

Mentoring Best Practices - Communication

Key Skills for Effective Communication

Four key skills for effective communication in mentoring relationships are:

Increase your awareness of yourself and others.

You are the instrument through which mentoring happens, both as mentor and mentee. The more you are clear about your own agenda and able to separate out your own thoughts, feelings, and wants from those of your mentor/mentee, the greater the potential for intentional partnership and mutual benefit.

"In each moment you spend in another person's presence, you are communicating that person's importance to you. Are you doing this consciously or unconsciously?" Denise Holmes

Get curious about the other person's story.

Listening in order to learn something new (rather than to confirm what you already know) is essential to good mentoring. When you get curious about the other person's story, you open up the possibility of greater connection and value for both parties.

"In order to understand what another person is saying, you must assume that it is true, and try to imagine what it could be true of." George Miller

Listen for passion and potential.

Great mentoring means understanding what makes the other person tick, what has brought them to this moment in their career, and where they would like to go next.

"Listening for potential means listening to people as if they have all the tools they need to be successful, and could simply benefit from exploring their thoughts and ideas out loud." David Rock

Share your own crystallized experience.

One of the pleasures of mentoring is the chance to share one's own hard-earned experience so that it might be helpful to others coming along a similar path.

"Ecologists tell us that a tree planted in a clearing of an old forest will grow more successfully than one planted in an open field. The reason, it seems, is that the roots of the forest tree are able to follow the intricate pathways created by former trees and thus imbed themselves more deeply. This literally enables stronger trees to share resources with the weaker so that the whole forest becomes healthier. Similarly, human beings thrive best when we grow in the presence of those who have gone before." Parks Daloz

Best Practices for Active Listening

Active listening is an art that can be learned. Often, when you listen to another person speak, you are listening to some extent but you can also be distracted and engaged in other pursuits –thinking about something else, looking around, typing, listening to others, reading, etc. Sometimes, you assume that you know what the speaker is going to say and you start to formulate a response, rather than paying complete attention to what they are saying in the moment. Active listening involves forgoing all other activities for the time being and giving your full attention to the act of listening to ensure that you understand the speaker's intent as well as the feelings behind the speaker's words.

What can I do to be an active listener?

- Maintain eye contact with the speaker while he or she is talking.
- Avoid distractions.
- Stop all other activities.
- Pay attention to what the speaker is saying.
- Ask for clarification.

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- Summarize what the speaker has said.
- Pay attention not only to the words but also to the feelings behind the words. (By referring to the speaker's feelings ["It seems that you are angry about..."], you can make it clear that you understand what the speaker is saying and also understand the speaker's feelings about the topic.)

Best Practices for Giving and Receiving Feedback

Why should I give feedback?

- It is your obligation to help your mentee identify and learn the skills and knowledge needed for a successful career.
- Feedback allows you to acknowledge your mentee's strengths and to motivate the mentee to work on areas of weakness.
- Your mentee wants and needs your feedback to move forward in his or her career.

When should I provide feedback?

- There is no answer set in stone, but the general answer is that you should provide feedback frequently.
- It is helpful to provide feedback on a regular basis so your mentee doesn't get bogged down pursuing the wrong path in his or her research or professional development.
- Feedback should be given on a timely basis. It is not helpful to provide feedback about a behavior or research method long after the behavior has occurred or the experiment has been completed.
- Prompt and frequent feedback will go a long way toward cementing your relationship.

How do I give constructive and effective feedback?

- The most important element in providing effective feedback is establishing an atmosphere of mutual trust and regard. When a feeling of trust has been created, it is easier both to give and to accept feedback.
- Make sure that the mentee understands that you are working toward a mutual goal – the mentee's success. Providing and receiving feedback can be a very positive experience for the mentor and the mentee as long as you both understand that you share the same commitment to developing the mentee's career.
- When you give feedback, it is important to acknowledge the mentee's accomplishments and successes along with the areas in which he or she needs to improve.
- You should always be specific in providing feedback. It is not terribly helpful to say, "Your work is sloppy." It is much more useful to describe the specific element of work that concerns you.
- Keep the feedback simple. When planning to give feedback, decide on a small number of areas that you want to cover. You don't want to create a shopping list of faults that could overwhelm and discourage the mentee.
- If a mentee is falling behind in his or her work, don't automatically assume a lack of commitment. Explore with your mentee what is really going on.
- When providing feedback, offer to work with your mentee to develop solutions to any problems that he or she is encountering.

