



Dialog 4: Brenda and Eddie

Mentor Helps Protege / Protege Asks for Advice

Brenda's the founder and CEO of Sandhill Lifts, a company that builds bespoke crane systems for industrial clients like shipyards, aviation, and construction companies. Her current big headache is quality control, or the lack of it. They're shipping imperfect products, and have to send engineers into the field to debug and repair them.

She reaches out to an old mentor, Eddie, a retired executive who still takes an interest in her career.

Step 1: Permission

Brenda: Hey, I need your advice.

It doesn't get easier than this. Eddie just has to resist the urge to give advice, rather than follow the Four Steps (chapter 10).

Step 2: Outcome

Eddie: Sure. What's going on?

Brenda: It's our quality problem — the one we've been throwing money at for years, and still haven't solved.

Eddie: Yeah, let's think it through. Give me a 30-second overview of the problem.

Since Eddie doesn't have any context, it's helpful to get a brief overview before asking about Brenda's energizing outcome.

Brenda: We're shipping products that have literally not passed QA (quality assurance). We're scrambling to fix them in the field. It's very expensive for us, and very annoying to the customers.

Eddie: So what's the outcome you're going for? If you solved this problem completely and utterly, what would be happening instead?

Orienting Brenda toward an energizing outcome (chapter 15).

Brenda: We'd be shipping solutions that work out of the box as soon as they're installed. We'd be following quality protocols that prevent bugs and substandard parts from making it out the door.

Eddie: What's at stake? Why is this a priority?

Probing for a meaningful outcome (chapter 17)

Brenda: It's costing us a lot of money. We're losing profits that we could be putting into growth, and backfilling past commitments. And we're starting to get a reputation for slipshod work among our client base. They've been very patient, because we've only been working with early adopters, and they know that startups like ours move fast and break things. And they love what our systems can do, once they're properly installed and programmed. But our competitors are catching up, and we're trying to break into established markets, and we can't afford to mess up on any of the big opportunities in our pipeline.

Eddie: So adopting and implementing an uncompromising quality process would reestablish Sandhill as a premier brand.

That's the outcome that energizes Brenda: for Sandhill to be recognized in the marketplace as a premier brand, known for reliability. It's positive (chapter 15), as opposed to the "don't want" of "stop shipping products with defects."

Brenda: Yes, absolutely. Being known for reliability would be huge. It would stem the flow of business to the competitors who have been playing catchup, and would pave the way for significant expansion of our market share.

Step 3: Opportunity

What's happening now?

Eddie: So what happens that allows products to ship without passing QA?

Brenda: Every time we make a sale and build the product, there's a lot of pressure to ship quickly. Even if we have a substandard product, if we delay, that means postponed revenue and lower quarterly numbers. Our investors hate that. Also, most aerospace companies budget on an annual basis, and if we take too long to ship, they'll cancel the order and go with a different vendor. That's permanently lost revenue.

Eddie: How does the decision to ship a substandard order get made?

Brenda: Well, theoretically any of the line managers can step in and stop the sale if a product hasn't met QA standards. But they don't, because they'd be ostracized by the rest of their team. After all, no shipment, no sale, and no bonuses.

Eddie: What about their higher-ups?

Brenda: That's part of the problem — the department heads have the most to lose in terms of bonuses. If someone in their department advocated unwavering adherence to QA standards, their department head would just overrule them and ship anyway. Everyone knows there are immediate and severe penalties for delaying, and no tangible consequences for shipments that don't meet standards.

What have you tried?

Eddie: What have you tried?

Brenda: We've changed our software twice. We hired consultants, as I mentioned, who wrote policies for us, and trained us on automated and manual testing protocols.

Eddie: And what else?

Brenda: We restructured teams, so that QA engineers and programmers would be in closer contact, and not feel like adversaries.

Opportunity question #2 (chapter 20).

"And what else?" vs "Anything else?" (chapter 20).

Eddie: Has any of that helped?

Brenda: Only in theory. What happens in practice is, we all give lip service to the policies, every single actual situation called for an exception.

Where's the Opportunity in the Problem?

Eddie: I have a thought, but I want to ask a few more questions before I share it. Is that OK?

Brenda: Absolutely.

Eddie: You mentioned that you're a startup. What does that mean, in terms of your culture and how you do business?

Brenda: Well, like I said, we've always moved fast and broken things. I started the company because I was fed up with the delays and bottlenecks in production and repair when we made the smallest changes to the assembly line. Everything would get reconfigured in a matter of days, except we'd have to wait weeks for an entire team of engineers to complete a full assessment for the new crane setup. I saw that anticipating those changes could revolutionize how we build and program the cranes. So I started this company, convinced some friends in the industry to invest, hired a team, and we've been pedal to the metal ever since. Every deal that I signed for the first few years was just in time and just enough to keep us going. We've been playing catchup since day one.

