Mentoring Guide #3: Maintaining Progress – Goals, Mentoring Conversations & Feedback

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This third Guide in the Series focuses on ways that Advisers can help NRC Associates maintain forward momentum throughout their tenure. The emphasis is on the how-to of mentoring, including core skills like the mentor’s role in goal setting, enabling purposeful conversations, and fostering development with feedback.

Much of the content in this Guide concerns core skills that are very important in mentoring. A number of recommended resources and exercises are included for those wishing to build their skills.

I. Introduction

In Mentoring Guide #2, we noted that NRC Adviser-Associate mentoring relationships develop like other types of relationships. There is a natural pattern that starts with establishing your working relationship, continues to the phase where you work closely together as an Adviser-Advisee pair, then wraps up as the Associate’s tenure nears its end, offering you a chance to celebrate and build a new type of relationship for the future.

This Guide focuses on the middle stage of the advising partnership. During this stage, you and your mentee interact frequently. You discuss research productivity, professional development and career advancement, work through issues as they arise, and collaborate in professional endeavors. Whether you and your mentee have chosen to set weekly, bi-weekly or monthly check-ins, or to connect in a less scheduled way, there will be many mentoring interactions. In this Guide, we dive deep into how you can interact productively and constructively to help the Associate you are advising create actionable goals, work through challenges, and sustain progress.

II. Goals & Goal Setting

Encouraging mentees to develop and stay focused on their goals is a very important aspect of mentoring. It is also a great way to help an Associate sustain and monitor progress. As an Adviser, you can help Associates to develop impactful goals by engaging in conversations that help them clarify, reflect on, and think critically about what they want to accomplish. You can also help by creating accountability – checking in on progress and celebrating together when goals are reached. Setting goals is recommended for all aspects of the Associate’s experience – research, professional development, and career advancement.

It is a good practice to begin conversations about goals early, as part of onboarding or shortly thereafter, but goal setting is not a “one and done” conversation. As early goals are reached, new

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goals will replace them. Goals may also need to be revised to account for discoveries, new information, or unanticipated obstacles.

In general, your role as a mentor is to help your mentee refine their goals: making them more specific, breaking larger aspirations into manageable steps, and helping to clarify criteria for success. One thing you can do to prepare for this role is to educate yourself about goal formats, such as SMART goals. SMART stands for Specific, Measurable, Actionable, Relevant, and Timely – a set of criteria that can help focus and clarify nearly any goal.

For example, imagine you are advising an Associate who will conduct measurements for their NRC project using a highly sophisticated technique. This technique is a specialty of your group but is brand new to the Associate. For the sake of this exercise, let’s choose small angle neutron scattering (SANS). A new Associate might propose a technical learning goal like:

Learn to use small angle neutron scattering (SANS) methods

Though targeted to the area of interest, this starting goal is very broad, and the success criteria are not clear. As a novice, the Associate may be at a loss regarding how to shape this into a more specific goal or break it into manageable steps. You can offer suggestions based on your experience, perhaps helping the Associate reshape their goal into something like one of these:

By March, I will have learned to calibrate the SANS instrument properly, according to established standards and protocols.

By December, I will have designed, completed, and documented a SANS research project of publishable quality.

A mentor’s role in goal refinement is not limited to their specific area of expertise. For example, you might help an Associate refine this general career goal:

Learn about careers in industrial research

Into something like this:

In order to learn about careers in industrial research, I will interview four scientists from at least three different companies who have successful careers in industrial R&D. I will develop and ask specific questions during these interviews about success factors for these jobs, what the scientists enjoy most about their job, what they see as the biggest challenges, and what advice they would offer me. I will complete these interviews within 6 months.

One benefit of goal refinement conversations is that they naturally lead to a conversation about what the Associate needs in order to achieve their goal, creating the opportunity to discuss how you might support them. For example, you might offer to train the Associate on SANS calibration or make introductions to colleagues who have had successful careers in industrial research.

