

Building a Relationship with a Mentee



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Building an effective relationship of mutual understanding and trust with the mentee is a critical component of effective mentoring. Mentors can establish rapport with their mentees by using effective interpersonal communication skills, actively building trust, and maintaining confidentiality. This document contains information and advice to help mentors build rapport and create positive relationships with mentees so both parties can achieve the greatest benefit from the mentoring experience.

Interpersonal Communication

Interpersonal communication is a person-to-person, two-way, verbal and nonverbal sharing of information between two or more persons. Good communication helps to develop a positive working relationship between the mentor and mentee by helping the mentee to better understand directions and feedback from the mentor, feel respected and understood, and be motivated to learn from the mentor. Mentees learn best from mentors who are sincere, approachable, and nonjudgmental. These qualities are communicated primarily by facial expressions, and, to a limited extent, by words. People often remember more about how a subject is communicated than the speaker's knowledge of the subject.

There are two types of communication: verbal and nonverbal. Verbal communication is communication that occurs through spoken words. Nonverbal communication is communication that occurs through unspoken mediums, such as gestures, posture, facial expressions, silence, and eye contact. It is important for mentors to remember they are communicating to mentees both when they are speaking and when they are not speaking. Up to 93% of human communication is nonverbal.¹ Body language tells those with whom we are communicating a great deal about what we are thinking and feeling. Examples of positive or open body language include:

- Eye contact (depending on the culture)
- Open or relaxed posture
- Nodding or other affirmation
- Pleasant facial expressions

Examples of negative or closed body language include crossed arms, averted eyes, and pointing fingers. The mentor needs to be aware of what he or she is communicating nonverbally as well as what the mentee is communicating nonverbally.

When mentoring, effective communication involves more than providing information or giving advice; it requires asking questions, listening carefully, trying to understand a mentee's concerns or needs, demonstrating a caring attitude, remaining open-minded, and helping solve problems. There are many communication skills that mentors can utilize to effectively communicate with mentees, including the following:

¹ Mehrabian, Albert. *Nonverbal communication*. Chicago: Aldine-Atherton, Chicago; 1972.

- Active listening: Be sure to really listen to what a mentee is saying. Often, instead of truly listening to the mentee, the mentor is thinking about his or her response, what to say next, or something else entirely. It is important to quiet these thoughts and remain fully engaged in the task of listening.
- Attending: Listen while observing, and communicate attentiveness. This can include verbal follow-up (saying “yes” or “I see”) or nonverbal cues (making eye contact and nodding the head).
- Reflective listening: Verbally reflect back what the mentee has just said. This helps the mentor to check whether or not he or she understands the mentee, and helps the mentee feel understood.
Examples:
 - “So it seems that you’re overwhelmed with your workload.”
 - “It seems that you are concerned about that experiment.”
- Paraphrasing: Determine the basic message of the mentee’s previous statement and rephrase it in your own words to check for understanding. Examples:
 - “You’re interested in developing a system for improving that.”
 - “It sounds like you’re concerned about the design of the experiment.”
- Summarizing: Select main points from a conversation and bring them together in a complete statement. This helps ensure the message is received correctly. For example, “Let me tell you what I heard, so I can be sure that I understand you. You said that the main challenge right now is balancing your clinical load and writing the research proposal.”
- Asking open-ended questions: Ask mentees questions that cannot be answered with a simple yes or no. Open-ended questions encourage a full, meaningful answer using the mentee’s own knowledge and feelings, whereas closed-ended questions encourage a short or single-word answer. Examples:

Close-ended question: “You didn’t think the experiment would work?”

Open-ended question: “What factors led you to your decision to change the protocol?”

Close-ended question: “Did you understand what we discussed today?”

Open-ended question: “Can you summarize what we discussed today?”
- Probing: Identify a subject or topic that needs further discussion or clarification and use open-ended questions to examine the situation in greater depth. For example, “I heard you say you are overwhelmed; please tell me more about that.”
- Self-disclosure: Share appropriate personal feelings, attitudes, opinions, and experiences to increase the intimacy of communication. For example, “I can relate to your difficult situation, I have experienced something similar and recall being very frustrated. Hopefully I can assist you to figure out how to move forward.”
- Interpreting: Add to the mentee’s ideas to present alternate ways of looking at circumstances. When using this technique, it is important to check back in with the mentee and be sure you are interpreting correctly before assigning additional meaning to their words. For example, “So you are saying that the reason the interpretation is flawed is because of the statistical test used to analyze the data? That is likely one reason, but have you also considered that the design may be wrong as well?”

- **Confrontation:** Use questions or statements to encourage mentees to face difficult issues without accusing, judging, or devaluing them. This can include gently pointing out contradictions in mentees' behavior or statements, as well as guiding mentees to face an issue that is being avoided. For example, "It's great that you are so committed to mentoring the younger researcher in the group. However, I am concerned that you are not dedicating enough time to your own research."

A number of attitudes and/or behaviors can serve as barriers to communication—these can be verbal or nonverbal. Verbal barriers to communication that should be avoided include the following:

- **Moralizing:** Making judgments about a mentee's behavior, including calling it right or wrong, or telling them what they should or should not do.
- **Arguing:** Disagreeing with instead of encouraging the mentee.
- **Preaching:** Telling the mentee what to do in a self-righteous way.
- **Storytelling:** Relating long-winded personal narratives that are not relevant or helpful to the mentee.
- **Blocking communication:** Speaking without listening to the mentee's responses, using an aggressive voice, showing impatience, showing annoyance when interrupted, or having an authoritative manner. These behaviors often lead to the mentee feeling down, humiliated, scared, and insecure. As a result, the mentee may remain passive and refrain from asking questions, or distrust the mentor and disregard his or her recommendations.
- **Talking too much:** Talking so much that the mentee does not have time to express themselves. As a mentor, it is important not to dominate the interaction.

Examples of nonverbal barriers to communication include shuffling papers, not looking directly at the mentee when he or she is speaking, and allowing interruptions or distractions. These barriers may have consequences for both the mentor and the mentee. They may lead to a poor sharing of information, fewer questions being asked by the mentee, difficulty in understanding problems, uncomfortable situations, and a lack of motivation on the part of the mentee.

Establishing Trust

Establishing trust is an essential component in building rapport with a mentee. Trust is the trait of believing in the honesty and reliability of others.² Some mentees may be nervous about working with a mentor. To put them at ease, create a trusting relationship by empathizing with their challenges, share knowledge without being patronizing, and remain nonjudgmental. Along with the other communication skills listed above, establishing a trusting dynamic is essential for a productive and positive mentor/mentee relationship.

The following list provides some ideas for how the mentor can build trust with the mentee:

- Share appropriate personal experiences from a time when they were being mentored.
- Acknowledge mentee strengths and accomplishments from the onset of the mentoring process.
- Encourage questions of any type and tell the mentee that there is no such thing as a bad question.

² WordNet. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University, Cognitive Science Library; c2006 [cited 2008 5 June]. Available from: <http://wordnet.princeton.edu>.

- Take time to learn culturally appropriate ways of interacting with your mentee and helping your mentee to interact appropriately with their peers.
- When appropriate, consider how local knowledge can be incorporated into the mentoring experience.
- Acknowledge the mentee's existing knowledge and incorporate new knowledge into existing knowledge.
- Ask for and be open to receiving feedback from mentees, apply constructive feedback to improve mentoring skills.
- Eat a meal with the mentee to get to know him or her in a non-work setting.