Eddie: What does "playing catchup" look like in the QA process?

Brenda: We cut corners to get to payday.

Eddie: What does that look like, exactly? Let's say I'm a fly on the wall during the process of cutting quality corners to speed up delivery and payment. What am I seeing and hearing? Take me there.

Brenda: You're not seeing or hearing anything. It's like that Sherlock Holmes' story about the dog not barking at night. We're so used to prioritizing speed and action that it's a given that we'll ship rather than waste days or weeks getting a stamp of approval from QA.

Eddie: Gotcha. So let me recap what I've heard so far. You've been operating as a startup: innovating, winging it, moving as fast as you can. You're always scrambling,

Continually asking permission to stay in the conversation, and being transparent about what he's doing and why.

Recap for understanding and to demonstrate empathy (chapter 16).

always behind, and always needing the next sale to survive. Your functions are siloed, with every division not wanting to be the bottleneck — almost competing with each other to be the most valuable part of the company. And now you've grown, and you've got a stable customer base and healthy financials, but you're still operating like a startup. While your product is totally integrated, your work is totally siloed. Does that sound right?

Brenda: Yes, pretty much.

Eddie: What am I missing?

Brenda: No, you're right. Part of me wants to protest that we're farther along than that, but I know you're right.

Eddie: OK. So here's my thought, and I'd love your reaction to it: You don't have a quality problem. I mean, you do have a quality problem. But it's really a symptom of something much more fundamental: your startup culture.

Brenda: What do you mean?

Eddie: Startups prototype. That means building imperfect solutions based on collaboration with beta customers. You build a minimum viable product and get real customer feedback and keep making it better and better, right?

Brenda: Yes, exactly.

Eddie: You get rewarded for speed. For calculated risks. For "good enough." You want to fail fast, get feedback, and move on.

Brenda: Yes, that's our culture all right. It's exhilarating, and exhausting. We've been living on adrenaline and caffeine for years.

Eddie: When you were a small, scrappy startup, how hard was it to get everyone on the same page? Aligned behind specific goals and deliverables?

Brenda: It was easy. Everyone knew what they had to do. And they took responsibility and did it, no matter what.

Eddie: You've grown a lot since the early days. Are your people as aligned now as they were at first?

Brenda: No, definitely not. Marketing and Sales are at each other's throats. Sales and Finance constantly require me to referee their squabbles. And even engineering and manufacturing have slipped up because of miscommunication.

Checking for understanding rather than assuming.

Going for extreme clarity; not willing to settle for his recap sounding "pretty much" right.

Going for extreme clarity; not willing to settle for his recap sounding "pretty much" right.

Eddie: That's what I mean about the fundamental issue being your startup culture. You're not a scrappy startup anymore. You have a much more complex organizational structure, and you have to sell to much more conservative buyers. (Pauses and observes Brenda's expression) What's going on for you as you hear that?

Brenda: I know you're right, and I'm sad. I hate to think that I built this company just so we could become corporate.

Eddie: What does that mean to you?

Brenda: Slow, bureaucratic, risk-averse, and boring.

Find the Opportunity in the Problem

Eddie: OK, I'm going to share my bias here. Feel free to take it or leave it. I think your opportunity here, with the quality issue, is to shift from a startup culture to a culture of excellence. When you're no longer fighting for survival, you can go for a higher bar. How does that sound to you?

Brenda: Wow. I'm totally with you.

Eddie: What would a culture of excellence look like?

Brenda: Well, we're committed to our customers, but in a different way than when they were just our focus group and earlyvangelists. Now we care for our customers by making sure that everything we ship is of the highest possible quality.

Eddie: What else?

Brenda: Well, we need to be able to slow down — not to become complacent or bureaucratic, but to be able to breathe. To have down time. To not have to eat, breathe, and sleep cranes 24/7. You know what? I want this not just for my sanity, and for the bottom line, and for our customers — I really want this for our employees. I see the stress they're under, feeling like they have to do everything last minute. And you're right — that's really where the QA problem is. We know how to implement quality. We have the tools, the software, the documentation, the protocols. We just haven't been prioritizing quality because it's felt too risky.

Eddie said earlier that he had a thought, but wanted to ask some questions first. His questions weren't "leading," as if he were trying to drag Brenda to the "right" (ie his) answer, but curiosity-based. Now that he has answers, he doesn't play coy with his opinion. By calling it his "bias," he allows Brenda to respond to it without having to worry about hurting his feelings or being pressured to agree (chapter 24).

