

CHAPTER 5: Communicating with your Mentee

Chapter Subjects:

- Do's and Don'ts
- What Makes a Good Mentor
- The Beginning
- Effective Communication
- Active Listening
- Non-Directive Approach
- Paraphrasing
- Discussing Delicate Issues – Guidelines for Mentors
- Open-Ended Questions
- Questions With Strategy
- Good Conversations / Bad Conversations (*Exercise*)

Starting the Mentoring Relationship

It's not possible to anticipate every situation and the appropriate behavior to apply when one is mentoring. However, here are a few suggestions to use as general guidelines:

Do:

- Get to know your mentee. Try to really understand how things are for him or her now.
- Be positive, patient, dependable, honest and sincere.
- Be consistent, but flexible. Expect changes in plans.
- Encourage, praise and compliment – even the smallest of accomplishments.
- Be an active listener. Use language that's easy to understand.
- Give concrete explanations.
- Be straight, honest and sincere (people pick up on falseness and shallowness).
- Ask for opinions and participation in decision-making.
- Work with your mentee. Share your knowledge rather than giving advice.
- Be enthusiastic – it's contagious.
- Stress the positive.
- Be firm. Have your mentee assume responsibilities and hold him or her accountable.
- Help your mentee use mistakes as learning experiences.
- Be fair – they'll notice if you're not.

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- Help identify your mentee's talents, strengths and assets.
- Tell your mentee about yourself, especially what you remember from your high school years.
- Help them identify the significance for their own lives of the information you are discussing (e.g., possible future profession, similar experiences, etc.) – tell them how they can use the information.
- Have activities planned in advance.
- Take the initiative. A mentee who fails to call or attend must be pursued and the coordinator notified of the situation so that issues can be resolved and sessions can begin again, if applicable.
- If you're going to miss a mentoring session, call the coordinator and leave a message for the mentee. It is important to let the mentee know you did not forget about your mentoring session.
- Learn to appreciate your mentee's cultural and ethnic background. Strive toward cultural reciprocity.
- Be open to what your mentee can teach you or share with you.
- **Honor Your Commitment – This is extremely important!**
- **HAVE FUN!**

Don't:

- Expect to have instant rapport with your mentee.
- Be lenient in order to be liked – it won't earn their respect, and they need consistency and structure.
- Lecture, moralize or preach.
- Tell them what to do (instead, you should suggest, invite, encourage).
- Share personal problems unless it is to explain your current disposition (e.g., tired or irritable).
- Make promises you can't keep.
- Be convinced that what mentees say is always what they mean.
- Pry into the young person's life. If a mentee pries into your affairs, it is okay to say that some things in your life are private just as they are in his or her life.
- Be afraid to admit that you do not know an answer or that you have made a mistake. Find the correct answer and learn together. It helps the mentee to see that you are learning too.
- Interpret lack of enthusiasm as a personal rejection or reaction to you.

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- Be sarcastic or use excessive teasing.
- Refer to youths that reside in public housing as being from “the projects.”
- Lend money.
- Violate confidences, with the single *exception of crisis intervention situations*, in which case you must contact the coordinator privately and immediately.
- Forget your own adolescence. What do you wish an adult had said to you or done for you at that time in your life?
- Attempt to become a surrogate parent to a child.

WHAT MAKES A GOOD MENTOR?

Many people feel that being a mentor requires special skills, but mentors are simply people who have the qualities of good role models.

Mentors listen.	They maintain eye contact and give mentees their full attention.
Mentors guide.	Mentors are there to help their mentees find life direction, never to push them.
Mentors are practical.	They give insights about keeping on task and setting goals and priorities.
Mentors educate.	Mentors educate about life and their own careers.
Mentors provide insight.	Mentors use their personal experience to help their mentees avoid mistakes and learn from good decisions.
Mentors are accessible.	Mentors are available as a resource and a sounding board.
Mentors criticize constructively.	When necessary, mentors point out areas that need improvement, always focusing on the mentee’s behavior, never his/her character.

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Mentors are supportive.	No matter how painful the mentee’s experience, mentors continue to encourage them to learn and improve.
Mentors are specific.	Mentors give specific advice on what was done well or could be corrected, what was achieved and the benefits of various actions.
Mentors care.	Mentors care about their mentees’ progress in school and career planning, as well as their personal development.
Mentors succeed.	Mentors not only are successful themselves, but they also foster success in others.
Mentors are admirable.	Mentors are usually well respected in their organizations and in the community.

