

Mentor Tools and Tips for a Positive Mentoring Experience

SEAS CENTER FOR WOMEN IN ENGINEERING

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What is Mentoring?

Mentoring is a structured and trusted relationship. It is an intentional relationship established for a specific duration around mutually agreed upon goals of guiding, supporting, and encouraging the development of the mentee.

The word “mentor” has its origin in Greek mythology. Mentor was the son of Alcimus. Mentor was a close friend of Odysseus. As Odysseus went off to the Trojan War, he asked Mentor to guide Telemachus (Odysseus son). So, does a mentor have to be a male? No, a female can be a mentor too, as evidenced by Athena, Goddess of Wisdom, even if she disguised herself as a man and took on Mentor’s form when she, too, spoke to Telemachus.

A mentor, an experienced and trusted advisor, serves as a professional colleague. The best mentors encourage their mentees, serve as supporters, motivators, advocates, role models and even friends. While some suggest a mentor is a coach, there is a distinction: A mentor is the ‘wise’ teacher who is there to support, rather than someone who is constantly on the sidelines suggesting new behaviors or actions.

Mentors also discover challenges and rewards in the relationship. In addition to the satisfaction mentors get from working with a mentee, mentors can develop their own leadership and communication skills through the relationship. Mentors who approach the relationship with an open mind also gain new perspectives and new ways of thinking about challenges through discussions with mentees.

As a mentor, it is up to you to maintain the structured and trusted relationship. It may be easy to overstep the boundaries of good mentoring, especially as you advance in your relationship. The lines can get blurry. Remember that as a mentor, just as you are not a coach, you are also not a surrogate parent, an ATM or bank, a psychologist, a social worker (even if you are one professionally), or a rescuer.

- As you prepare to establish a relationship with your mentee, encourage the mentee to take the lead.
- Ask the mentee what she would like to accomplish during a meeting. The mentee’s agenda should drive the discussions and interchanges.
- Help build the mentee’s own confidence to be successful.
- Allow the mentee to naturally bring up issues and concerns about her life.
- Listen, ask questions, and let the mentee do most of the talking.

Special Note: At times, you may become concerned that the mentee needs special attention that is outside the scope of the mentorship relationship. Issues of Concern should be shared with the [GW CARE Team](http://studentlife.gwu.edu/care-team) (studentlife.gwu.edu/care-team).

Active Listening

MentorLoop defines active listening as a technique in which the listener fully concentrates to understand, respond to, and then remember what is being said. Active listening is used in counseling, training, and solving disputes or conflicts. Listening skills may establish flow and openness rather than closed mindedness or negative emotions such as stress, anger and frustration.

The use of active listening skills is crucial to developing a genuine and successful mentoring relationship. A mentor can be most effective by investing the time to actively listen to what the mentee is saying, how she is behaving while saying it, and how she is feeling. Below are a few tips to guide you in being an effective listener.

- Pay attention to what a mentee is saying, even if it just seems to be silliness. Establish to your mentee that you value her confiding in and trusting you; reward her trust with your undivided attention.
 - In situations where you are conversing by phone, your primary method to do this will be through your verbal responses—both words and sounds of encouragement.
 - If you are in person or on a video call:
 - Show you are listening – nod from time to time, smile encouragingly, lean in to the speaker.
 - Look at the speaker and minimize distractions such as new emails, texts or calls coming in.
 - Maintain an open posture – try not to fold your arms across your chest.
- Use questions that can help expand a conversation, such as:
 - **Leading questions:** “What happened then?” or “Could you tell me more?” Encourage the mentee to go into more detail and continue sharing with less pressure of feeling like a burden.
 - **Open-ended questions:** “How?” “Where?” “Who?” “Which one?” are more likely to elicit detailed responses than closed-ended (or yes/no) questions such as “Are you?” “Could you?” “Would you have?”
 - **Reflective statements and questions:** These encourage a speaker to think more about what they said. Reflective questions enable you to offer help without forcing your advice upon a person. For example, if the mentee said “I’m scared I won’t be able to do my work on my own,” you could respond with, “It sounds like you would like some help with your work. How can you get more help?”