Use your best judgment to determine a goal refinement approach that is appropriate for your mentee and the situation. Smaller steps and more specific, attainable goals can help the Associate build confidence quickly. Larger steps will do more to foster independence. The best goals will be
appropriately matched to an Associate’s skill level and natural inclinations. Given the uncertainty inherent in most research, it may make sense to craft some goals around proving or disproving hypotheses or completing critical sets of experiments, rather than around anticipated outcomes.

When mentoring on criteria for success, avoid the temptation to associate quantitative metrics with all goals. The criteria should be appropriately matched to the objective, which will sometimes be better served by qualitative measures. As long as the goal is crafted to make its successful completion clear, the criteria should be sufficient.

Once a set of goals is established, it provides a basis for productive conversations on progress and changes in direction; for recognizing, acknowledging, and adapting to growth; and for celebrating success.

III. Core Skills for Effective Mentoring Conversations

The types of conversations you have with your mentees will evolve over the course of your relationship. During the onboarding period, you can expect basic questions and tactical discussions as the new Associate adjusts to the work environment in your laboratory. As things progress, there will be more in-depth conversations about the Associate’s technical work, professional development, and career aspirations. Your role is to help the Associate clarify their own thinking, identify the issues important to them within any topic, and create a clear path forward. Goal setting is, in fact, one topic to cover. Processing feedback is another. By building skills in several key areas — **listening**, **questioning**, and **structuring conversations** — you can increase the effectiveness of your mentoring conversations, yielding better results for both of you.

**Listening**

Good listening is about understanding the perspective of another first before seeking to be understood. To build **listening skills**, start first with intent. Consider the distinctions of listening to “win,” “fix,” or “learn.” When we listen to “win,” we are primarily gathering information that may be used to reinforce our own position or opinion and convince others of its merit. When we listen to “fix,” we are listening for the purposes of providing a solution. Our focus is on diagnosing a problem, making connections to related situations or information, and formulating a solution. When we listen to “learn,” our focus is on understanding the issue at hand fully, from the other person’s perspective. For many of us with scientific training, listening to fix comes very naturally. It is highly recommended that mentors develop a habit of listening to learn first, to gain a full understanding of the situation including its nuances and emotional components before moving into solution mode if appropriate.

In most mentoring conversations, you should avoid listening to win. However, there may be situations where you are confident it is in the best interest of the Associate to convince them of your position, for example, if you observe an Associate engaging in unsafe work practices. Or perhaps when faced with a talented, competent, and well-prepared Associate who lacks the confidence to pursue a great opportunity. Under these circumstances, it might be appropriate to listen to win.

*To gain a more in-depth understanding of listening to win, fix, and learn, watch the video cited in reference 10 and practice listening to learn.*
While it may be easy to intend to listen to learn, actually doing it can be more challenging. Developing these six skills of active listening can help:\textsuperscript{11,12}

1. **Pay attention:** Focus on the moment; allow time and opportunity for your mentee to speak, think, and respond to your questions; convey interest and respect through your body language; and observe your mentee carefully to pick up verbal and nonverbal cues during the conversation.

2. **Withhold judgment:** Keep an open mind, remembering that your intent is to understand the issue from your mentee’s perspective – whether you agree with that perspective or not. Hold back criticism. Avoid arguing or pushing your perspective from the start.

3. **Reflect:** Do not assume you understand what your mentee intends to communicate, periodically recap your mentee’s key points to confirm what you are hearing, and reflect back what you are hearing about your mentee’s thoughts and feelings as well as the information they are sharing.

4. **Clarify:** Ask questions to help you understand any issues that seem unclear or ambiguous (see below for questioning tips).

5. **Summarize:** As the conversation proceeds, summarize key points to ensure you understand or agree – or ask your mentee to do so.

6. **Share:** Once you’ve gained a full understanding of your mentee’s feelings and perspective, begin to introduce your own ideas, feelings, and suggestions; address concerns or share relevant experience.

