

The **CRAFT** of **MENTORING** with **Brian O'Malley**



Tackle the Difficult Things Quickly. Don't Procrastinate.

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Brian O'Malley, former CEO and President of Domino Foods, Inc., and a mentor and coach at The ExCo Group, shared candid insights with Adam Bryant. Key themes include building trust through vulnerability and curiosity, using the GROW model to guide client conversations, and the importance of tackling difficult decisions quickly rather than procrastinating.

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

O'Malley: You have to build trust, and that includes showing some vulnerability ourselves. We have to acknowledge that we don't have all the answers, but working together, we can usually move to a much better place.

Mentoring also requires curiosity. That's how we learn. You want to understand your client's challenges. You need to have empathy. You have to be willing to put yourself into the other person's shoes to understand a situation from their perspective. And you have to relate that to our own experiences and similar situations at key moments.

I remember when I was first starting out as a CEO. It's lonely when you're at the top of an organization. I had a mentor then myself, and they were essential to helping me talk some things through and get comfortable with certain situations. A mentor has only your best interests at heart.

Bryant: Is there a tool or framework you like to use with clients when you first start working with them?

O'Malley: I like to use the GROW model. The G stands for goal. What are we specifically trying to accomplish? The R stands for reality, which is being clear about where we are right now in this situation, including the challenges we're dealing with.

The O stands for options-what are all the different possibilities you might use to attain that goal? And the W stands for the Way Forward. What's the plan for achieving your goal, including specific timelines?

Bryant: Is there a story you can share about a tough conversation you had to have with a client?

O'Malley: I worked with one client who needed to address underperformance by his team. He was a relatively high performer himself. He had a very demanding job and a very demanding boss. He worked his tail off.

And maybe because he was being challenged so much by his boss, he decided that he wanted to make life a little easier for his team. But by doing so, he was making his own life even more difficult because he wasn't being demanding enough of those people.

I shared with him that over my career, my best bosses were never necessarily my friends. But I respected them, and I was willing to work hard for them and take direction from them. I had other bosses who were friendly, but I don't feel that they often challenged me and brought the best out of me.

So I asked my client, what does great look like in terms of what you would like from your team? I asked him to divide his team into three groups: the strong performers, the skaters who were just doing their job but nothing more, and the underperformers.

I explained that the overperformers will probably get discouraged if they see a lot of skaters and underperformers on the team. And we talked about what he could and should do with the skaters and underperformers.

At the end of the day, you've got to be the best leader for your team, and the best leader is not always going to be somebody who's making it comfortable for everybody. It's better to be more on the demanding side as a boss than making it too easy on your team.

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

O'Malley: Earlier in my career, a colleague stressed the need to tackle the toughest decisions in a timely manner. I think we all tend to procrastinate on dealing with tougher issues if we can get away with it. So if we have five or six things on our to-do list, we'll probably look to do the easy ones first and push the tougher ones off a bit.

But he emphasized that the tough decisions often get harder because problems usually do not get easier over time. So he said to tackle the most difficult thing you have quickly, and do it early in the day. You can't let it slide.

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

O'Malley: Successful leadership is all about getting other people to buy into what you're trying to do, and to develop a strong team under you, and then give that team the resources they need to be successful. I also try not to micromanage people because most people don't react well to that style. You have to let people do their job, and then trust but verify.