view. And sometimes it has.

There is no point in alienating people who are bold colleagues. If you don't make enemies of people, you're going to learn an awful lot from them, even if they are very different from you.

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

Elliott: It's from the 2002 book, "Leadership on the Line," by Ronald Heifetz and Marty Linsky. In the book, they explain that people do not resist change, what they really resist is loss. I found that incredibly helpful in understanding why people dig in, which I've seen many people do in all the work I've done to drive transformation in organizations.

When people get upset, it's usually not about the new structure or the new values or whatever change is underway. It's about what those changes take away from them. What is making them feel disempowered or hurting their status or sense of identity?

That insight has informed the way I mentor, as well. Instead of wondering why somebody won't change, I try to understand what they are afraid of losing. Usually, it's some of the things that made them successful in the first place. You can honor it and appreciate its importance without dismissing it.

That approach is really applicable in this AI moment. People are not necessarily resisting the technology, they are concerned about the loss of relevance and potentially the loss of their jobs. AI will lead to the creation of many new things, but leaders who acknowledge that some things are being lost will be able to advance the transformation much more effectively.