(continued)

- Avoid communication blockers such as:
 - **Interrupting the mentee as she's trying to get her point across:** Interrupting may indicate you are not interested in what she has to say. Interruptions can waste time and be frustrating for your mentee.
 - **Asking "why" questions:** "Why" questions may make your mentee defensive, because they try to find a linear path from instance to explanation. Life isn't like that. You're asking them to cut out everything that happened along the way, when the those things may very well be what are troubling your mentee.
 - **Facile reassurances** such as "don't worry about it" or "you'll look back and laugh" may not be helpful. They often come across as dismissive and careless.
 - **Patronizing a mentee:** This is a terrific way to develop absolute resentment and feelings of powerlessness and codependency.
 - **Probing for information:** Digging too deeply can indicate interest, but it can also make a mentee uncomfortable at times and trigger emotional outbursts and reactions to buried issues.

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Difficult Conversations

At some point in a mentoring relationship, a difficult or touchy conversation between a mentor and mentee will take place. If you are feeling apprehensive about an upcoming mentoring session or worried about bringing up a topic, it's time for a difficult conversation. Addressing the issue builds trust, kicking the can down the road can develop a minor issue into a big one.

What triggers may require a difficult conversation?

- Not fulfilling the mentoring agreement.
- Lapse in communication.
- Sessions are lacking focus or direction.
- Lack of follow-up.
- Lack of accountability of either the mentor or mentee.
- Dealing with a difficult conversation requires empathy, courage and a commitment to the mentoring relationship.

Before you begin:

- Be clear of your purpose.
- Ensure you are able to chat in a private location with minimal interruptions.
- Keep an open mind.
- Go in as equals.

Starting:

- Reaffirm the value of the mentoring relationship.

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- Indicate the point is to make the relationship stronger.
- Indicate you want to clear the air.

During:

- Be open to listening first.
- Stay grounded in your goal.
- Repeat in your own words what you hear.
- Accept silence.

Ending:

- Acknowledge the value of the conversation (hope it did work).
- Summarize any agreement.
- If you need help – ask for it.

Make it work:

- Engage as equals.
- Focus on one or two outcomes.
- Support the mentee.
- Try to remain objective.
- Be patient, empathetic, and calm.

Helping Your Mentee Problem Solve

(Taken from *The Community Toolbox* - <https://ctb.ku.edu/en/table-of-contents>)

Remember, as a mentor, your role is not to solve the mentee's problems. It will be useful, however, to have tools to help your mentee discuss the challenges she's facing and solve her own problems.

The steps to effective problem solving are as follows:

- **Exploring the problem:** Your mentee describes the problem as she understands it
- **Understanding the problem:** Using open-ended questions, you uncover important facts, feeling sources, personal limitations and preferences. Understanding the problem also helps your mentee to understand her emotions
- **Defining the problem:** You work with your mentee to restate the problem, locating its root causes. In this step, you can use open-ended questions and reflective statements to help your mentee clarify the problem
- **Brainstorming alternatives:** You and your mentee think of any and all options, no matter how far-fetched or impractical they seem, to deal with the root of the problem
- **Evaluating options:** You and your mentee discuss the benefits and risks of each alternative, narrowing options down to the most agreeable or most plausible solutions
- **Choosing the best option:** Your mentee can now choose the best alternatives for the given situation, based on the solution's advantages and disadvantages and her personal values, abilities, and limitations. It's important that you respect and support the decision she reaches, even if you don't entirely agree with it
- **Taking action:** This step entails the mentee and you, as her mentor, making observable efforts to bring about the solution best tailored to the mentee's needs. It would be easy to ignore this last step, but then the problem solving process wouldn't be solving the problem!

Pay close attention and ensure you devote enough time to enhance your communication and problem-solving skills. They will be very important to your mentoring relationship.

Additional Resources: Please visit the GW SEAS Center for Women in Engineering website at womenengineers.seas.gwu.edu or email scwie@gwu.edu