The Beginning

The beginning of any new relationship can be awkward. We don’t know what to expect, although we certainly have expectations or a set of preconceived notions. We have ideas about the other person, either from stereotypes or from things that we’ve heard about people with similar circumstances, or we have ideas from our own experiences about how relationships work.

As you are preparing to enter the mentor/mentee relationship, you will probably be both apprehensive and excited about the adventure to follow. When interacting with the Mentee, the Mentor must consistently ask themselves, *“In this situation, what is best for the growth and development of the Mentee?”* Here are some things to keep in mind as you begin your journey.

1. **You will both be nervous.** You will each feel as though you are expected to perform in a particular way or to achieve a particular goal or set of goals. You are each likely to feel as though you are a title, mentor or mentee, rather than a person. You will also be wondering what the other person expects from you.



2. **You are both valuable to the relationship.** Although it is true that both participants will be working to help the mentee reach his or her goal, the mentee and the mentor are on equal footing within the relationship. Together, you have a much wider perspective and a greater set of resources with which to work than either of you had on your own.
3. **You do not yet trust each other.** Trust comes from a sense of comfort with another person, and comfort comes from repeated experience. Trust is developed over time, once we have a good idea of who the other person is, what he or she values, how he or she responds in particular situations and how he or she feels about us.
4. **Keep a positive outlook.** This relationship is new for both of you. There will be all kinds of new experiences that arise because you are in this new relationship. If you look for the positive aspects of situations as they occur, you will keep yourself and your partner moving forward.

Effective Communication

The following four communication skills are very helpful for mentors to develop and practice. These skills are particularly useful when your goal is to open up communication with a young person. They are also useful skills that you can help your mentee develop:

1) Active Listening

Active listening is an attempt to truly understand the content and emotion of what the other person is saying by paying attention to verbal and non-verbal messages. The task is to focus, hear, respect and communicate your desire to understand. This is not the time to be planning a response or conveying how you feel.

Active listening is *not* nagging, cajoling, reminding, threatening, criticizing, questioning, advising, evaluating, probing, judging or ridiculing. **Receive rather than transmit.** A good listener usually receives (listens) before they transmit (talks). Remember that the relationship is about the Mentee, not the Mentor. Do not be like the narcissistic character that Bette Midler played in the movie *Beaches*, who only slowed down enough to say to her friend, "That's enough about me. What do *you* think about me?"



Skills to Use:

- Eye contact;
- Body language: open and relaxed posture, forward lean, appropriate facial expressions, positive use of gestures; and
- Verbal cues such as “um-hmmm,” “sure,” “ah” and “yes.”

Results of Active Listening:

- Encourages honesty — helps people free themselves of troublesome feelings by expressing them openly;
- Reduces fear — helps people become less afraid of negative feelings;
- Builds respect and affection;
- Increases acceptance — promotes a feeling of understanding; and

When you actively listen, you cooperate in solving the problem — and in preventing future problems.

2) “I” Messages

These messages give the opportunity to keep the focus on you and explain your feelings in response to someone else’s behavior. Because “I” messages don’t accuse, point fingers at the other person or place blame, they avoid judgments and help keep communication open. At the same time, “I” messages continue to advance the situation to a problem-solving stage.

For example: “I was really sad when you didn’t show up for our meeting last week. I look forward to our meetings and was disappointed not to see you. In the future, I would appreciate it if you could call me and let me know if you will not be able to make it.”

Avoid: “You didn’t show up, and I waited for an hour. You could have at least called me and let me know that you wouldn’t be there. You are irresponsible.”

Take care that the following actions and behaviors are congruent with an honest, open heart:

- Body language: slouching, turning away, pointing a finger;
- Timing: speaking too fast or too slow;
- Facial expression: smiling, squirming, raising eyebrows, gritting teeth;
- Tone of voice: shouting, whispering, sneering, whining; and
- Choice of words: biting, accusative, pretentious, emotionally laden.

Results:

“I” messages present only one perspective. Allowing the other person to actually have a point of view and hearing it doesn’t mean that he or she is right. “I” messages communicate both information and respect for each position. Again, this skill moves both parties along to the problem-solving stage.

3) Non-Directive Approach

“Real motivation comes from within. People have to be given the freedom to succeed or fail.”

