



Send the Elevator Back Down to Bring Others Up

May 28, 2026

Coretha Rushing, former Chief People Officer at Equifax, Inc. and The Coca-Cola Company, and a mentor and coach at The ExCo Group, shared candid insights with Adam Bryant. Key themes include the rigor behind effective mentoring, the power of giving grace under pressure, and the responsibility of senior leaders to lift others as they climb.

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

Rushing: Mentoring does appear at many times to be just a conversation. But there is a rigor and discipline in our approach to staying on track and on task. We set the expectation that we are working toward a defined outcome. We should be able to point to results and show that something has changed.

We also need to understand what's driving our clients beyond what they have to deliver at work. One of my favorite tools is the lifeline exercise, in which people share the highs and lows of their lives, starting at an early age. After all, we tend to operate a certain way because of something that happened earlier in our lives. Some people are more aware than others of how those early influences shape their behavior now.

I've had clients who have been a bit reluctant at first to talk about their personal lives. But I always tell them that they are only going to get out of the engagement what they put into it. And our sole focus is to help them raise their game and get them to the next level. We do that by trying to build on their strengths

and identify the derailers that are holding them back.

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

Rushing: Earlier in my career, a boss told me that I was going to meet some difficult people in my career, particularly because I was often in meetings where I was the only woman and the only person of color. We were dealing with one client in particular where there were a lot of difficult men in the room. That's when my boss said to me, "I know these guys are hard to deal with, but when they're giving you a hard time, always remember that it's not about you."

He added: "A long time ago, somebody told me that hurt people hurt people, and unfortunately, they don't leave that at home. So even when they are directing something at you, it's about them, and it has nothing to do with you."

I've been sharing that advice my whole life with people. When people are angry and they're lashing out at you, it's easy to internalize what they are saying and start wondering if you did something wrong.

It's better to say to yourself, something must really be going on with this person for them to be this upset, and I'm just going to try to give them grace. And that helps you stay calm and strong in those moments. You're letting it pass right through you, because it's not about you.

Bryant: What has been another important lesson for you?

Rushing: When you get to a certain point in your career and you're in a good place, you should send the elevator back down and help bring others up. I think of our lives and careers in three chunks. Early on, when you're starting out in your first job, you're learning. Then there is a middle section where you've developed your skills and capabilities, and you are starting to maximize your income.

And then, later in your career or once you retire, you have the opportunity to return to others what was given to you and help others, because anybody who has been successful has been helped by others along the way.

Bryant: There is so much disruption and uncertainty right now. How do you help leaders stay grounded and focused?

Rushing: Not surprisingly, AI comes up often, and I hear from a lot of people that they are nervous and concerned that they are going to be displaced by the technology. I will often share with them a one-pager about the SARAH model of dealing with change. It's an acronym that stands for Shock, Anger, Rejection, Acceptance, and Hope.

As people move through those stages, it's not always linear. They may bounce around among the different emotions. The goal, of course, is to get to hope, where people can start seeing a path to success. It's true in many aspects of life, and I find it particularly relevant now as people are processing how AI is going to impact their careers. That also helps separate the emotions from the more practical and concrete actions they should take.