

Mastering Mentoring 4 Communication Modes

by Bob Whipple, MBA, CPTD



A mentoring relationship is mostly about communicating ideas in both directions. It is a consistent effort to provide value from the mentor to the protégé and vice versa.

At the start, it is worth it to have a serious discussion about the various options of communication and the advantages or limitations of each one.

The methods, frequency, and types of communication should be agreed upon after this discussion. Then the relationship begins, but do recognize the patterns you have just invented are general guidelines rather than hard and fast rules. There will be circumstances where you operate outside your normal pattern or even consciously modify your pattern based on new information or special circumstances.

This article will focus on some tips and caveats for the various modes of communication.

Face to Face

This will likely be the most common method of communicating. It may be from informal chance meetings, or the discussions may be formally scheduled. It will depend on the physical layout and how booked each individual is.

Some people like to schedule a set time each week for a one-hour discussion. You might schedule a lunch meeting each Wednesday with your mentor. The caveat here is to not be too rigid about a set meeting. If there is nothing new to discuss or if there is some priority job that needs to be done during the scheduled time slot, by all means take the opportunity to test each time if the meeting will be value added.

Many mentor relationships end up on the rocks because the schedule had become an albatross for the mentor. Stay alert to this possibility and keep testing.

Email or Text

In conjunction with live face to face discussions, it is fine to probe ideas or share data via electronic communication. Depending on the person, the email may provide a more positive interface or it may turn out to be unreliable.

I recall one situation where I was dealing with two mentors due to the matrix organization I was in. My main mentor was highly reliable on picking up email information, so that mode worked perfectly well. The other mentor was spotty at best with getting back to requests by email. I operated very differently with these two mentors due to their differing communication styles.

Remote Video Interfaces

Sometimes the situation will require most communication be done on one of the remote video platforms (like Zoom or Teams). These modes are helpful in that you can see if the other person is in a position to listen and consider what you are saying. Watch the body language to pick up a signal that the other person is distracted or rushed.

Voice Mail

One of my mentors was most reliable using voice mail. This form was excellent for access, but the asynchronous nature of the communication led to some awkward lapses at times. Sometimes I would find myself needing a reply but not getting one in a timely manner. I found myself debating whether to bug my mentor that I needed a response or waiting a longer period.

The good part about voice mail is that we were able to keep the dialog going 365 days a year without being a burden. In fact, it turned out to be an advantage when my mentor once said, "You know, Bob. I can always count on you to be there every time I dial in. You are much more active and dedicated than your peers."

Conclusion

There are dozens of ways to have meaningful dialog with your mentor. The advice here is to have an open discussion about which modes will be most useful, and select those as your primary vehicles. The caveat is to remain flexible to operate outside your normal convention when circumstances make that a better choice.

Bob Whipple, MBA, CPTD, is a consultant, trainer, speaker, and author in the areas of leadership and trust. He is the author of: The Trust Factor: Advanced Leadership for Professionals, Understanding E-Body Language: Building Trust Online, Leading with Trust is Like Sailing Downwind, and Trust in Transition: Navigating Organizational Change. Bob has many years as a senior executive with a Fortune 500 Company and with non-profit organizations.