

2.6 Mentor Communication Tips

Trust and effective communication are the foundation of the mentor-mentee relationship. Trust is built intrinsically throughout time. Using effective communication skills can help build trust and is the responsibility of the mentor, who will want to intentionally practice and model these skills with each mentee interaction.

Each mentor and mentee has their own personal communication style. Basic helpful communication skills include the following.

Active Listening

Active listening attempts to understand the content of what is being said and the emotion behind it by focusing on the verbal and nonverbal messages. Your intent is to understand what is being said and not to think about how you will respond. Active listening encourages honesty, reduces fear, builds respect and affection, and increases acceptance. Simple active listening skills include the following.

- Establishing and maintaining eye contact
- Keep body language open: relaxed posture, lean forward with the appropriate facial expression and positive use of gestures
- Use verbal clues such as “um-hmm,” “sure,” “ah” and “yes”

Paraphrasing

Paraphrasing focuses on listening first and then reflecting the *fact* and *feeling* back to the speaker. Often, the *fact* is clearly stated, but a good mentor also listens between the lines for the *feeling* part of the communication. This skill can help you evaluate that you have accurately interpreted your mentee, and it lets the mentee know that you hear, understand and care about his or her feelings. Be careful not to overdo paraphrasing because this may seem condescending.

Examples for paraphrasing *facts* include the following.

- “So, you’re saying that . . .”
- “You believe that . . .”
- “The problem is . . .”

Examples for paraphrasing *feelings* include the following.

- “You feel that . . .”
- “Your reaction is . . .”
- “And, that made you feel . . .”

Do not use paraphrasing as an opportunity to evaluate, sympathize, give your opinion, offer advice or to analyze.

Open-Ended Questions

“A prudent question is one-half of wisdom.” – Francis Bacon

Open-ended questions are intended to collect information by exploring the mentee’s feelings and attitudes. This technique can be used to learn how a mentee views a situation. Open-ended questions yield significant information that can often be used in problem solving. Try to ask broad, open-ended questions. Use the question “*why?*” carefully as it can yield a more defensive response.

Examples

- “How do you see this situation?”
- “How are things going?”
- “What are your reasons for . . . ?”
- “Can you give me an example?”
- “How does this affect you?”
- “How did you decide that?”
- “What would you like to do about it?”
- “What part did you play?”

Note: Open-ended questions are included with each section in the Mentoring Toolkit as discussion starters.

“I” Messages

“I” messages create the opportunity to explain your feelings in response to your mentee’s behavior, as well as to share the mentor’s life-experiences with the mentee. “I” messages don’t accuse or place blame or judgment; they can help keep communication open. They represent only one perspective and allow the other person to have a point of view. “I” messages communicate both information and respect for each position.

Examples of an “I” Message

1. Instead of asking “Why weren’t you at the Nurse Practice Council?” ask the following.
“I noticed that you were not at the Nurse Practice Council last week. I think you have some great examples that you could have shared that really would have benefited this group. In the future, if you can’t attend, maybe you could send a representative.”
2. “When I first started as a nurse, I worked on a medical/surgical floor which sounds similar to your unit.”

Note: An exercise using “I” messages is included in Section 6: Communication.

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