

The **CRAFT** of **MENTORING** with **Karen Vander Linde**



Never Let Internal Politics and Power Plays Quiet Your Voice

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Karen Vander Linde, former Global Practice Leader at PwC and a mentor and coach at The ExCo Group, shared candid insights with Adam Bryant. Key themes include building trust through transparency, refusing to let internal politics silence your voice, and knowing when good enough is good enough.

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

Vander Linde: Transparency and trust are the foundation of a strong mentoring relationship. Establishing a personal relationship, and sharing stories about challenges you've faced, is really important, because then the individual you're working with will do the same.

That type of transparency builds trust, so that the person you're mentoring always feels that you have their back. You may share tough messages at times, but that doesn't mean you don't have their back. You are working for their success and helping them to have greater impact as a leader.

Bryant: Do you have a favorite tool or framework that you like to use with clients?

Vander Linde: I always like to do a "from-to" analysis for the four categories we use at ExCo, shaping strategy, driving execution, building culture, and scaling your leadership. That helps ground the

conversation with the client about where they are now and where they want to be, and then we start working on the roadmap to get there, with a plan for regular check-ins on their progress.

Bryant: Can you share a story of a challenging conversation you had with a client that ultimately landed in a good place?

Vander Linde: I had a client who I thought I needed to fire because he didn't seem interested in the engagement. It was the leader's boss who said he needed to do this. He was a very intelligent person, and he believed that he had better ideas and a better way of doing things than the people he was working with.

In many cases he was right, but the problem was that he was not open to other ideas. So he was viewed as being rigid, arrogant, and not a team player. That came out in the interviews I did with his colleagues. His view was that their perception of him was their problem, not his.

I finally said to him, "I'm having the same problem that the people I interviewed have with you. No matter what question, suggestion, idea, or perspective I share with you, you put up a wall." I added that I felt he wasn't gaining much from the engagement, and that we should probably stop working together.

All of a sudden, he said, "I'm really glad that you were very straight with me with your feedback." We did continue working together, and we started to work on how he needed to learn to build on the ideas of others and listen more. Yes, he was brilliant, but there are kernels of brilliance in others too. He became much more effective.

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

Vander Linde: One of my mentors in my career was an ExCo mentor, Marty Holleran. He taught me to never let internal politics and power plays make me sit back. You have to find ways to come forward with your voice, even if you're pushing up against someone of power, and do it in a way that is not personal.

It can often feel personal if you're dealing with somebody who has a my-way-or-the-highway approach. Marty's suggestion was to always frame the conversation as a business solution to a leadership issue.

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

Vander Linde: I took a workshop many years ago, and one of the takeaways was that only 20 percent of what we do really requires top effort and high quality. For 80 percent, good enough is good enough.

I was the kind of person who would want to do the best for everything I was responsible for. It was very freeing for me to have that construct in my mind, is this part of the 20 percent or 80 percent?

In this day and age, when there's so much change and disruption, I hear leaders often say how overwhelmed they are, and that they are working very long hours, including on weekends.

I often share that idea with them, is this the 20 percent that you really need to focus on, or is it part of the 80 percent where it needs to be good enough? And good enough can often mean that it's something you can delegate and offer a chance for growth or challenge for someone else.