

Strategies to Improve Communication

Do you communicate well? Do you practice active listening? Do you give colleagues 100 percent of your attention when interacting? Do you take into consideration that English might not be your colleague's first language?

Or do you perhaps come across as rushed, distracted, or unfocused, maybe glancing at your phone a little too often?

Many of us *think* we are communicating well, but a neutral observer might say otherwise.

Assess Your Communication Skills Through Role Play

With one person playing mentee and the other playing mentor, act out a five-minute conversation where the mentee is asking for advice and the mentor is trying to help the mentee develop a plan of action. Enlist a third person to act as observer, taking notes on the verbal and non-verbal communication skills exhibited (or not) by each person, using the Communication Skills and Errors Checklist below.

Once the observed conversation is over, share the checklist with all participants and have a discussion about what happened.

(Note, you can also do this exercise during *any* type of interaction. For example, you could ask a friend to observe your real-life interactions with peers, you could ask a colleague to watch how you interact with patients or trainees, or you could assess your *own* conversational skills immediately after an interaction.)

Scenarios

Choose one of the scenarios below, or develop one of your own.

- A mentee asks her mentor for feedback on how she presented a patient to the nephrology fellows during rounds.
- A mentor runs into a mentee in the hallway and engages in a long discussion about making last-minute changes to a grant proposal.
- A mentee asks her mentor for advice on how to coordinate the work of a laboratory team.

If you find your communication skills are a little rusty, refer back to other ASN resources for some tips and ideas on how you can improve.

Communication Skills and Errors Checklist

	Person 1	Person 2
Verbal Communication		
Speaks slowly and clearly. Avoids slang, jargon and complex sentences.		
Asks open-ended questions; avoids asking closed-ended, yes/no questions.		
Probes for more information as appropriate; asks follow-up questions.		
Shares personal experiences or feelings to increase intimacy; makes an effort to get to know the colleague as a person.		
Summarizes or paraphrases the other person's comments to indicate understanding.		
Responds to questions with full sentences, rather than yes or no answers.		
Gives constructive feedback, not just criticism.		

	Person 1	Person 2
Uses statements or questions to raise difficult issues, rather than accusing, judging, or using devaluing language.		
Interrupts; changes the subject; talks too much; acts impatient.		
Preaches, moralizes, tells long-winded stories.		
Nonverbal Communication		
Gives 100% of attention to the other person.		
Uses clues to let the other person know they are listening (leans forward, nods, makes eye contact, pleasant facial expression).		
Acts distracted (looks at phone, papers on desk; allows interruptions).		
Other Comments		

Developed from *Activity #3: Active Listening*, University of Wisconsin Institute for Clinical and Translational Research's curriculum for training mentors