

GIVING AND RECEIVING FEEDBACK

'Do you know, I was so angry, Kitty,' Alice went on as soon as they were comfortably settled again, 'when I saw all the mischief you had been doing, I was very nearly opening the window, and putting you out into the snow! And you'd have deserved it, you little mischievous darling! What have you got to say for yourself? Now don't interrupt me!' she went on, holding up one finger. 'I'm going to tell you all your faults.' - Through the Looking Glass by Lewis Carroll

Giving feedback

'Give your evidence,' said the King; 'and don't be nervous, or I'll have you executed on the spot.' - Alice's Adventures in Wonderland by Lewis Carroll

Why should I give feedback?

As a mentor, it is crucial that you provide guidance to your protege. It is your obligation to help your protege identify and learn the skills and knowledge needed for a successful career. Feedback allows you to acknowledge your protege's strengths and to motivate the protege to work on areas of weakness. Keep in mind that your protege 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 it on a regular basis so your protege 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 as well. It is not helpful to provide feedback about a behaviour or research method long after the behaviour 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 protege understands that you are working toward a mutual goal—the protege's success. When you give feedback, it is important to acknowledge the protege'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 protege. If a protege is falling behind in his or her work, don't automatically assume a lack of commitment. Explore with your protege what is really going on. When providing feedback, offer to work with your protege to develop solutions to any problems that he or she is encountering. Providing and receiving feedback can be a very positive experience for the mentor and the protege as long as you both understand that you share the same commitment to developing the protege's career.

How do I set up a feedback episode?

First, e-mail or call your protege to make an appointment and let your protege know what the meeting is about. There is no quicker way to dissolve the atmosphere of trust than by “sandbagging” your protege. 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. Young proteges need a bit of gentleness so as not to get discouraged. If your protege 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 protege some space. He or she might be upset and not prepared to discuss the issues right then and there.

Receiving feedback

‘Take some more tea,’ the March Hare said to Alice, very earnestly. ‘I’ve had nothing yet,’ Alice replied in an offended tone, ‘so I can’t take more.’ ‘You mean you can’t take less,’ said the Hatter: ‘it’s very easy to take more than nothing.’ ‘Nobody asked your opinion,’ said Alice. - Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland by Lewis Carroll.

Is feedback a way to criticize the protege’s work?

No. Absolutely not. Remember that your mentor is invested in your future and wants you to succeed. Feedback is intended to provide you with information on your strengths and areas that need more work. Feedback involves a critique of your work, not a criticism.

What do I do while I am getting feedback?

First, 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. Second, 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 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?

First, 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. It may be useful to ask a trusted peer for his or her point of view or to talk with another of your mentors. 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 let your mentor know 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.

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