--Gordon Forward,
CEO Chaparral Steel

In the non-directive approach, you do a great deal of listening and asking questions, and you spend minimal time giving advice. Remember that a successful Mentor places the growth and development of the Mentee above helping them solve a particular problem. If you continually tell the Mentee what to do, you are failing to create an environment where the Mentee can feel empowered. The Mentor must have faith that the Mentee will eventually make the right decision, even though the “right” answers to a problem may not be immediately apparent.

4) Paraphrasing

Paraphrasing focuses on listening first and then reflecting the two parts of the speaker’s message — *fact* and *feeling* — back to the speaker. Often, the fact is clearly stated, but a good listener is “listening between the lines” for the “feeling” part of the communication. Using this skill is a way to check out what you heard for accuracy — did you interpret what your mentee said correctly? This is particularly helpful with youth, as youth culture/language change constantly. Often words that meant one thing when mentors were young could have an entirely different meaning for youth today.

Examples for *fact*:

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

Examples for *feeling*:

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

The above are some of the lead-ins to paraphrasing. Paraphrasing is the process of repeating what you just heard the Mentee say, but in a little different wording:

“Correct me if I’m wrong, but what I think I’m hearing you say is that your affiliate has been doing it this way, and no one has ever asked why. Is this accurate?”

Paraphrases are not an opportunity to respond by evaluating, sympathizing, giving an opinion, offering advice, analyzing or questioning.

Results:

Using active listening skills will enable you to gather the information and then be able to simply report back what you heard in the message — the facts and the attitudes/feelings that were expressed. Doing so lets the other person know that you hear, understand and care about his or her thoughts and feelings.

Discussing Delicate Issues

Sensitive issues that come up between a mentor and mentee require different levels of response and intervention. These issues have been grouped below as delicate topics, issues of concern and crises requiring intervention. However, any of these issues may move up or down this continuum depending on the seriousness of the actions involved.

Delicate Topics

Generally speaking, delicate topics should be discussed only when initiated by the mentee. These topics can be touchy and strongly affect the relationship. Confidentiality takes on greater importance with these topics. Although mentors should be adequately trained to deal with these issues on their own, they should be encouraged to seek support and feedback from their supervisor and other mentors when their mentee has brought issues such as these to their attention.

Examples of delicate topics:

- Sex
- Peer pressure
- Hygiene
- Behavior
- School performance
- Self-image/personal insecurities
- Identity issues: class, cultural and sexual
- Others_____

Issues of Concern

Issues of concern are those that may have lifelong implications for the mentee, and therefore *the mentor needs to report them to the agency*. However, these issues do not necessarily require direct intervention. Because these issues may be part of ongoing situations and conditions that mentees face, mentors need to be trained and supported to accept these aspects of the mentees' lives without judgment. Mentors and mentoring programs should not focus too heavily on changing behavior when issues such as these arise. Nevertheless, by staying aware of the challenges their mentees must face, they may be able to help mentees ameliorate these problems over time.

Examples of Issues of Concern:

- Unsafe sex
- Fighting at school
- Depression
- Delinquent behavior
- Gang affiliation
- Substance abuse
- Verbal harassment: sexual, racial, bullying, others
- Others:_____

Crises Requiring Intervention

Crises involve issues of grave concern that generally require direct and immediate intervention. Some of these issues, like child abuse and neglect, are mandated by law to be reported to the county; others may require a referral of a direct intervention by the mentor program.



MENTORS SHOULD NEVER BE EXPECTED TO HANDLE ISSUES SUCH AS THESE ALONE. In addition, many of these issues require collaboration with families of mentees, and this should be handled by the mentor program manager.

Examples of Crises Requiring Intervention:

- Child abuse and neglect
- Abusive relationships: sexual abuse, incest, dating violence/rape
- Chemical dependency
- Serious delinquency/arrests
- Suicidal behavior
- Mental illness
- Physical harassment: sexual, racial, bullying, others
- Other trauma
- Others _____

Discussing Delicate Issues: Guidelines for Mentors

Put the mentee at ease . . .

- Stay calm.
- Use body language to communicate attentiveness (e.g., maintain eye contact, sit at same level).
- Avoid judgmental statements such as “Why would you do something like that?” or “I think you know better.”
- Be honest if you are getting emotional or upset.
- Let mentee know that you are glad he or she came to you.
- Reassure mentee that his or her confidentiality will be honored.
- Use tact, but be honest.
- Allow mentee to talk at his or her own pace—don’t force an issue.
- Do not pry—allow mentee to bring up topics he or she is comfortable with.
- Do not collaborate with mentee’s family to provide discipline.
- Other thoughts: _____

Honor the mentee's right to self-determination . . .