The short videos cited in reference 12 offer a practical, if comical, demonstration of many of these skills. See how many of the six key active listening skills you can identify in each of the videos. Further self-study using the resources cited in reference 11 is highly recommended and will help you learn more about active listening, assess and address your own listening challenges, and build listening skills.

**Questioning**

Effective questioning skills are another core competency of great mentors. Understanding different types of mentoring questions and matching your question to the situation are at the heart of this. Good questioning skills are also linked to active listening. They often play a big part in diagnosing problems when listening to fix.

Four important types of mentoring questions\textsuperscript{13,12} are: open questions, clarifying questions, filtering questions, and probing questions.

1. **Open questions** are used to encourage people to share and expand on their ideas or perspective, inviting the maximum response.
   
   For example: “What do you find appealing about an academic career?”

2. **Clarifying questions** are used to ensure understanding.
   
   For example: “What do you mean by ‘intellectual freedom’?”
3. **Probing questions** are used to invite reflection, introduce new ideas, or link information from different parts of the conversation together to create new insights. They are usually in the form of an open question and may incorporate an element of challenge.

   For example: “If R&D funding trends imposed practical constraints on the research areas you could realistically hope to pursue, would you feel that your intellectual freedom was compromised?”

4. **Filtering questions** are used to sort through or prioritize issues or options. They can be used to help focus a conversation or begin to identify next steps.

   For example: “If you had to choose, would you say working closely with students or having intellectual freedom was your most important criteria for selecting a career path?”

In the course of a mentoring conversation on any topic, you are likely to use several types of questions. In general, it is good practice to start with open and clarifying questions to ensure you understand the situation before moving on to probing and filtering questions. You may go through several cycles of diverging with open questions and converging with filtering questions before any given issue is resolved.

Formulating great coaching questions is an important skill for mentors. You might find it helpful to practice, using some of the great questions compiled by the Coaches Training Institute. Many of these are suitable for almost any mentoring situation. Note how short and simple they are. Another great resource is the book *The Art of Asking Essential Questions*, which includes targeted questions for some situations commonly encountered in research endeavors.

Developing great questioning technique involves more than just asking questions. A very critical element of the skill is getting comfortable with **silence**. The pause after you’ve asked a question, to allow your mentee time to consider the question and think before responding, is just as important as asking a good question. Sit quietly and attentively after you’ve asked a question and resist the temptation to rush in and fill the silence with further clarification or additional information, even if your mentee does not respond right away.

Good questioning technique also involves asking questions one at a time. If you ask several without allowing time for a response in between, you may create confusion, accidentally divert attention to a lesser issue, or inadvertently narrow the conversation prematurely. For example, your mentee’s response is likely to be different if you say:

   “What do you find appealing about an academic career? Is it the interaction with students or the security of tenure? Or perhaps you enjoy living in a university town?” [pause]

versus:

   “What do you find appealing about an academic career?” [pause]

In the first case, your mentee is likely to respond to the second or third question, rather than sharing their broader perspective.
As you develop your questioning techniques, there are a few behaviors to avoid (or use sparingly). When your aim is to help a mentee develop skills, avoid asking questions that lend themselves to “yes or no” answers. For example, if you are trying to help a mentee learn about the relative merits of publishing in various journals in your field, “What are your thoughts on target journals for publishing this work?” is far more likely to shed light on your mentee’s perspectives and provide mentoring openings than, “Do you want to publish this work in the Journal of Applied Physics?” The second question will either get a quick affirmative or start a very narrow discussion on the suitability of the work for the Journal of Applied Physics.

Leading questions should also be avoided. This is really a statement disguised as a question, rather than a genuine question borne of curiosity and a desire to learn. For example, “You agree that the Journal of Applied Physics is the best journal for publishing this work, right?” is a leading question because embedded within it is a suggestion. Not every Associate faced with this question from their Adviser would feel comfortable saying “no” if they disagreed. Instead, you could say: “I think the Journal of Applied Physics could be a good choice for publishing this work. What other options could we consider?” Or simply revert back to an open question like “What journals could we consider for publishing this work?”

