Don’t Be Daunted by the “Smoke and Mirrors” of Bigger Roles

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Susan Hooper, Board Member at Uber UK, and a mentor and coach at The ExCo Group, shared candid insights with Adam Bryant. Key themes include balancing warmth with candor in effective mentoring, the power of authenticity over imitation as a leadership lesson, and why leaders should not be daunted by the "smoke and mirrors" of bigger roles.

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

Hooper: One is to have presence as a mentor. Given our backgrounds as operators, we've earned the right to have an opinion on the challenges our clients are facing and to be able to defend that point of view with substance. And that is paired with candor and honesty.

You have to earn the ability to be totally truthful with them, as well. You've got to be the one person in your client's life with no agenda except their success. It's a balance, because warmth without challenge is like flattery, and challenge without warmth is just criticism.

The last point I'll mention is restraint. It can be tempting to want to help solve a client's business problems. But it's not our job to fix them. It's our job to make sure that the leader arrives at that insight themselves.

Bryant: Is there a tough conversation you've had to work through with somebody that ultimately landed a good place?

Hooper: Earlier in my career, I took over as CEO of one of two divisions in a company. Before I arrived, two very strong leaders in the organization had vied for the chief executive role. The leader who won was my boss, but the one who lost had taken a reduced salary and stayed in the organization, working within my division.

As you can imagine, he was filled with bitterness that he'd lost, but no one had dealt with this situation, and he was undermining a lot of what I was trying to do. Six months in, I had to sit down with him and say to him, "We're going to have to end our relationship here because it's not good for us and it's not good for you." Not surprisingly, he was angry.

He left and later became CEO of a charity. When I met him a year later, he thanked me because his leaving had released him of a lot of toxic emotions. I was disappointed that my predecessors had not dealt with a difficult situation before I got there. But it was a reminder that when you have difficult conversations that are grounded in facts, truth, and respect, it usually turns out well for both sides.

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

Hooper: I've done a lot of presenting over my career, and early on, I would often overthink the content and get caught up in the words and the slides. Then my coach at the time said to me, "You're overthinking it. Just be yourself."

It made me realize that for years, in the way I managed people and gave speeches, I was always trying to be someone else because I didn't really have the confidence just to be myself. His advice that being myself would serve me better in every respect than imitating someone else was a massive release.

It made me a better and more authentic leader. People know when it's genuine and when you're trying to be someone that you're not. I've passed that advice on a lot.

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

Hooper: As I moved up the ranks in my career, I remember looking at a position above me and often hearing from people why I couldn't do them because they were so difficult. Over time, I learned it was all smoke and mirrors. Because every time I moved into a bigger role, I would say to myself, "This is just common sense, and the experience I have is perfect. You just put the pieces together, ask for help when you need it, and it works."

The lesson was not to be daunted by smoke and mirrors, knowing that the source of all that is likely someone who is trying to protect their job or turf. It's quite liberating when you realize that. If you've got a good head on your shoulders and know how to manage people to achieve clear goals, you're going to be fine.

Bryant: What are the new topics that are coming up in your mentoring conversations?

Hooper: One is about fostering innovation and not penalizing failure. Risks need to be redefined to be able to create the right momentum to solve all these new issues. AI and sustainability are the key ones.

The longstanding risk-analysis framework we have for businesses has to be reviewed to support the idea that you need to take action before you know 100 percent for certain what the outcome is going to be.

You're going to make mistakes on the way, and they should be celebrated as much as successes. It's about having to make decisions before you know for certain the outcome. It's like dealing with a new COVID every month. You have to be comfortable with change and embrace it.