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BUILDING EFFECTIVE COMMUNICATIONS WITH YOUR ADVISOR AND MENTORS: A WORKSHOP FOR PHDS
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Workshop Presented by:
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WHAT IS IN THE PICTURE?

THREE KEYS TO PRODUCTIVE CONVERSATIONS

1. Prepare for the Conversation
2. Listen, Learn and Understand
3. Creative Problem Solving; setting up systems that work
1) It is April 15. You are a PhD student in the early dissertation writing stage. You submitted a draft of your lit review to your faculty advisor three weeks ago and there has been radio silence ever since. You were hoping to get the lit review in final draft form and be able to finalize your thesis question before the end of the semester so that you could do a large chunk of work over the summer. You know that your faculty advisor usually travels extensively during the summer and is exceptionally hard to get in touch with and you need her buy-in before you move forward.

2) You have just received an e-mail from the department chair, reminding you that funding for your project will run out at the end of the next year. Your advisor was not cc’d on the e-mail. You are frustrated because you believe that the department blames you for your slow progress, when in fact, the faculty have been slow to review your work at each stage.

3) You are in the final stages of your work at Penn and have begun to think critically about “next steps.” You are at a faculty event and your mentor says to you in passing (over a glass of wine), “are you sure you really want to teach?” Just as you are about to ask her to clarify, she moves on to talk to the Department chair.

**CONFLICTS:** MANAGING UP

What are the barriers to having the conversation?

- Time
- Confidence
- Concern over response
- Concern over reputation
- Anxiety about pushing your own agenda
- Anxiety about negative feedback
- Concerns over respect/disrespect

**WHY NOT JUST TALK?**

1. Understand your desired outcome/self-awareness/own what is yours
2. Identify what is at stake for all parties
   - Yourself
   - Other party
   - Third parties (if there are any involved in this situation)
3. Logistics
   - What
   - When
   - Where
   - Who should be present
   - How do you set up the meeting (e-mail, in person conversation, text, note, just stop by?)

**PREPARING FOR THE CONVERSATION**
Dear Professor... Or Rena (depending on what you typically call your advisor),

I would appreciate the opportunity to speak with you this week about my project and next steps. I am available at X, Y, Z time. Please let me know what works for you.

Thanks,
GOAL for your active communication: share your perspective with other party(ies) in a way that still allows for open dialogue

1. Empathy
2. Asking the right type of questions and listening to the answers
   - Open ended questions to understand what matters to the other person and why
   - Looking for common ground/Open to common ground
3. Avoid blaming and anger: attack problem not person
4. Make I-statements vs. blaming statements
5. Avoid creating a stand off or defensive posture
6. Express desire to move forward, not rehash the past

LISTENING, LEARNING AND
UNDERSTANDING

OPEN ENDED QUESTIONS VS. CROSS
EXAMINATION

Open Ended Questions
- Can you say more about that?
- Can you explain what you think will work best?
- Can you walk me through your thought process?
- What communication systems work best for you?
- What system do you think makes the most sense moving forward?

Cross-Examination/closed Questions
- So you say you always come in at 9:00 am, right?
- Didn’t you arrive at 9:15 yesterday?
- You said your car broke down, right?
- You know that timeliness is a key value at our company, right?
- She yelled at you and made you angry and that is why you hit her?
- Would you be willing to split the cost in half?

Blaming Statements
1. “You are wrong”
2. “You are not making any sense”
3. “You are always excluding me from the decision-making process”
4. “That is such a warped perspective”
5. “You never put my items on the agenda”
6. “Don’t you ever have anything nice to say?”

I-Statements
1. “I don’t agree”
2. “I don’t understand”
3. “I feel excluded from the decision making process”
4. “I view things a bit differently”
5. “I am frustrated that we didn’t get to discuss my agenda item at the meeting”
6. “It is challenging for me to hear so many negative comments without any positives—"
For example:

- Something came up suddenly and you really don’t have the time to have this conversation right now. You know it’s important and you feel bad, but this is just not your first priority.

- You haven’t had time to read your student’s paper. You know that this needs to get done. You had hoped that by putting a meeting on the calendar you would have gotten it done—but you didn’t. You are embarrassed and don’t really want to let the student know that you haven’t done the work.

- You think the student’s work is good, but it can be significantly improved. In fact you are a bit surprised by the lack of quality. You are not great with conflict and don’t really know how to give feedback that is helpful and not too hurtful.

- You think the student’s work has room for improvement and you feel compelled to berate the student about her work—because you think this is the best way for her to learn how to improve.

**KNOW YOUR ADVISOR**

- Generating options that will work for you
- What systems do you need to put in place to avoid future conflict?
  - Creating scheduled meetings at a time that actually will work and putting a reminder system in place up front so that the reminder is not rude—just planned
  - Using third parties to help keep schedules
  - Creating a joint agenda prior to the meeting
- Communicate:
  - Listen
  - to understand the other person’s perspective, needs, concerns
  - Listen to constructive comments carefully and ask questions in order to learn
  - Share concerns from the “I” perspective

**CREATIVE PROBLEM SOLVING: SYSTEMS THAT WORK**

**PRACTICE POSITIVE COMMUNICATION**

Change the BUT to AND...

“I love the brochure but I have a few changes I want to make,”
“I understand your perspective but let me share with you some other ideas,”
“I don’t have the time to help you right now but I might later today”
“yes, you can leave early tomorrow but make sure I have the report before you go.”
“Bernice, you’re doing an excellent job in your new role, but to do an even better job please take the time to proofread your written work carefully.”
FINAL THOUGHTS

- Remember that each situation can be understood from multiple perspectives/be mindful of your own perspective and bias
- Listen and understand the other perspectives in the room
- share your own story in an open and productive way
- Problem solve creatively
- Create systems that will help you get the support you need in a positive and proactive way

THANK YOU

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