How do I set up a feedback conversation?

- First, e-mail or call your mentee to make an appointment and let your mentee know what the meeting is about. There is no quicker way to dissolve the atmosphere of trust than by "sandbagging" your mentee.
- Hold the meeting in your office or other private space – never provide negative feedback in an open area with others around.
- While you are giving feedback, maintain eye contact and a measured tone. Some mentees need a bit of gentleness so as not to get discouraged.
- If your mentee wants to respond to your feedback, let him or her do so and actively listen to his or her thoughts and words. At the same time, be prepared to give your mentee some space. He or she might be upset and not prepared to discuss the issues right then and there.

What do I do while I am receiving feedback?

- Listen while your mentor is giving feedback, and wait until he or she is finished before you respond.
- Make sure you understand the feedback. It's useful to paraphrase the feedback to your mentor to ensure that you captured the intended meaning. Ask the mentor to clarify or to be more specific if he or she has not been. Or ask for strategies to resolve the issues and work together to develop solutions.
- Try not to be defensive. Your mentor is trying to help you succeed. If you're feeling defensive, it might be a good idea to ask if you can make an appointment to discuss the feedback later, after you've had time to consider it. You don't want to continue the conversation while you are upset. It's best to have a cooling down period. You also don't

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want to ask your mentor to defend the feedback, since feedback generally involves subjective perceptions and opinions.

- Finally, whether you agree with the feedback or not, thank your mentor for his or her time and for being helpful to you.

What if I get feedback that I don't agree with?

- Step back a bit. It's useful to consider the feedback calmly and to think about it in the overall context of moving forward in your career. An important element of receiving feedback is evaluating it, but evaluate it without emotion.
- Ask a trusted peer for his or her point of view or to talk with another mentor.
- While your mentor has more experience and expertise than you have, the decision about whether or not to use the feedback is ultimately your own. If you decide not to use the feedback, let your mentor know and tell her or him your reasons. Your mentoring relationship is long-term, and you don't want to jeopardize it by alienating your mentor.
- Your mentor may want to give you additional feedback. Listen to it and think about it before you finalize your decision. And if you decide not to use the feedback at this time, keep the feedback in mind, since it may make more sense to you down the road.

Barriers to Effective Communication

Three typical barriers to effective communication include the following:

Defensiveness or premature assumptions

Problem: A defensive listener will be less able to "hear" what the speaker is saying. In some cases, instead of listening, a person is thinking about why an interaction is occurring or perhaps preparing a response to a message that he or she hasn't heard. By making assumptions about the speaker and the reasons that a conversation is taking place, the listener keeps him/herself from paying attention to the real message.

Solution: The listener should not presuppose that he or she knows the reason for or the basis of the communication, nor should the listener feel defensive without knowing what is being said. Being open and nonjudgmental will allow the listener to truly hear what is being said.

Judgments based on cultural differences or interpersonal relationships

Problem: This problem goes hand in hand with that of making assumptions. In this case, the problem involves presupposing things about another person based on cultural differences and personal associations. This can result in not hearing a message or misinterpreting the message.

Solution: It's important for the speaker and listener to be open with each other to dispel assumptions and biases. For this to happen, it may be useful to address biases straight on in an open dialogue. By revealing and discussing biases and assumptions, it is possible to minimize their negative impact and thereby communicate more fully and effectively.

Mixed messages

Problem: A conversation that conveys contradictory messages or conflates the intended message with extraneous issues can cause confusion, concern, or resentment.

Solution: Before speaking, people should think carefully about the points to be made. Written talking points can be useful in this regard. If there are multiple messages to convey (perhaps some positive and some negative messages), it may be better to present them on separate occasions or in different environments. Conveying only one message at a time can help avoid confusion and misunderstanding.

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