# MENTORING AND PROVIDING FEEDBACK

**TOOLKIT FOR DIFFICULT CONVERSATIONS**

## Feedback and Difficult Conversations[[1]](#footnote-1)

Having a difficult conversation effectively depends upon the mentor and mentee having *already* established trust in their relationship, in part through reciprocal active listening. The following suggestions build on active listening skills.

**Before Approaching the Mentee**

Treat the conflict or challenge confidentially.

Cultivate self-awareness:

* What are your feelings about the issue? About the other person?
* Is a prior experience shaping your reaction now?
* How have your identities shaped your prior experiences, and how are they shaping your reactions now?

Agree to a time, free from distractions and competing priorities, that you can dedicate to having the conversation. If it’s not possible to meet in person, a phone call is the next best alternative.

**During the Conversation**

Be open to the other person’s point of view and experience.

* How does the other person experience this issue?
* What values are driving their actions and responses? For example, what is their definition of *success*?

Be willing to re-evaluate your assumptions and, potentially, values.

* What assumptions and values are driving you? Does your definition of *success*, for example, match theirs?
* Is there some aspect of the other person’s experience or identity that means your experiences may not be a good model?

Reframe the issue, for yourself or the other person, by putting it in a different context.

* E.g., “Method X is clunky and boring” to “using method X is part of building a repertoire of methods.”
* E.g., “Mentee is withdrawn and doesn’t want my help as a mentor” to “Mentee may be struggling with a personal challenge and need support or feeling alienated.”

Seek common ground by shifting from a focus on positions to a focus on interests

* Position: implicit or explicit commitment to a particular outcome (e.g., “To accomplish this science, we must use method X”; “I am the mentor, and the mentee should follow my advice”).
* Interest: what promotes the well-being, subjectively or objectively, of the individual (e.g., “Accomplishing this science will enable progress on this big question”; “What will enable the mentee to achieve *their* goals and success as they define it?”).

Stay focused on the issue you have agreed to address. Resist the temptation to broaden the conversation into everything and anything that is frustrating in the mentor-mentee relationship.

## Sample Situations[[2]](#footnote-2)

* A lab director has worked hard to mentor a very bright graduate student, including accommodating his family-related needs. But when this becomes unfair to the rest of the group, the director has to address this problem with him. He responds by saying, “Why are you so rigid?”
* A mentee shows up 15 minutes late, Starbucks cup in hand, to the first two meetings with their mentor.
* A mentee from an underrepresented group is struggling with how to say “no” to continuing expectations of service work, especially those related to her being the only “qualified” African American woman. Not only does she feel like a token, she seldom feels like she is taken seriously.
* A mentor does not believe their mentee is ready for promotion review, but the mentee wants the mentor to support her for review.
* A mentee who wants to be an independent academic researcher resists her mentor’s observations that in the current funding climate this career path is unlikely to be productive (e.g., she may be better suited for a career in a liberal arts college setting or in industry or as team science contributor).
* The form-fitting outfits a young female colleague wears strike a mentor as unprofessional and distracting.

1. Adapted from Claudia Plaisted Fernandez, “The Management Moment: Managing the Difficult Conversation,” *Journal of Public Health Management Practice*, 2008, 14(3), 317-319. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Adapted from Janet Bickel (Janet Bickel & Associates, LLC) in collaboration with the UNC School of Medicine Mentoring Task Force and the UNC Center for Faculty Excellence, “Handling Difficult Issues.” [↑](#footnote-ref-2)