- Focus on the mentee's feelings and needs rather than jumping to problem solving.
- When issue has been talked about, ask, "What do you think you would like to do about this situation?" "How would you like me to help?"
- If you are not comfortable with what the mentee wants to do, ask yourself why before you decide whether to say so.
- If what the mentee wants to do is not possible, explain so gently and apologize.
- Ask what alternative solutions would make the mentee comfortable.
- Encourage critical thinking through questions and reflections.
- Use the words, "I don't know—what do you think?"
- Other thoughts: _____

Problem solve and offer resources . . .

- Know your appropriate role as a mentor.
- Be honest with mentee if confidentiality does not hold.
- Suggest that your supervisor may have some thoughts if you don't know what to do.
- Ask mentee if he or she would like to talk to the agency with you if necessary.
- Provide information if mentee is unaware of resources or options.
- Brainstorm with mentee and be creative in finding a solution—there is usually more than one way to handle a situation and this process is educational for the mentee.
- Offer to accompany mentee if he or she is uncomfortable with something he or she has decided to do.
- *Be collaborative*—you are a team.
- *Follow through with any and all commitments.*
- Other thoughts: _____

Open-Ended Questions

Open-ended questions are intended to collect information by exploring feelings, attitudes and how the other person views a situation. **Open questions** have nice soft beginnings:

"I'm wondering if you did this because..."

"I'm not sure, but it occurs to me that you might be... Is that true?"

"Do you have any ideas why...?"



Open questions help the Mentee to respond without having to be defensive. Using a style that encourages the Mentee to speak freely helps in generating ideas, as well as in building the relationship.

Open-ended questions are extremely helpful when dealing with young people. Youth, teenagers especially, tend to answer questions with as few words as possible. To maintain an active dialogue without interrogating, try to ask a few questions that cannot be answered with a “yes,” “no,” “I don’t know,” or a grunt.

Examples:

- “How do you see this situation?”
- “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: Using the question “Why did you do that?” may sometimes yield a defensive response rather than a clarifying response.

Results:

Because open-ended questions require a bit more time to answer than close-ended questions (questions that can be answered by “yes,” “no,” or a brief phrase), they give the person a chance to explain. Open-ended questions yield significant information that can in turn be used to problem solve.

Questions with Strategy

During the mentoring process, you often begin with **Investigative Questions** – to understand the issue at hand. And when basic understanding has been accomplished, you can move to **Discovery** and **Empowering Questions** – to push the person to learn and to make a decision or a commitment to a course of action. Strategically questioning your mentee will help them identify the real issue or problem, define how he/she is contributing to the problem, push for action and challenge them to think.

1. **Investigative Questions** solicit facts, objective data.
 - a. Tell me what you have accomplished so far.
 - b. How long has his been going on?
 - c. What's happened?
2. **Discovery Questions** push the person to draw conclusions, learn from experience and discover new knowledge or insights.
 - a. What have you learned from this?
 - b. If you had it to do all over again, what would you do?
 - c. What worked best?
 - d. What advice would you give someone just starting out on a project like this?
 - e. What concerns you?
 - f. What are your ideas on this?
 - g. What would happen if you did?
 - h. What scares you most about taking this on?
 - i. Tell me three things that you would consider in making a decision on that.
 - j. What are you most comfortable with?
 - k. What conclusions do you draw from this experience?
 - l. What caused you to say that?
 - m. What makes it necessary to do it that way?
 - n. What is your reasoning?
 - o. What did he/she do that helped most?
 - p. Give me two alternative ways of thinking about this.
 - q. What could you have done?
 - r. If Charlie says this, what could you say back?
 - s. What else could you have done?
 - t. What is most important to you?
3. **Empowering Questions** inquire into what the person being mentored is feeling, planning, wanting, and is ready to commit to.
 - a. What outcome are you looking for?
 - b. What will you do first?
 - c. What must you do to make it happen?
 - d. How will you begin?
 - e. How will you know when you have it?
 - f. Who else needs to know this?
 - g. What resources do you have/need?
 - h. What is the risk of doing this? Not doing this?
 - i. How might you get in your own way?



Exercise: Good Conversations / Bad Conversations

Interview your partner. Ask them to name someone they have good conversations with and why. Take notes below.

Now ask them about someone they have bad conversations with and why.
