What Communication Styles Assist The Mentoring Process?

A balance of two communication styles will help you get the most out of the mentoring experience.

COMMUNICATION STYLES
Discussing your experience with a mentor allows you to reflect and gain personal insight. The mentor’s experience provides new information and perspective. This means that to get the most out of mentoring there must be a balance between the

- facilitative role of the mentor i.e. the mentor listening, encouraging reflection and supporting the mentee, and a more
- authoritative role, where the mentor is imparting information and recommending action.

FACILITATIVE SKILLS

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<tr>
<th>Supporting</th>
<th>Eliciting</th>
<th>Exploring</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>■ Affirming their worth</td>
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<td>■ Giving good attention</td>
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<td>■ Expressing care or concern</td>
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<td>■ Appropriate sharing and self-disclosure</td>
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<td>■ Encouraging celebration of personal attributes</td>
<td>■ Provoking self-discovery through reflection</td>
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<td>■ Asking clarifying questions</td>
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<td>■ Prompting to say more</td>
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<tr>
<td>■ Using reflective listening to help someone express their feelings</td>
<td>Asking questions that help:</td>
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<td>■ Generate options and possibilities</td>
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<td>■ Evaluate the pros and cons of options or actions</td>
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<td>■ Consider consequences of decisions before taking action</td>
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AUTHORITATIVE SKILLS

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<tr>
<th>Confronting</th>
<th>Informing</th>
<th>Guiding</th>
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<tr>
<td>■ Giving feedback</td>
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<td>■ Challenging perceptions</td>
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<td>■ Describing how others may perceive a situation or behaviour</td>
<td>■ Imparting information</td>
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<td>■ Expressing your perception</td>
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<td>■ Sharing your own experience</td>
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<td>■ Giving your opinion or stating your point of view</td>
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<td>■ Explaining</td>
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<td>■ Providing background</td>
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<td>■ Identifying other resources</td>
<td>■ Describing possible consequences of a particular action</td>
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<td>■ Suggesting</td>
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<td>■ Advising</td>
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<td>■ Recommending</td>
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The mentor’s strength in communication is their ability to shift styles easily, switching from giving advice to eliciting information, or from challenging someone to being supportive, or they can choose to be silent and simply listen.

The supportive style is the foundation of the mentoring relationship. It is used to build rapport and trust. The emphasis is on listening and reflection eliciting the mentee’s perception of situations and their self-appraisal.

However, everybody has their “blind spots” and sometimes a person must be challenged with perceptions or opinions contrary to their own. Mentors must be able to use authoritative styles to impart information, identify potential risks and recommend action. Learning and growth do not always come easily and without this kind of feedback a person could be blissfully ignorant of opportunities to develop.
FOUR MAIN ACTIVITIES OF MENTORS

In *Mentoring Mindset, Tools and Skills*, Ann Rolfe describes four main activities of mentors:

- **Initiate exploration** at the beginning of the relationship and when a new goal, topic or issue is raised;
- **Facilitate learning** when a new perspective or a different way of thinking about a situation is needed;
- **Guide planning**, once a goal is set and the mentee needs to figure out how to achieve it;
- **Support experimentation**, encouraging the mentee to take action and try new approaches.

**INITIATING EXPLORATION**

This involves reflecting on the current situation, a forthcoming change, or a problem. The mentor must judge whether the facilitative style raises their mentee’s awareness enough to motivate the necessary learning and action planning. Sometimes the authoritative style must be used. Bluntness doesn’t mean brutality but too much tact can prevent people from getting the message that they must change if they want their situation to change.

**FACILITATING LEARNING**

The assumptions that people are fundamentally intelligent and able to learn and solve problems for themselves is the basis of mentoring. Using the facilitative style, the mentor draws out their mentee’s innate wisdom and insight. However, sometimes understanding dawns only when the mentor uses the authoritative style to provide information, facts or opinions that are outside their mentee’s awareness.

**GUIDING PLANNING**

The mentee needs to set goals and plan action. The mentor may use the facilitative style, asking questions to prompt the mentee’s thinking processes and elicit ideas. On the other hand, a great benefit a mentor can offer is their own experience, their knowledge of strategies, politics and generally, what is likely to work and what isn’t. So the authoritative style has its place as the mentor makes recommendations and offers advice.

**SUPPORTING EXPERIMENTATION**

This is the time when the mentee is implementing their plan. Using the facilitative style, the mentor offers encouragement and support. The mentor can also use the authoritative style, perhaps to coach or instruct, perhaps to give feedback or perhaps to feedback unnoticed aspects of their actions.

**PERSONAL STYLE**

Neither the facilitative nor the authoritative styles should be used exclusively in mentoring. Neither style is better than the other but people may tend to be better at, or more inclined to use, one rather than the other.

Most people like to be liked and for some, the toughness of the authoritative style does not come easily. Some people hate confrontation and avoid potential conflict. But being “nice” to people and tip-toeing around their feelings can be a disadvantage in mentoring, where learning and growth is the objective. Conversely, the sensitivity, patience and trust called for by the facilitative style are not second nature to some people.

Managers are expected to be decisive, problem solvers with the ability to direct the action of subordinates when necessary. Therefore the authoritative style may be their habit.

Both styles can be developed and both styles have benefits that go beyond mentoring. Managing, parenting, friendship, in fact almost any interpersonal relationship, can benefit from the balanced use of the facilitative and authoritative styles of communication.

**ASKING QUESTIONS EFFECTIVELY**

Asking questions is a core skill for mentors. Good questions are those that cause the mentee to think deeply, explore, learn, plan and experiment.

It is important to think before you ask, consider the goal and focus, determine what you seek to learn, then choose questions that will take you there. At the same time, be aware of the tendency to craft questions that give you the answer you would like to hear.

Make sure your approach does not make the mentee feel like it is an inquisition rather than a conversation.

Avoid keeping your questions too much on the surface. While invading privacy is not the goal, your aim is to foster in-depth thinking. Be willing to allow a bit of controversy and debate. When both the mentor and the mentee accurately interpret and work through conflict with candour and openness, interpersonal closeness and valuable creativity will be the likely byproduct.

Be aware of not giving the mentee an opportunity to answer or answering on their behalf. Pause after asking a question. If you are susceptible to this trap, count to ten after asking a question before asking another or rephrasing the one you just asked. Assume that the mentee heard and understood the questions and is simply contemplating an answer.

For tools and resources please visit [go.unimelb.edu.au/3d7](go.unimelb.edu.au/3d7)

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