

The **CRAFT** of **MENTORING** with **Roger Nober**



As a Leader, Everything You Do is Role-Modeling

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Roger Nober, former EVP of Law & Corporate Affairs and Chief Legal Officer at BNSF Railway, and a mentor and coach at The ExCo Group, shared candid insights with Adam Bryant. Key themes include how every leadership action becomes role-modeling for a team, why feedback should be treated as a gift, and how understanding others' perspectives builds the trust leaders need to succeed.

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

Nober: I see mentoring in some ways as problem-solving. During my career as chief legal officer, I would often describe my role as an organizational psychologist, trying to figure out the best way to influence the organization to get to a certain outcome. What's the best process? What's the best way to deal with people?

You can never forget that organizations, which sometimes are seen as inanimate objects, are really made up of people and everything that goes along with dealing with other humans. So I always try to understand the people my client is dealing with, the institutional problems, and the social dynamics to figure out the best way to help them achieve what they're hoping to achieve.

Bryant: Are there one or two themes that come up often when you are mentoring someone?

Nober: I often counsel people, particularly if they're new leaders, on a couple of aspects that may not be intuitive. The first is that everything they do is role-modeling for the rest of their team, whether or not they intend to. Their effectiveness as a leader is a function of how they act.

So I tell them that they have to be conscious of the little things. One way to do that is to ask them to reflect on a time earlier in their career when they were dealing with a new leader. The leader might have been busy with something else, and they were short with them, and I ask my clients to remember the impact that had on them. All leaders have to be conscious of the signals they are sending.

The second common theme is that a lot of leaders are very reluctant to let people go. Of course, nobody wakes up in the morning wanting to fire people. They're there to build things and accomplish things.

But I remind them that if you have employees who are not pulling their weight, and their performance is up and down, you need to deal with those things and have the hard conversation. That's something that can be very hard for people to do.

Bryant: What's the best lesson you learned from somebody you worked with over the years?

Nober: It's to recognize that feedback is a gift. I know that can sound like a cliché, but you have to be able to look at all the feedback you get and decide what is constructive so that you can act on it.

You also have to recognize that having an emotional reaction to feedback is just part of the process. I don't think it's a bad thing, because it means people care about how they're perceived.

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

Nober: In organizations, you can't do things by yourself. You need a team that believes in you and wants to follow you. So being right, per se, is not always the end of the discussion. Many people who are really smart don't always see things that way. They're used to thinking that natural ability will win out. That's a prerequisite for a leadership position, but it's not enough. You have to be somebody who people want to work for.

Bryant: Are there certain "Roger-isms" you've repeated often over the years?

Nober: One is an expression I picked up working in Washington, D.C.: "Where you stand depends on where you sit." It means that your position often dictates how you view issues. It's a good reminder to appreciate where people are coming from. It can be easy sometimes to wonder why people are saying or doing something.

But it's usually because of their position and what is important to them in that role. I always try to give people the benefit of the doubt and assume they're doing what they're doing for a reason. If you can understand where they're coming from, then you can try to figure out something that will come closest to what they're looking for.