

# The **CRAFT** of **MENTORING**

with **Rajesh Padmanabhan**



## When Great Leaders Leave a Room, They Leave Behind Meaning

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**Rajesh Padmanabhan**, CEO of Talavvy Business Catalysts, and a mentor and coach at The ExCo Group, shared candid insights with Adam Bryant. Key themes include shifting mentees from seeking answers to sharpening their own thinking, coaching senior leaders through issues of trust and credibility, and building a legacy through the leaders you develop.

**Bryant: What to you is the secret sauce of effective mentoring?**

**Rajesh:** The biggest misconception about mentoring is that mentees should expect that they will get answers from us. The goal instead is to improve the client's thinking about the challenge they are working through. It's not necessary to have the answers for everything.

You also have to strike the right balance between when to question and when to listen. It varies from mentee to mentee, but the amount of listening has to be much more than the time spent challenging. The goal is to instill in them that they have the belief over capabilities to succeed in their role.

Another strategy I use is to look for patterns. Yes, there are specific problems we have to work through, but if there are clear patterns in the kinds of problems they are having, then that will point us to a bigger issue we need to work on.

**Bryant: What are some other approaches you use?**

**Rajesh:** Another discussion I like to have with my clients is about what they need to listen to rather than what they like to listen to. Because in these senior roles, there are always people who will tell you what you want to hear, or what they think you want to hear.

I also focus on four C's: culture, capability, contribution, and credibility. You have to understand the cultural context of the organization in which the client is operating. The executives we work with at this level all have immense capabilities, but the goal has to shift to contribution rather than performance. Because performance is about effort, while contribution is about outcomes. And the last one is building credibility for yourself and for the enterprise that you represent.

**Bryant: Is there a story you can share about a difficult conversation you had to work through with a client?**

**Rajesh:** I had a tough assignment in which a board asked me to coach a high-profile CEO. He was immensely successful by many important measures, but the board wanted me to focus on one area with this leader, which was his trustworthiness. Clearly, that can be subjective, but I learned that the board felt that the CEO often did not give them a straight answer. And his team also felt that he was often resistant to their input.

During the course of one of our sessions, I mentioned that the tenure of CEOs at companies that were roughly the size of his company was 2.8 years, on average. That struck a chord with him. He was very data-driven, and that statistic drew him into the conversation we needed to have about leadership. He wanted to understand why CEOs did not last very long in their role, which opened up a conversation about being open to feedback and input, building trust, and making more of an effort to relate to people.

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

**Rajesh:** I worked for a time for the Oberoi Group, a luxury hotel chain in India with about 35 properties. I worked very closely with the chairman, who shared something with me that stayed with me forever. He said, "If it's not possible to be the biggest in our industry, let us be the best. I learned that it's not possible, of course, for every person or organization to be the best, but you should do everything you can to set yourself apart."

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

**Rajesh:** Careers are built by decisions. Reputations are built by behaviors. Legacies are built by the leaders you develop. And what I learned was "All leaders leave the room. Great leaders leave a meaning behind in the room." It's not about seniority or title of a leader; it's about the meaning and value they create.