

PRACTICING GIVING AND RECEIVING FEEDBACK - MENTORS*

Giving and receiving productive feedback are skills that you will need throughout your life. This process will help you grow as you move through your own professional development journey as a mentor. When you make the conscious decision to give and receive useful feedback on a regular basis, you will be able to continue on your path in a more informed way and gain more from your mentoring relationship.

Effective feedback identifies and reinforces behaviors which contribute towards your growth, and the mentoring relationship, positively while altering those which get in the way. Be prepared to work on yourself and help your mentee understand their role in the relationship better. The more practice you have with giving and receiving feedback, the better you will become!

Giving Feedback

There are four basic parts to giving productive feedback.

1. Check Your Motives

Feedback is meant to assist the recipient in their growth; avoid being harsh or offensive. You will likely find your approach to be more effective if it is positive and focused on what could be done to improve in the future. This does not mean that every comment needs to be positive, but the discussion should be fair and balanced. If you are unsure if your critique is too tough, err on the side of caution.

Tip: Before entering into your mentoring meeting, take a moment to think about the positive aspects of your mentoring relationship and what your mentee has done well so far. Going through a mini-SWOT analysis, similar to your Self Evaluation, can be helpful in organizing your thoughts with regards to perceived strengths and weaknesses.

2. Make It Regular

Setting regular, private meetings with your mentee to give and receive feedback will help keep communication open between you both. However, if the need for feedback is more urgent than your scheduled check-ins, do not hesitate to reach out and express that desire. By providing frequent feedback, you will ensure that it is timely and closely related to the events it refers to. Set a timeline with your mentee to exchange feedback; for example, dedicating part of a monthly meeting to this process will help you both stay in top shape.

Tip: Think about other major deadlines that may exist in your mentee's timeline; are there any conference dates, submission times, or other relevant schedules to consider? Planning opportunities for feedback in relation to these other responsibilities will assist you in tracking areas where your mentee may require additional support.

3. Be Sincere

Feedback should be a conversation, not a lecture, and all feedback should be sincere and honest. If positive feedback is forced, it will lose its value and undermine your credibility. If negative feedback is forced, it can seem nitpicky. Remember that this is meant to be a two-way dialogue which enriches both you and your mentee, so engage them in a conversation. Ask questions to make sure they understand your input and actively listen when it is your turn to receive feedback.

Tip: It is recommended that you give and receive feedback face-to-face, since tone and message can be easily misinterpreted over text communications.

4. Be Specific

Limit your feedback to one or two main action items per meeting. After sharing your point of view, ask your mentee what their perspective is on the situation. Using phrases like "What is your reaction to this?" and "Do you have any additional context or perspective you would like to share?" can help you both achieve clarity and address gaps in communication. You can use the SMART goals framework to help you both understand what exactly needs to be done to improve the situation and establish a timeframe for change.

Tip: It can be helpful to take a few minutes before meeting with your mentee to write down the main ideas behind the feedback you will be giving. This can help you determine your desired outcomes from the conversation, as well as good places to start the dialogue.

Receiving Feedback

There are four basic parts to receiving productive feedback.

1. Be Specific

Start on a positive note by asking about what you are doing well so far, then ask about one or two action areas that your mentee feels need improvement. You will receive better feedback if you ask specific questions such as “What’s one thing I could do to improve my communication style as your mentor?” and “Was the last round of critique I provided on your paper useful?”.

Tip: If you are unsure why your mentee is providing a specific type of feedback, then ask further questions such as “Can you please explain further?”. It is important to clarify any confusion over feedback in the moment it is given so that you do not jump to any incorrect conclusions.

2. Make It Regular

Setting regular, private meetings with your mentee to give and receive feedback will help keep communication open between you both. However, if the need for feedback is more urgent than your scheduled check-ins, do not hesitate to reach out and express that desire. By exchanging frequent feedback, you will ensure that it is timely and closely related to the events it refers to. Set a timeline with your mentee to exchange feedback; for example, dedicating part of a monthly meeting to this process will help you both stay in top shape.

Tip: When receiving feedback, actively listen and take notes on what your mentee is saying. This will help you get the full measure of what they are saying so that you can respond effectively during your conversation and better prepare a plan towards improvement together.

3. Reflect On The Future

Asking for feedback can be intimidating at first, but you can overcome this hesitation by adjusting your mindset. Remember that no one is perfect and that everyone is still growing. After your meeting, take time to reflect on the feedback that you and your mentee exchanged, remembering that the critique is meant to help you further develop. You may find the Feedback Matrix exercise at the end of this document to be useful during this process.

Tip: At the end of your meeting, thank your mentee for providing feedback. This will end the conversation on an upwards note and remind you that receiving feedback is a good thing.

4. Take Positive Action

Feedback is only helpful when you take the next step and make a change to address areas for improvement. If you were previously unaware of an issue your mentee is raising, do not get defensive. Instead, ask for an example of where you fell short and if they have ideas for how you could improve. You may find the SMART goals framework useful for incorporating the feedback you received into your growth moving forward.