Probing for clarity (chapter 16).

Getting the whole picture (chapter 16).

Step 4: Plan

Identify Options

Eddie: So what are some things you could try that would solve the quality issue in a way that could move you toward a culture of excellence?

What could you try? (chapter 24).

Brenda: Well, I think the QA function is siloed, just like the rest of the organization. We need to integrate quality into everything we do — programming, manufacturing, customer service, sales, everything. And you can't have excellence in one function without tight integration among all the functions. So the first thing is to have an offsite with my team and bring everyone into alignment around this new vision.

Eddie: Great. What else?

Increasing the number of options (chapter 24).

Brenda: We could bring in an outside expert in quality. But that wouldn't address the larger issue. Forget it...

Eddie: Let's put it on the list anyway. You might not do it right away, but it may become appropriate later on. Anyway, let's not judge anything right now. We're just spitballing. In fact, that idea just gave me one — can I share it?

Avoid any evaluation during the identifying options task (chapter 24).

Brenda: Yes please.

Eddie: What if you brought in an expert on teamwork and strategic alignment?

Both people can put options on the table. When you're the helper, ask permission so your partner can take it or leave it. That way, they'll own any suggestions you make (chapter 24).

Brenda: Yes, I love that. It's going on the list.

Eddie: What else might you try? What's something that would be aligned with your focus on excellence?

Brenda: Ooh, you know what I just thought? Our offsites have been at pretty ratty places over the years — we'd go out to a nice dinner, but the hotel and conference center weren't very exciting. Maybe I could show rather than tell my new excellence story by booking a nicer place. I mean, we can afford it now. And it would help us see ourselves in that way.

Eddie: Great. Put it on the list. What else?

Brenda: I'm thinking about changing the compensation structure. Up until now, we've kind of rewarded "ready, fire, aim." What if the new comp system prioritized quality?

Eddie: Great. On the list. What else?

Brenda: That's about it.

Choose

Eddie: Given all the options you have in front of you, what would like to do?

What would you like to do? (chapter 25)

Brenda: I'm really excited about the offsite. I have a location in mind. And I think I will bring in an outside consultant on strategic alignment. Let me know if you have any recommendations.

Eddie: How do you see that going?

Asking for specificity so Brenda can make an informed choice (chapter 25).

Brenda: Well, I think we need to focus on a shared vision of excellence, and define it operationally. And then make a plan for how to work together to achieve it. That's the mandate I'll set for the consultant.

Eddie: How does quality fit into all this?

Brenda: Well, I hope we'll agree that solving the quality issue is crucial to our continued success. And if that's the case, then that will have to be part of the vision of excellence. So rather than focus on quality as a standalone issue, we can use it as a proxy for how well we're working together as an aligned organization. This conversation has been so helpful — you've allowed me to see that I don't want to just solve the quality issue. What we really need is to work together in a seamless and integrated way so we aren't just flying by the seat of our pants, fixing problems in a haphazard and frantic way every time they pop up. It's time for us to go on the offense, strategically, and chart our future. That way, whatever opportunities or threats arise, we have the capacity to deal with them.

Commit

Eddie: That's awesome. You sound very energized and clear.

Brenda: Totally. Thanks so much!

Eddie: So what exactly will you do, and by when?

What will you do, by when? (chapter 26)

Brenda: I'll start talking to my leadership team right away. First one on one, to share this conversation and get their feedback, and any concerns. Then we'll schedule an offsite for next month, and really plan for it. No more "So, what

do we have to talk about?” meetings. We’ll be excellent even in how we plan for the offsite.

Eddie: How confident are you that you can get the ball rolling? One to ten.

Brenda: Totally. A 10. I actually think it will be pretty easy to get everyone on board.

Eddie: Any risks you want to consider? Any little voices in your head going, “Yeah, but so-and-so is going to be a problem here”?

Brenda: Honestly, no. I think most of them have probably been waiting for someone to suggest something — and since I’m the CEO, they’ve probably been looking to me for this kind of leadership.

Eddie: That sounds great. I’m happy to share names of some of the consultants I’ve worked with on stuff like this — drop me an email and I’ll send you a few. And I’d love to hear how it goes — would you be willing to keep me in the loop? You totally don’t have to — I’m just eager to hear.

Brenda: Yeah, totally. Can I keep asking you for advice?

Eddie: Sure thing.

Assessing confidence (likelihood of following through) (chapter 26).

Considering risks (chapter 25).