

The **CRAFT** of **MENTORING** with **Kathy Murphy**



Are You Playing to Win, or Playing Not to Lose?

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Kathy Murphy, former President and CEO of Corning Gilbert, and a mentor and coach at The ExCo Group, shared candid insights with Adam Bryant. Key themes include the power of asking incisive questions to spark client breakthroughs, why firsthand leadership experience sharpens mentoring, and her rallying question for leaders: are you playing to win, or playing not to lose?

Bryant: What do you see as the key to effective mentoring?

Murphy: It's about asking great questions and helping my clients to have those "aha" moments in which they discover an insight of their own. That's the key to our clients having a breakthrough and solving a problem or deciding to make a change.

I particularly want to understand the "why" behind what my clients are telling me. I know when a question hits the bullseye because the client stops in their tracks and acknowledges that they have a new insight. Often, they surprise themselves with their answer.

I also say the hard things that need to be said to my clients. I do it in a constructive way, but it's part of my job to help the client face reality. I'll do it with candor, but also constructively.

Part of the secret sauce of mentoring is leadership experience. The mentors at ExCo have walked in our clients' shoes. Our clients' day-to-day challenges are not foreign to us. We know how they think, we know the stress they're under, and that helps us to relate to them more effectively. And because we understand what they're going through, we can ask the right questions.

Bryant: What is the most challenging conversation you've had with a client that ultimately landed in a good place?

Murphy: I always ask my clients at the start of our work together, and then periodically along the way, "How will you define this mentoring relationship as a success for you?" When I started with one particular client, he had just been assigned to an extremely challenging new role.

I asked what mentoring success would look like for him. After a few soul-searching, uncomfortable moments, he replied that success would involve navigating him to a different position that better fit his current skills, desired career path, and quality of life.

So, I asked a lot more questions. "What about this challenge is making you fearful?" "Why were you chosen for this role?" "Who else in your company would you suggest could do it instead of you?" "Who can help you?" I was trying to problem-solve, but I was also trying to figure out why he seemed so reluctant to take on this job.

He spent some time making rational arguments that he lacked experience and knowledge to accomplish the goals of the assignment. I continued probing, "How would you define success in this job? How would your boss define success in this job?" He said, "I must successfully start up this new business that has never been done before." He indicated that he was highly skeptical about the feasibility of the endeavor.

I asked, "Is that the right definition of success, or could your job be to determine whether or not your company should be starting up this new business?"

There was a long pause, and a big sigh of relief. He said that he could do that. So he buckled down, worked hard to iterate through business-case scenarios and actually determined a feasible path, won over supporters, overcame obstacles, and went on to successfully start the new business.

As we continue to work together, he has been assigned to even greater challenges and he approaches them with significantly increased degrees of confidence and courage. He has learned the art of reframing questions in a way that takes off a lot of self-imposed pressure. "What is the question we should be answering in this situation?" "What is the definition of success?" He focuses on possibilities and outcomes and often remembers that he has proven, including to himself, that he is really quite excellent at achieving really hard goals.

Bryant: What is the best lesson you learned from a mentor of yours?

Murphy: One was the importance of always adding value. Don't look at a job as a paycheck. My job has always been to add value, to make things better, to get better results, and to help everybody around me to be smarter. So that's number one.

The second one was to speak up if I have an answer or if I see a problem, and to make sure that my voice was heard. There were many times early in my career when I said something that didn't stick and I sat back and thought, all right, I gave my idea, but it didn't go anywhere, so I'll just be quiet. I was coached and mentored to be persistent in speaking up in a way that had positive impact, and so I did, and the results benefited my organization, my customers, and me.

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

Murphy: "Are you playing to win or playing not to lose?" I think that's pretty profound. I ask people that question a lot in my coaching, and I think about it often myself, am I being a bit hesitant or reticent because I'm trying not to lose? I want to be someone who strives to win.

Another one is related to that, "The question is not who will allow you to do something, but who will stop you?" I often hear people say, "Here's what I would like to do, but I don't know if they will let me." My response is: "Who is they? Given the responsibility and authority you have, why are you waiting for somebody else to tell you that you can do something? Or why are you asking? Can you just make it happen?"