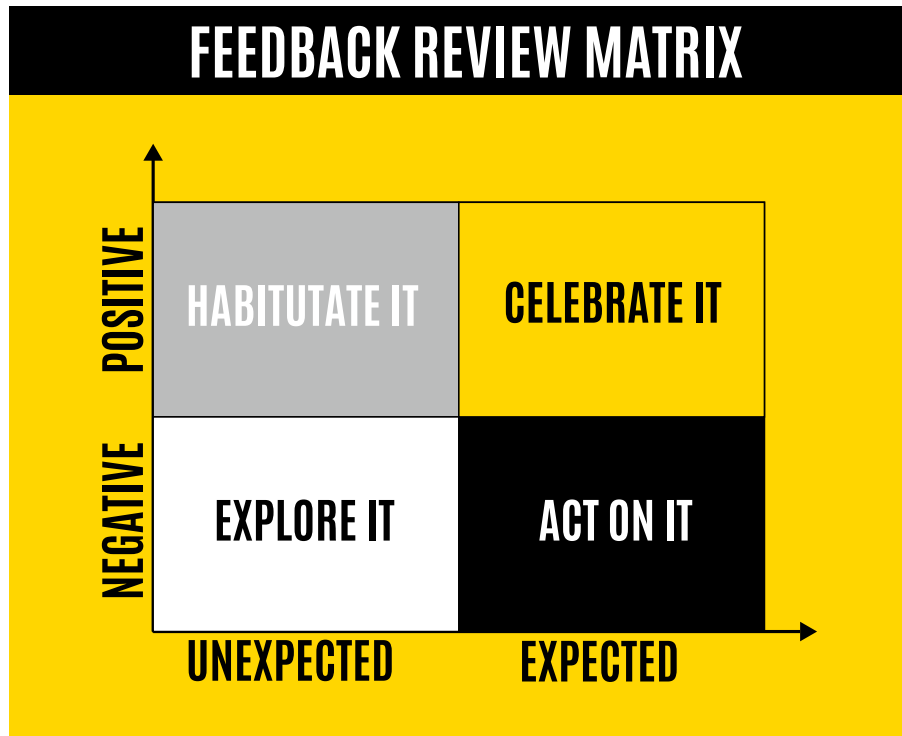
Tip: During your next evaluation meeting, take some time to check in with your mentee to determine if the changes you have made are making a positive difference.

Example

- Dr. Patel is Robert’s research advisor; at the beginning of their mentoring relationship, the two of them decided that they would exchange feedback twice a month leading up to Robert’s dissertation defense. Lately, Robert has not been hitting his research deadlines and Dr. Patel wants to make sure that he is still on track with his project. Before their next meeting, she takes some time and makes note of what Robert has done well so far and the progress he has made. She also decides that her main piece of feedback will be centered around Robert submitting his section drafts after their agreed upon deadlines, rather than on time.
- During their meeting, Dr. Patel opens by mentioning that Robert has done an excellent job analyzing the data he has collected so far and specifically highlights a certain section where his writing skills shine. She then expresses concern that Robert has not been hitting his deadlines, and asks whether he believes their timeline needs to be adjusted a bit. Dr. Patel speaks with compassion and understanding, assuring Robert that she is there to help and wants to see his continued success.
- Robert feels comfortable enough to share that he is feeling burnt out with regards to his research and is discouraged, but that he did not mention it earlier because he felt like he could manage it. Dr. Patel thanks Robert for his candor and reminds him that the mentoring relationship is there to help him in his growth. Together, the two of them figure out a new series of deadlines using the SMART goals framework which support Robert’s further progress without feeling stifling and which still allow him to finish his dissertation in time. Dr. Patel also mentions that there are several mental health resources available on campus should he feel the need for additional professional assistance.
- After engaging in an active conversation with each other, Dr. Patel asks Robert if he has any feedback for her, which he provides. Dr. Patel practices active listening and takes notes on the comments she receives, asking for clarification when needed. Both leave the meeting feeling satisfied. After the meeting, Dr. Patel takes action to incorporate the feedback Robert provided into her mentoring moving forward.

Feedback Matrix

Acting on feedback is the next step towards development. Using the Feedback Matrix to organize the feedback you receive can help you understand what should be celebrated, what needs to be changed, and where you can build more self-awareness.



Using the matrix, feedback falls into four categories:

1. Positive and Unexpected

Habituate It - This is feedback which points out a positive behavior you may not have been aware of. Think about how you can turn this behavior into a habit or routine so that you continue to succeed in the future.

2. Positive and Expected

Celebrate It - Take note of your accomplishments so that you can be proud of the clear, positive outcomes that your investment into the mentoring relationship has created.

3. Negative and Unexpected

Explore It - After discussing this feedback with your mentee, explore it in detail outside of your meeting to gain a deeper understanding of where you could improve moving forward. Reflect on potential spaces in your growth where you could foster more self-awareness and nurture positive change within yourself.

4. Negative and Expected

Change It - Design an action plan, set SMART goals, and continue exchanging consistent feedback with your mentee to help you change the problematic behavior or mindset.

→ [MENTOR.UIOWA.EDU](https://mentor.uiowa.edu)

*Adapted from [MindTools](https://www.mindtools.com/)