

The **CRAFT** of **MENTORING**

with **Shellye Archambeau**



Soft Skills Are Going to Become More Important than Hard Skills

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Shellye Archambeau, former CEO of MetricStream, and a mentor and coach at The ExCo Group, shared candid insights with Adam Bryant. Key themes include using mirroring to surface what leaders really feel beneath the corporate speak, uncovering the deeper why behind a client's stated goals, and why soft skills will soon outweigh hard skills as AI reshapes leadership.

Bryant: What do you see as the secret sauce of effective mentoring?

Archambeau: My main tool that I use when I mentor is mirroring, reflecting back to people what they are saying so they can understand it more objectively. Executives at these senior levels are very good at saying the right thing, but it may not be what they truly feel or believe. The role of the mentor sometimes is to call them on it.

For example, I had a mentee, and something was going on with them that was deeply personal and emotional. I asked them, "So how are you doing?" They gave me an answer, and I said, "That's what you might tell your team or your peers. I want to know how you really feel."

Sometimes you have to break through to people who have been rewarded throughout their career for managing themselves tightly. I work hard on separating the "corporate speak" from the "they speak." That comes from building trust, which I do in part by being vulnerable myself and sharing stories at appropriate moments about when I've been in similar situations.

Bryant: Is there a tool or framework that you've found to be particularly effective when you start working with a client?

Archambeau: I focus on what they are trying to achieve, and I don't limit that conversation to the business. People at very senior levels will often say that they want to be a CEO. Then I will say, "Okay, but what are you actually trying to achieve? Why do you want to do that?"

I try to understand their vision for their life, and I'm always amazed at how few people have spent any time thinking deeply about that question. They often have goals, but then they get stuck when you ask them about the why behind the goal. Often their best answer is some version of, "Well, that's what I'm supposed to do." When they say it out loud, they realize that it's not a good answer.

I try to understand what drives them, because if I can understand what motivates them, then I can help them with their vision. And once that is clear, then I help them create their own rubric for how to navigate and make decisions based on where they're trying to go. We do an assessment of where they are now and their short-term and long-term goals.

Bryant: Can you share a story of a challenging conversation you had to work through with a client?

Archambeau: I was working with a client for whom English was their third language. He was struggling at times with being too direct, and therefore, he could come across as being rough on people. He couldn't figure out how to get past that.

So we worked through some scenarios, and I started responding to the client as they respond to others. He could see the difference. The client ended up realizing that he should simply tell his teams, "Listen, English is my third language and so there are times when I can come across as pretty direct or gruff. That's not what I'm trying to do."

The lesson is that if you have a weakness, if you have a challenge, just tell people. It shows them you are self-aware, you're working on it, and you need their help. If you do that, people will give you grace and the benefit of the doubt.

Bryant: What is the best lesson that you learned from one of your mentors over the years?

Archambeau: The lesson was to manage my calendar. That sounds obvious, but I was given that advice when I was in my early thirties and working for IBM. My calendar was filled with meetings that other people had put on my calendar. I realized I was spending a lot of time on things that weren't my priorities. They were other people's priorities.

But if I was going to be evaluated based on my priorities, then the majority of my time should be spent on my priorities. That doesn't mean I'm not helping other people, but the mix needed to flip. That had a big impact. To this day, I look back at my calendar every quarter to see if I am spending my time in ways that are consistent with my priorities.

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

Archambeau: Your title makes you a manager, but your people make you a leader. That came from Bill Campbell, the legendary executive coach in Silicon Valley. The core message is that it's all about the people, and leadership is nothing more than creating an environment of followership.

Just because you're in charge doesn't mean you're in charge. If there's a crisis, your team is not necessarily going to be there for you. And yet there are a lot of people who are unofficial leaders, they don't have the title, but you turn to them if you want something done or if you want to find out what is really going on.

Bryant: Do you find that there are new issues coming up in your coaching conversations?

Archambeau: It's not about new issues, but I am seeing a shift in emphasis. It used to be that if, as a leader, you were a mix of 75 percent hard skills and 25 percent soft skills, people were pretty happy with that.

But that ratio is changing, and we're going to get to the point where it's completely flipped in this world of AI. The next decade is going to be all about people. And the companies that figure out how to navigate by taking the people along will be in a much better shape than those who don't. Soft skills are going to become more important than hard skills.