

MENTORING **SPARK**

Quick ideas to light up your doctoral conversations.

► COMMUNICATION



SOLUTIONS FOR STUDENTS

Methods of communication (*as well as word choice, tone, etc.*) have changed. The haste of quick communication often results in a lack of specificity (*e.g., using generic “this” or “that” vs a specific name*) allowing for confusion in message and/or instructions to act. Familiarity with a topic or idea may lead the communicator to leave out information that the receiver needs to understand the message. Poor communication is frustrating to all involved. Adding to the above, a potential power dynamic of student/teacher or student/manager can further complicate the situation.

This **Spark** endeavors to provide methods to reduce frustrations. In particular, listening or reading for understanding could mean requesting clarification and/or verification of the received message to ensure that the intended message was received.



► LEVEL 2

LEVEL 1: COMMUNICATION MODES

LEVEL 2: UNDERSTANDING OTHERS

LEVEL 3: EFFECTIVE COMMUNICATION



FACULTY FYI

This **Spark** is intended to improve communication skills by providing suggestions to ensure that messages are received accurately. In this age of rapid response and brief text messages, businesses are reporting a decline in communication skills of new hires. Both receiving information and replying with information is important for effective communication. Ensuring the request was understood is imperative for receiving an accurate response.

Within a faculty member's lab, accurate understanding of others can improve the research – and possibly even keep the lab environment safer.



ACTIONS FOR FACULTY

- Discuss with students the adage, “we have two ears and one mouth so we can listen twice as much as we talk.”
- Discuss that listening to others, regardless of position, is a sign of respect and should be practiced always.
- Discuss that good listening is proactive and takes effort; it requires more than just *hearing*. It also involves paying attention to the context and cues. Discuss the challenges of communicating via email and texts.
- Help students verify their comprehension. This may include summarizing the information, paraphrasing, confirming actions they have, asking for clarity, and showing they understand what to do and when they need to complete it. Let students know that asking for clarity is OK.

CONTINUED ...

A RESOURCE FROM:



Use this QR code to access this and other Mentoring Spark tip sheets:





DIGGING DEEPER

- Paraphrase what was said to confirm accuracy. Do not interrupt unless you are getting lost in the message. Do not interrupt to “solve” or “rebut” what is being said (*you are not actively listening if you are talking*), and ask open-ended (*not yes/no*) questions to gain clarity.
- Remove distractions (*silence phones, turn off emails, close laptops, etc.*). Fully concentrate on the conversation versus “multi-tasking”; this minimizes communication errors, improves trust, and is more efficient in the long run.
- Use more than your ears to actively listen: pay attention to the tone, body language, and facial expressions. If the communication is written, pay attention to added styles (*italic, bold, underline, different colors*).

Please visit the RDI Mentoring Sparks website for examples and links to these tools and resources!



EXERCISES FOR STUDENTS

1. Have students sit or stand across from each other. For the first two minutes, one side talks about their favorite food. Next, the other side explains to everyone what they heard. The original speaker replies if the explanation was accurate. This can also be done for favorite class, favorite aspect of research, etc.
2. Role playing is a good exercise for all communication areas. Have students simulate a meeting, with students being the recipient/customer (*of a product, research, or proposal*) and assign roles of **paying attention to the speaker** and **not paying attention**, being contrary or just agreeing, or asking curveball questions. Have a student be the speaker and present their work. Go around the room to learn how the customer behaviors influenced the speaker.
3. Have students bring in an example of feedback (*a homework paper, manuscript, proposal, etc.*) and practice providing a paraphrased understanding of the feedback and response. Include what is believed to be the underlying concern (*root cause*) for the feedback.



ACTIONS FOR FACULTY

- Remind students that replying to a message (*indicating that it was received*) is important— even if it’s just a quick response of “message received.” Some emails do not have an action, or the action may take weeks, in which case confirming receipt of the information is important.
- Help students practice analyzing what information received from others means for them. Ask them to recap a message, to reply with specificity the next steps; push back on vague responses such as, “OK”, or “I understand.” Ask students on a regular basis, “**OK, what did you hear me say?**” and ensure the students know this question is being asked to help develop the student’s listening skills, not to challenge them in a negative manner.
- **GOAL Setting:** Agree on a goal for the student related to listening/reading for understanding. A powerful goal will include why the area should be improved — that is, include the perceived communication weakness.



REFLECTION & NEXT STEPS

Student and Faculty: Active listening is tiring; it requires using all of our senses. Perhaps reflect on the importance of listening for understanding.



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