



“Do’s” and “Don’ts” for Mentors

“If you talk to a man in a language he understands, that goes to his head. If you talk to him in his language, that goes to his heart.” –Nelson Mandela

Nelson Mandela’s quote expresses the key to the relationship between an AASuccess coach and student. Life Skills coaches and Skills mentors must relate to the students, speaking to their hearts. This is a deeper level of communication that goes beyond basic message-sending; it fosters a profound understanding between two persons. So often, I see well-intentioned folks volunteer as Skills mentors and become frustrated when trying to communicate with their students. This is because they speak to the heads of the students, not the hearts.

So how do you connect on a more meaningful level to your student or employee? How do you keep the conversation focused on him or her, and not let the conversation derail? How do you remain focused on a mentee and constantly relate back to his or her current core values and overall goals?

Keep the following “do’s” and “don’ts” in mind for building a strong, healthy relationship with your student.

“Do’s”

1. Do remember that there is no way you can know everything immediately about your mentee. While it can be helpful to ask at a first-time session a question like “Is there anything that you think I need to know about what you respond to best in coaching?”, your relationship will take time to develop.
2. Do listen actively to your mentee. Talk, coordinate, and work with your mentee as opposed to just teaching and managing him or her. This involves learning to think and speak like the student in order to relate to him or her. Knowing the EQ and IQ of the mentee helps with this.
3. When assigning tasks or challenges, give clear guidelines to the scope, context, purpose, and deadline; discuss the methods needed to accomplish the task; review the progress or difficulties at some interim point; and review the final product and give feedback that includes areas of improvement.
4. Do pay attention to the verbal and nonverbal cues of your mentee.



5. Do give sincere and specific praise when the situation warrants it.
6. Do clarify with your mentee what you and he/she hope to get out of this relationship. Identify goals, the best way to communicate, a schedule, capacities, and expectations that you may have of each other.
7. Do respect your student. This may sound basic, but it is key for a strong relationship.
8. Do remember to be patient and ask probing questions of your mentee. Some mentees may have difficulty speaking up; you can encourage them to do so by building a safe environment with them.

“Don’ts”

1. Do not impose expectations and feel frustrated when they are not met. This approach is too aggressive. Poor coaching instills a fear in mentees to speak up, and then the coaches become frustrated when they do not know how to address the mentees’ needs.
2. Do not be too nice or sympathetic. At a certain point, too much positive reinforcement can be detrimental. While a sympathetic ear is helpful, the mentees need a Coach who can challenge them and yet believe in them.
3. Do talk overly about your own experiences. While you are valuable, in part, as a Skills mentor because of your experience, mentees such as our LSA students often do not have confidantes that will actively listen. This time is to benefit your mentee; make sure that the focus of conversation is on him/her.
4. While small talk can be useful to establish common ground with a mentee, do not engage with too much small talk; it can take away time from more deep and fulfilling conversations.
5. Do not assert your strong opinions on what is the best course of action for your mentee. Mentees learn through self-discovery and need to be free to make mistakes. Lessons need to be learned by the student, not taught by the mentor.