

Communication Hacks for Promoting Learning

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Use active listening skills
Give your full attention; indicate engagement through language and body language
Ask clarifying questions and restatements to be sure you understand
Use pauses to encourage sharing and to give your students time to gather their thoughts and formulate a response
Ask open- and not close-ended questions
Be sure to acknowledge and thank them for sharing with you
When a student shares something difficult with you, first acknowledge their trust
“Thanks for sharing that”
“I appreciate your willingness to share this with me”
“I am so sorry to hear that”.
Keep the focus on them and where they are at
Do not feel the need to speak immediately; pauses give them time to gather their thought and formulate a response
Do not immediately jump into “fix-it” mode
Do not immediately share a similar story of yours (although this may be appropriate at the right time)
Be willing to acknowledge the difficult emotions that come up – “I can see you are frustrated”; “That really made you angry”.
Do not immediately cut-off crying or the appropriate expression of other emotions.
Make problem-solving a joint effort (recognize and validate their agency in controlling their graduate experience)
Ask for suggestions before giving your own; e.g. “have you given any thought to how you might.....?”. “What do you think might be the best next step?”
Acknowledge mistakes and turn them into learning opportunities – “we all make mistakes; the key is to learn from them. What might you learn from this?”
Promote the use of resources - “I understand you are struggling a bit in your genetics class; what resources might you use to work through the material?”
Ask if they would like your advice – “I have some thoughts on how you might organize your proposal if you would like to hear them.”
Ask questions to elicit their thoughts and reasoning in decision making – “Can you explain your rationale for doing it this way?”; “What lead to this decision?” “What might you do differently next time?”
Acknowledge and don’t minimize difficulty and challenge
“That must have been really hard for you.”
“I’m so sorry that happened to you and would like to help.”
Avoid dismissing their frustration and disappointment. Try “Paper reviews can be very frustrating, and we need to find a way to move forward regardless.” instead of “Get over it; everyone’s papers get rejected .“

Show them that you are genuinely interested in them – as people and as emerging scientists
“Tell me about the workshop you went to today.”
“What did you think about that talk?”
“How was your weekend? Did you do anything relaxing or fun?”
Express confidence in them and their abilities (especially important when they are tackling new tasks, when experiments are not working and during tough times in general)
“I really think you can do this; you’ve handled hard things before.”
“You are doing careful experiments and will get to the bottom of this technical issue”.
Take a strengths-based approach when discussing performance
“What do you think went well during your rotation?”
In thinking about your committee meeting, what do you think went well? Is there anything you might like to do differently next time?’
“What are you proud of in these fellowship reviews?”
Be honest and kind when sharing difficult news or giving difficult feedback
“I know this is a difficult time for you. When you are ready, I would like to discuss ways we can move forward given the critical input from your committee. Do you think you might be ready to talk tomorrow?”
“It is important to me that you carefully consider my concerns about as I want you to succeed here.”
Reinforce positive attitudes and behaviors and the use of helpful resources
“You stayed positive even though we hit bumps in the protocol and that was a part of your eventual success”.
I am glad you went to the writing workshop; I can see it was helpful based on the new draft of your proposal.”
“Thank you for reaching out to _____ to discuss stress management strategies. Your willingness to do that is a sign of how seriously you take your work.”
Keep the door open
It seems that you are set for now. Feel free to come back if you want to talk about this again.
I appreciate the open discussion about your career goals and hope we can talk about it again as you make progress exploring your next step.”
“I would appreciate if you would let me know that you made contact with _____ and I am happy to talk again if needed.”