



CENTER for WORKFORCE DEVELOPMENT

COMMUNICATING WITH YOUR MENTEE

As in any relationship where information is being shared on an on-going basis, you and your mentee need to interact and communicate effectively. Communicating accomplishes three basic things. It is used to get things done, to indicate feelings and thoughts, and to develop the relationship. In impersonal interactions, a minimum of these three things are accomplished. But in a mentoring relationship, the communication process should accomplish all three tasks.

Communication in mentoring relationships should be interpersonal.

PERCEPTIONS

Whenever you communicate, part of what goes on is that you define yourself in relation to the other person involved. Coupled with that transaction are the personal and socialized perceptions you have learned to utilize to interpret information about others. You interpret raw cues to create perceptions that define who you are communicating with. Also, your perceptions are selectively formed based upon the cues you choose to perceive. Some cues you simply choose to ignore. It is important to realize that you do not react to raw cues but to your perception of the raw cues. The following suggestions will help lessen the negative effects your perceptions may have:

- Focus on the communication situation with your mentee at any given moment. React to the present, current signals, and try to block out all other influences, especially pre-formed ideas.
- Be psychologically available to your mentee when communicating with him or her. Consider what is being said from his or her perspective before reacting.
- Use perceptions in a positive way. Confirm your perception before reacting to it. This type of communicating establishes respect and understanding.

BEHAVIORS

When you begin your relationship with your mentee, you may be uncertain about how to relate to him or her. You will both go through the process of establishing roles. One way of doing this is in the behaviors you both assume when communicating with one another.

As a mentor, you will probably take on the leader role in the relationship. Your mentee, not certain of his or her position, may assume the characteristics of a passive participant without realizing what he or she is communicating. Passive behavior includes:

- not openly expressing his or her thoughts and feelings;
- taking things personally;
- being anxious;
- letting you make all the choices for him or her; and
- not often achieving his or her goals.

These characteristics can be detrimental to the relationship. As the receiver of the passive interactions, you may:

- feel guilty;
- become angry; or
- achieve a goal at the mentee's expense.

In addition, you may have cultivated an aggressive behavioral pattern that serves you well in the work place, but is difficult for your mentee to work with. If your mentee does not have experience with professionals who exhibit this type of behavior, he or she may:

- often feel hurt;
- feel humiliated;
- become defensive; or
- not achieve a desired goal in the interaction.

Both aggressive and passive styles create behaviors that continue a non-productive cycle of interaction. To prevent these subtle forms of sabotage in your mentoring relationship, it is important to negotiate and establish what types of responses both of you are hoping to receive.

A constructive behavior in mentoring relationships is an assertive one. To behave assertively:

- state "I want" or "I would like";
- openly express thoughts and feelings;
- use positive non-verbal expressions;
- use "I" messages;
- use "and" rather than "but";
- state facts; and
- remain emotionally calm.

Assertive behavior causes the other person to:

- be self-enhancing;
- be expressive; and
- feel good about the interaction.

Encourage your mentee to behave and interact with you in an assertive manner. Not only will it help facilitate effective communication, but it will enhance your mentee's self-esteem.

VERBAL AND NON-VERBAL LANGUAGE

Language is a critical part of effective communications. If you really consider your words before speaking them to your mentee, you can remove many inadvertent negative messages from your communications. If the words you use to communicate ideas and knowledge are gender specific, the opposite gender may feel excluded. It can also be ambiguous to use such language. The use of man or mankind to represent humanity collectively does not clearly imply that women are included. Always mentally review the language of your message before speaking. It can help you prevent many miscommunications and will help make you more thoughtful about what it is you want to say.

Nonverbal communication uses methods such as gestures, intonation, body language, the way you are dressed and even the place you chose to communicate in to express messages. There are major differences between verbal communication cues and nonverbal ones. Nonverbal cues cannot stand alone as words sometimes can. For example, a sigh can indicate either relief or frustration and needs a context to be interpreted correctly. Also, we are not taught the proper way to use our nonverbal cues as we are taught language. Interpretation of nonverbal cues is taught by social interaction. The major categories of nonverbal behaviors include:

- facial expression;
- eye behavior;
- proximity and space;
- touch;
- body movement;
- voice; and
- silence.

Understanding the nonverbal cues of your mentee will help you communicate with him or her more effectively. Being aware of your own body language when you communicate can improve your relationship. The following is a list of positive body language behaviors to use to indicate interest in and value of your interactions with your mentee:¹

- good posture;
- nodding your head to show attention;
- leaning toward your mentee;
- enunciating clearly;
- showing pleasant and sincere facial expressions;
- maintaining eye contact;
- being neatly groomed;
- talking in an animated style, using small hand gestures and facial expressions;
- having vocal variety (avoid monotone);
- appearing calm (not fidgeting);
- sitting close enough to show openness/friendliness, but not too close (appropriate distance);
- smiling; and
- shaking hands firmly.

¹ P. Ruzicka & Others, *Hand in Hand: Mentoring Young Women, Guide for Planning, Implementing, & Evaluating A Mentoring Program*, Center for Sex Equity (Portland, Oregon: US Dept. of Education, 1986): 40

LISTENING

Interpersonal communication is two directional, but at any given moment during a conversation, your attention may fade. No one listens one hundred percent to what their conversation partner is saying. Listening is not a passive activity, it should be active. To improve your listening skills try the following:

- Acknowledging: Verbally and non-verbally indicate your involvement in what is being said by saying “yes”, “right”, “uh huh”, and nodding your head. Always remember to respond to and validate your mentee’s feelings first and then the facts, not the reverse.
- Attending: Be totally present, both mentally and physically. Through mental attending, you use mental capabilities and all senses to detect the entire message. Through physical attending, you use body language to convey involvement with and understanding of the message.
- Reflecting: Reflecting is the rephrasing, in your own words, what your mentee has said or feels. It is a skill you should use after your mentee discloses something. It is a restating rather than an interpreting of the disclosure. Reflecting provides encouragement for your mentor to continue talking.
- Probing: Ask questions that are relevant and non-threatening to gain more understanding of the communication. There are two basic types of probes: closed ended questions and open ended questions or requests. Closed ended questions, which require yes, no, or short information responses, are useful in focusing your mentee on specific issues and in assisting the development of action plans. Open ended questions or requests, such as asking “what if,” impose no constraints on the response and are useful in encouraging your mentee to help you explore the problem at hand.
- Summarizing: Sum up the conversation at different points to ensure mutual understanding. Use this technique to pull the main points together before going in another direction or discussing a new topic.

Recognizing that listening is not just waiting for your turn to talk is a major step towards better interpersonal communications. Pay attention to your mentee’s personality traits. Listen for feelings in his or her messages as well as facts. When you begin to listen to each other with the same enthusiasm as when you speak, a bond will begin to develop.