

Are You Tapping in to the Power of Mentoring?

It's all about communication.

Reviewed by Terrence Fernsler

Bridging Differences for Better Mentoring. By Lisa Z. Fain & Lois J. Zachary. Berrett-Koehler Publishers (bkconnection.com).

Power differences are built into mentoring. The mentor holds expert power over the mentee. Different cultures, work styles, and learning preferences between mentor and mentee can also give rise to communication challenges.

Bridging Differences for Better Mentoring addresses the communication miscues that can result. It offers a wealth of useful tips that will make the mentoring process go more smoothly. For example:

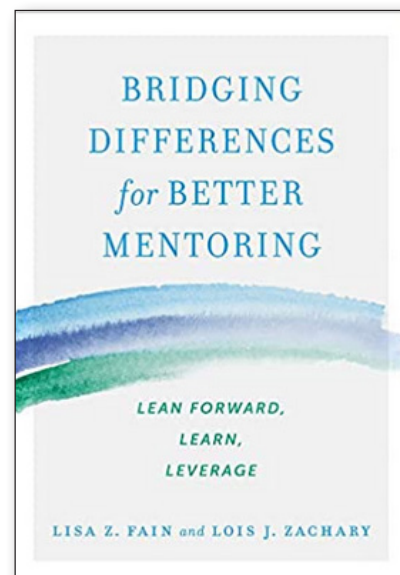
Start with self-awareness. Whether you're a mentor or mentee, mentoring requires self-awareness, a growth mindset, and a readiness to learn. Note that only about 20% of your identity is visible to others. The other 80% that lies beneath the surface has a lot to do with how you think of yourself and act in the world. The better you know yourself, the better you can relate to others.

Acknowledge that diversity exists in the mentoring relationship. Together with your mentoring partner, identify what your differences are. Seek ways to bridge those differences and find common ground.

Know your learning style and that of your mentoring partner. Discuss your different learning styles and find compromises that benefit you both. For example, one person may value being blunt and getting things done quickly, while the other may care more about being open-minded and creating harmony. Those are very different styles, and it's crucial for each person to respect and accommodate the other person's way of learning and relating.

Take a deep look at your assumptions. We often make assumptions based on our native culture – for instance, believing that people who don't look us in the eye aren't to be trusted, while those from other cultures believe that looking down is a sign of respect. Test out beliefs with your mentoring partner and uncover the assumptions you both carry. Even if you're from the same culture, it's likely that you express your culture differently.

“Only about 20% of your identity is visible to others.”



This book gives us helpful advice not only about mentoring but about communicating to get the most out of any working relationship.

This makes it a valuable book for any organization where teamwork on an ongoing basis is important.

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Communicating for Good

For more on bridging differences for better communication, see articles such as these at NonprofitWorld.org:

- Is Your Organization Culturally Competent?** (Vol. 26, No. 6)
- The Failure of Diversity Training** (Vol. 18, No. 3)
- Manage for Today, Mentor for Tomorrow** (Vol. 23, No. 5)
- Eight Steps to Managing Conflict** (Vol. 20, No. 4)
- Be a Better Leader by Being a Careful Listener** (Vol. 37, No. 1)
- Why Feedback Is the Key to Your Success** (Vol. 35, No. 3)
- Assess Your Work Style for Better Communication** (Vol. 37, No. 4)
- To Make an Impact, Improve Your Non-Verbal Skills** (Vol. 38, No. 3)
- Fighting Harassment & Improving Inclusion** (Vol. 36, No. 2)
- Seven Kinds of Listeners & How to Approach Them** (Vol. 39, No. 2)
- Managers Must Become Multicultural** (Vol. 20, No. 6)
- Keys to Finding (And Making the Most of) a Mentor** (Vol. 38, No. 3)
- How to Find Your Voice, Speak Your Truth, & Listen Deeply** (Vol. 38, No. 4)
- Overcome People's Resistance with These Steps** (Vol. 38, No. 3)

Use Feedback to Boost Growth

In the mentoring relationship, feedback is everything, say the authors of *Bridging Differences for Better Mentoring*. They discuss different types of feedback and how to present each one for best effect:

Shielded Feedback

If you're uncomfortable with giving feedback, worried about hurting someone's feelings, or fearful of seeming biased, you may "shield" the other person from your feedback by sugarcoating it. You may filter what you say to make it "not so bad," rendering it ineffective.

Even with the best intentions, such halfway feedback comes across as inauthentic and can erode trust. It's always better to be candid when you need to change behavior that might get in the way of success.

Hard Feedback

Sometimes you'll need to give feedback that's negative and critical in order to correct self-limiting behaviors. When you give hard feedback, here are some things to keep in mind:

Give the feedback as close to the observed behavior as possible.

Set the context before you give the feedback. Explain your reason for giving it. For instance, you might say, "I thought we had a good plan in place. I'm concerned we haven't made much progress. I'm wondering what's going on for you."

Ask questions to clarify, summarize, and nurture a supportive environment: "What I hear you saying is that . . ." "Do you agree that . . .?" "What do you think worked well, and what might be improved?" "How will you follow up?" "How can I help?" Coaxing someone to insight through questions is more effective than giving advice.


Listen carefully, and pay close attention to the person's words and the emotions beneath the words.

Talk about what you both gain from having this conversation. For instance, "We both want to be sure you achieve your goals."

When you speak from your perspective, remember that your reality is not the other's reality. When you talk about your own experiences, set a context by saying, for example, "In my experience . . ." or "I know that's not your situation, but maybe there's something to learn here."

Summarize the conversation in an optimistic way. For instance, "So we've agreed that . . ." "What I take away is that you're going to . . ."

Positive Feedback

It's important to give feedback even when things are going well. Use positive feedback often and make it specific to what was good. Just saying "Great job!" or "You're doing fine" is too vague to help the person replicate the desired behavior. Instead, pinpoint exactly what success looks like so your mentoring partner can recognize it, recreate it, and refine it. That's the best kind of learning. 

Bridge the Gap

