**Communication**

Communication is a vital set of skills, on which the success of the relationship with your learners will depend. There are as many definitions of communication as there are opportunities to communicate. We believe that for our mentors to be successful the learners should feel as if they have been communicated *with* rather than communicated *at*.

Good communication skills are the key to successful mentoring because it is the mentor who will take the lead and you are going to have to work hard at it. Do not expect to walk through the door and your learner to say, “thank goodness you are here”. You are also going to have to take into consideration how long you are spending with each learner or group. The time that you spend with them needs to be full of communication of some sort.

**Verbal – words:** The way we say things can give different meanings and therefore we need to be very careful. Therefore it is essential to think about not only what we say but how we say it.

**Non-verbal:** Non-verbal is actually more important as it gives out many different messages and we can communicate with each other without saying anything. For example,the tone of what we say gives clues to the type of response we are expecting e.g. a questioning statement.

Types of non-verbal communication include;

**Written Communication**: Can be very formal and therefore difficult to misinterpret what is being communicated. However, there are methods of written communication that can be dangerous because there is no supporting meaning behind it and it can be taken the wrong way. Text and e-mail are perfect examples of this.

**Body Language:** Someone’s body language can have a significant impact on how we think they are receiving what we say and how we can respond to them. Body language can be the first thing a learner judges about their mentor and can set the tone for any interaction.

**Gesture:** Gestures are used a great deal between people who know each other well and there is no requirement for the words to a message to be understood. There are lots of gestures that have universal understanding.

**\*Activity\***

“Your communication style” quiz is available on the Aimhigher resources website

[**www.aimhigherwm.ac.uk/mentoring-scheme/generic-resources-and-activities**](http://www.aimhigherwm.ac.uk/mentoring-scheme/generic-resources-and-activities)

**Communication as a Weapon**

Within a mentoring context communication must never be used to intimidate, ignore or ridicule. There is one main purpose as to why communication is used as a weapon - and that is for control. Take a few moments to think about occasions where communication has been used as a weapon against you. How did it make you feel?

You need to think about how you communicate messages in all aspects of the mentoring process and be aware of any factors which may affect the learners understanding of what you have said. There is no such thing as good or bad communication; but is the communication fit for the purpose?

**Active Listening**

It is important for mentors to be active listeners. Be aware of the importance of body language and that sometimes people can give the impression they are not listening when they are. A study from Argyle stated that the following gives an indication of the level of impact on active listening skills; words 8%, tone 37% and body language 55%. Therefore your learners may give you the impression they are not interested in what you are saying but do not assume they are not listening. It is vital that you listen to the answer before you ask the next question. If you give the impression that you are not listening, your learners will think you are not interested in what they have to say.

You should try to improve your listening skills and the following gives you some advice on how to help you achieve this. Demonstrating good listening skills through any of the following will help a learner recognise that they are being heard.

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| **Physical Approach** | **Mental Approach** |
| * Be relaxed * Keep reasonably still * Face the speaker * Look interested * Maintain eye contact. | * Keep an open mind * Concentrate * Don’t interrupt * Listen to tone as well as content * Ask questions on any areas of difficulty or confusion. |

Active listening is a skill; we can learn it, even if we are not very good at it to start with. When we practice this skill, we are trying to act as a “mirror” for the person who is speaking. This is why it is sometimes referred to as “reflective listening”. We reflect back, in our own words, what the person has said and also the feelings being expressed. This helps the conversation move forward.

**Questioning Skills**

A key mentoring skill is the ability to ask the right type of question, all types are usually good in the right situations and if they are fit for purpose. You would need to use the right type of question with your learners. Here are some examples of different types of questions

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| **Open:** | These questions allow you to gather information and allow your learners to open up and talk more freely. Open questions generally begin with what, why, when, how, where. For example “what progress have you made with research for your history coursework” or “which aspects of school do you like the most?” |
| **Closed:** | These tend to invite only yes, no or very short answers but can be acceptable in certain situations. For example “have you used this computer programme before?” It is recommended that closed questions are used sparingly. |
| **Probing:** | Open questions encourage full responses and probing questions, will allow you to explore and clarify further. This will help learners identify experiences and clarify important issues which can help you obtain a better understanding of the situation. For example “you say you feel like dropping history - what would help you to consider not dropping it?” |
| **Summary:** | These questions help you to check your understanding of what your learner is saying or to clarify information already given. For example “as I understand it” or “so you are going to”. This lets the learner know they are being listened to and understood, and gives them an opportunity to correct any assumptions that may have been made |
| **Reflective:** | This type of question can to be used to get the learner to reflect on an issue or to express an opinion on something. “How do you feel about” or “what are your views on?” |
| **Hypothetical:** | These questions are used to encourage the learners to think more widely and are particularly useful to get them to consider a range of alternatives, for example “what would you do if”, or “what happens if”. Again, like closed questions, try to use hypothetical questions sparingly. |

All question types are good in the right situation and if they are fit for purpose. General guidance is that you should not ask a question if you do not want an answer and when an answer is given, listen to it. Do not prepare the next question while listening to the answer to the last one. Questions should build. Never assume that your learners have understood everything you have communicated to them. Use questions to check their understanding.