

Making skilful interventions

Effective communicators use a range of styles of intervention (e.g. questions, statements, observations). In mentoring relationships, the best mentors are clear about the intention of their interventions and are skilful in their choice and application.

In the list below, the interventions are described according to their intention rather than content. As you read this list, think about which of these styles of intervention you use most and least in your own communication with other researchers, patients, colleagues and family. Notice whether you use some more than others.

Authoritative interventions

1 Prescriptive: A prescriptive intervention seeks to direct the behaviour of the mentee; usually behaviour that is outside of the mentee/mentor relationship. For example – ‘I would like you to discuss this issue with your senior colleagues.’

2 Informative: An informative intervention seeks to impart knowledge, information and meaning to the mentee. For example – ‘Grants are often made available for this type of work.’

3 Confronting: A confronting intervention seeks to raise the awareness of the mentee about some limiting attitude or behaviour of which he/she is relatively unaware. For example – ‘I notice this is the third time we have talked about this and you have still not been able to act; I wonder what is going on.’

Facilitative interventions

4 Cathartic: A cathartic intervention seeks to enable the mentee to discharge and express painful emotion, usually grief, anger or fear, in order to unblock development and creativity. For example – ‘I notice that whenever you speak about your research you look rather anxious.’

5 Catalytic: A catalytic intervention seeks to elicit self discovery, self-directed learning and problem solving. For example – ‘Tell me about a previous time when you had to work with a colleague whom you found particularly challenging... how did you deal with that?’

6 Supportive: A supportive intervention seeks to affirm the worth and value of the other person, and their qualities, attitudes and actions. For example – ‘It sounds like you handled that in a very mature and confident way.’

Adapted from John Heron (1986)

In developing effective mentoring relationships it is usual for the mentor to rely more on facilitative interventions rather than on authoritative ones. This enables the mentee to develop their own solutions and autonomy. This can pose a particular challenge for professionals such as doctors who are reliant on more authoritative styles of intervention, such as informative and prescriptive styles, in the course of their day-to-day work.

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