

Barriers to Effective Communication

Trainee Materials

Learning Objectives:

Trainees will:

- Learn strategies for improving communication (in person, at a distance, across multiple mentors, and within proper personal boundaries).

Answer these questions on your own, then pair with a peer and share.

1. In what ways and how often do you communicate with your mentor?

2. How do you know when communication with your mentor is good?

3. What are the signs that communication with your mentor is not good?

4. What strategies do you use or would you like to use to improve communication with your mentor when things are not going as well as you would like?

A few examples of barriers to effective communication between mentors and trainees are listed below. Write down a solution for each barrier.

Barrier to Effective Communication	Solutions to Overcome Barrier
Your mentor has very little time to meet with you one-on-one.	
Your mentor only provides verbal feedback on your work, and you often fail to catch everything that he/she suggests.	
You perceive the feedback you receive from your mentor as particularly critical.	
You are anxious about asking your mentor questions during your meetings.	
English is not your mentor's first language and at times you are unsure that you understand him/her.	
Other:	
Other:	
Other:	

Conflict Resolution

Use “I” Statements: “I” statements are one way to speak assertively about *our* needs while simultaneously giving them a chance to express *their* needs.

1. **Facts** are objective observations
2. Share your **feelings** and **interests**
3. **Ask for their perception** of the story or interests
4. Speak tentatively
5. Encourage questions

1-3: What to say
4-5: How to say it

Evaluations	Facts
He always interrupts me.	<i>He interrupted me four times last month.</i>
Sam doesn't want to hear my opinions.	<i>Sam didn't ask for my opinion.</i>
Shandra is a good worker.	<i>Shandra completes every task accurately and on time.</i>
Henry is selfish and not a team player.	<i>Henry has promoted only the projects he has developed.</i>

Constructing “I” Statements: Here is the structure to help you start constructing “I” statements:

Describe the facts relating to the difficulty—clearly, objectively, without blame.	<i>WHEN...</i>	<i>When changes to our plans have been finalized without my input,</i>
Share how you feel about it and why it is important to you.	<i>I FEEL...</i> <i>BECAUSE...</i>	<i>I don't know what to tell our customers. I feel left out of the loop, and I want to be useful and capable for our customers.</i>
Ask them to share their perception of the facts.	<i>HOW DO YOU SEE IT?</i>	<i>I don't want to misinterpret what's going on, so would you please tell me how you see it?</i>

For each statement on the left, use the space on the right to construct an “I” statement that is simple and clear, using the structure of “I” statements.

<p><i>Example:</i> Where’s that data that you promised me last week?</p>	<p><i>I thought you had promised me the data last week. I need that information for a talk I’m giving tomorrow because some collaborators will be in the audience. I don’t want to make any assumptions, so what is your understanding of our agreement?</i></p>
<p>1. You’re (a labmate) always so rude to me!</p>	
<p>2. You never reorder reagents when you use the last of them, and you’re ruining my experiments!</p>	
<p>3. You (PI or mentee) never listen to my suggestions!</p>	

What did you find challenging about constructing an “I” statement?

What might undermine the success of an “I” statement?

Effective Communication: Action Items

- Determine your mentor's preferred medium of communication (face-to-face, phone, or email) and acknowledge if it differs from your own personal preference.
- Schedule a regular time to meet or check in with your mentor.
- Keep track and share progress toward project and professional goals, both verbally and in writing.
- Identify challenges and request your mentor's advice/intervention when appropriate.
- Prepare for meetings with your mentor by articulating specifically what you want to get out of the meeting and how you will follow up after the meeting.
- Develop a "benefit of the doubt" philosophy

Case Study: Frustrated

Undergraduate Trainee Materials

Learning Objectives:

- Trainees will practice strategies for communicating with their mentor and members of their mentor's research team.

Jamal has been in his research group for almost three weeks and is disappointed with his project so far. When he interviewed with Professor Stanley, she described a molecular biology project that he would work on. However, his graduate student mentor, Roxanne, has not given him any molecular biology experiments, but instead tasks such as making media and growing bacteria. Other undergraduate students in the lab seem to be doing things like cloning and sequencing genes. Jamal is getting frustrated, but doesn't want to complain or look ungrateful. What can he do?

1. To whom should Jamal go to discuss his frustration?

2. What strategies might he use to avoid appearing as though he is complaining?

3. How might establishing specific goals and expectations with his mentor help Jamal to avoid this situation?