

The **CRAFT** of **MENTORING** with **Christi Deakin**



A Good Experiment is Never a Failure. It's About Progress and Direction.

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Christi Deakin, former EVP and Chief Strategy Officer at Wells Fargo, and a mentor and coach at The ExCo Group, shared candid insights with Adam Bryant. Key themes include earning trust before offering challenging ideas, working backward from a client's biggest two-year aspiration, and reframing failed experiments as signs of progress rather than failure.

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

Deakin: A lot of my leadership roles, including chief strategy officer, have been more about influence. A key part of those roles was earning trust, so that when I would show up with a provocative or challenging idea, people knew I was there in full service and support of what they needed to accomplish for the business.

Building trust is just as important in mentoring. I listen closely to understand what my client wants to achieve. I don't know what someone wants and needs to accomplish, personally and professionally, until I have a chance to sit down and really dig in with them in a sincere and genuine way.

Bryant: Other frameworks you use early on in engagements?

Deakin: I like to start with understanding how my client thinks about doing something really big. What's their biggest aspiration for the next two years? What would have the most impact, or make them feel the most rewarded or happy?

Once we are clear on the big vision, then we can work backward and figure out how we can accelerate along that path. Because it's easy to get stuck focusing on all the demands of today. Mentoring is also about providing some space and time to think about these big questions, because nobody ever has enough space on their calendars for deep thinking time.

Bryant: Is there a common theme when you've had to have difficult conversations with someone you've mentored?

Deakin: I've worked with people who were high-performers in their current role and aspired to be in a bigger role. They didn't have all the skills needed for the new job. Sometimes, they are aware of what is required but haven't addressed the gap.

For example, I worked with a talented colleague who had great followership from her stakeholders and clients, but not from the people who worked for her directly. She wasn't even aware of it.

So I had to sit down with her and say, "I really want to help you develop the same followership from your team that you have with everybody else." Once she understood the gap, she dove right in and did a complete turnaround.

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

Deakin: Some of the best feedback that really changed my approach was that I would often develop a vision or strategy but not take the time to bring people along with me. I wasn't stopping and investing the time to sell the idea and bring people along by explaining how all the pieces fit together.

When I started doing better at that, it made everything easier. You always need to take a pause and make sure that you figure out who you need to bring along in the journey by explaining the why behind what you need them to do and answering any questions.

You need to make sure they are fully on board with the plan, rather than just expecting everyone to simply do it. You have to slow down to speed up. It makes all the difference in the world.

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

Deakin: I worked at Amazon for a few years. Part of the culture is that there is a huge push for people to come up with creative ideas and then test and experiment to see if it's worth investing more resources or whether you should just cut it off and move on.

Amazon embraces the idea of talking about the things that don't work and the need to shed them. And it's done in a way that's not personal, so nobody is made to feel that they failed at something. People have good conversations where they will say, "I had this idea, here's why I thought it was great, and here's what didn't work out."

My big takeaway was that a good experiment is never a failure. It's about progress and direction. That approach expands and tests people differently. Rather than having to always perform up to a certain standard, you are actually encouraged and rewarded to go try some things.