



Great Mentoring is About Asking the Question Behind the Question

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David Stokes, former GM, Partner Ecosystem at IBM EMEA, and a mentor and coach at The ExCo Group, shared incisive insights with Adam Bryant. Key themes include asking the question behind the question, mentoring as a state of readiness for wisdom wherever it arrives, and how agentic AI is reshaping the way leaders build judgment.

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

Stokes: I think great mentoring is about asking the question behind the question. Most people I've mentored will bring forward a problem they think they have, but it isn't actually the problem. The real problem they're trying to solve is sitting behind that.

So you have to be able to ask the right questions at the right time, and then have the courage to challenge someone as to whether they're thinking about the right problem they're dealing with.

I feel strongly that great coaches ask great questions, not clever questions, not challenging questions for the sake of it, but questions that open something up rather than close it down. Warren Berger captures this in his *Book of Beautiful Questions*, the central idea being that the quality of the answers we get in life is almost entirely determined by the quality of the questions we are willing to ask. That is as true in a

coaching conversation as anywhere else.

Finally, people don't arrive at their job just as professionals. It's important to understand the individual as a whole person. People carry everything into the room with them, whether that's the joy of something happening on a weekend, worries about a parent or a child's health, relationship troubles, or financial pressures.

So when I mentor someone, I don't just assume that we're having a discussion in a professional context. It's about understanding the person's entire context, what they're dealing with in their working and personal life within limits, so that you can clearly understand where they are trying to go and why.

One of the most powerful tools I use in mentoring is to try to understand someone's purpose. Because if you understand your purpose, you will find joy in that. And if you can do that, then what you do for work doesn't feel like work.

Bryant: What are some powerful lessons you've learned yourself over your career?

Stokes: The most important lesson is one about readiness. I can't point to one mentor who shaped me, I can point to many. The people who shaped my thinking most impactfully were those that I would not have formally recognized as mentors at the time.

They were colleagues, clients, managers who took the time to say something that lodged somewhere and stayed there.

What I've come to understand is that mentoring is less a relationship and more a state of readiness. The question isn't who your mentor is. The question is whether you are paying enough attention to recognize wisdom when it arrives, because it will arrive, from the most unexpected directions, at the most unexpected moments. The only variable is whether you are open enough to receive it.

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

Stokes: That's a hard one, but something that has stuck with me in recent years is from Wayne Dyer: "When you change the way you look at things, the things you look at change."

I want to be careful about how I use that line, because it's easy to hear it as an instruction to be passive, to drift with whatever wind is blowing. That is not what it means. It is almost the opposite. It is a discipline. It requires you to make an active, deliberate choice to examine your assumptions about a situation, a person, or a problem, and to hold open the possibility that what you are seeing is not all there is to see.

The most capable leaders I've worked alongside were not the ones with the most certainty. They were the ones who remained genuinely curious, about the people in front of them, about whether the frame they were using was actually the right one.

That is what the best mentoring does. It doesn't give you new information. It changes the way you are looking at the information you already have.

Bryant: What are some forward-looking questions that are coming up in your mentoring work?

Stokes: They're all around the intersection of leadership and agentic AI. As a leader, your judgment becomes much more important now that an agent can do analysis and come up with recommendations. So where does your experience, empathy, and understanding of your industry add value in the decision-making process? That can be a very challenging discussion for leaders.

But the question that concerns me more is what happens to the development of judgment in the next generation of leaders if AI absorbs the tasks that used to build it. A great deal of what produces good leadership instinct is the repetition of difficult, low-stakes decisions early in a career. If those decisions get routed to an agent, where does the young professional get the experience? And if they don't get that experience, what exactly are we developing them into?

The differentiating skills in the agentic era won't be technical fluency alone, those skills will commoditize quickly. The skills that will matter are harder to automate: the ability to ask a genuinely good question, to exercise judgment where there is ambiguity and when the agent is confident but something feels wrong, and to hold the human dimension of a decision alongside the analytical one. Those are not new skills. What is new is the urgency.

This is where I believe mentors become more important, not less. In a world where machines handle more of the analytical work, the mentor's role shifts, from passing on technical knowledge to deliberately provoking experiences that build judgment.