One small change that will have a big and positive impact on your mentoring performance is to avoid questions that start with “Why.” This may seem counter-intuitive, given your scientific training. Consider, however, the following pairs of questions:

“Why do you want to go to the American Chemical Society Meeting?” versus “What do you hope to gain by attending the American Chemical Society Meeting?”

Or:

“Why is our department’s administrative assistant angry with you?” versus “What happened when you approached our administrative assistant?”

While you could use either question in each pair to open a conversation, the choices that start with “Why” are much more likely to put your mentee on the defensive and/or to narrowly focus the conversation. Asking a more open question will help you gain insight into your mentee’s perspective, paving the way for a constructive discussion.

**Structuring Conversations**

Adding a bit of structure to your mentoring conversations can help to ensure they are purposeful as well as interesting. A few modifications to your approach – especially at the beginning and end of a conversation – can increase impact and generate forward momentum.
By default, a typical 1-hour mentoring meeting is likely to start with less than 5 minutes of check-in and finding a meeting topic, followed by 50+ minutes of conversation and a few minutes of wrap-up. As a best practice, we recommend restructuring your time to look something like this:

First, an agenda should be set. Under most circumstances, it should be a mentee-driven agenda. As the conversation starts, ask your mentee to share the topics they would like to discuss. If this conversation is one step in an on-going discussion or occurs at a recurring mentoring meeting, be sure to ask about progress since your last conversation. Knowing that you will ask helps your mentee stay accountable to the actions they chose during your last discussion.

Next, prioritize. If your mentee has proposed several topics, ask which is the most important and be sure to discuss this first. Then, spend some time listening to learn as you clarify the priority topic(s). It is critically important to understand what your mentee would like to get from the conversation before you forge ahead. Most of us have experienced a conversation with someone that was well-intended, yet unhelpful, because they launched into offering advice and suggestions without first understanding what we were asking. You want to avoid this time-wasting mistake.

Aim to fully understand both the discussion topic and what your mentee wants from the discussion. Use open and clarifying questions. If your mentee has encountered an obstacle, are they looking to brainstorm on a new direction – or have they already decided on a new direction and instead want help refining their approach? Does the mentee want to know what you would do, or do they want your help identifying important factors to consider? Does your mentee want to learn about government careers by hearing about your experience, or do they want your help finding a few recently hired, early-career scientists to learn from? Take care not to assume that you already know what your mentee needs from you when their topic is first shared. Use your active listening skills to get a full picture and to pick up cues on how your mentee feels about the situation before you decide how you can help. For a description of several advising approaches, see the table entitled “What Advisers Can Do” in the article “The Art of Giving and Receiving Advice.”

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*This general time allocation is patterned after practices taught by the Coaches Training Institute. You can scale the time allocation to match your preferred meeting time.*
Only after you have prioritized, gained a good understanding of the topic, and have a clear picture of how you can help your mentee is it appropriate to move on to processing. This part of the conversation will likely feel more natural and less structured, but be mindful of your approach. If your mentee has asked for help choosing a career direction – an answer that must come from within – use a lot of open and probing questions. You might also summarize themes you hear in their responses to your questions and reflect back their own feelings about various options. If your mentee wants to brainstorm ideas for resolving a technical problem, you might ask a lot of clarifying questions to help you understand the problem and a lot of filtering questions once a number of possibilities emerge. You might also offer your own ideas and suggestions, after making sure that’s what your mentee would like from you. You might say something like “Would it be helpful if I shared a few ideas?” as a prelude.

No matter what you discuss, strive to stay focused on your mentee’s priorities and desired outcomes for the conversation. Check in periodically during the processing phase to make sure your mentee feels the conversation is serving their needs, especially if it has moved off on a tangent – or if you notice you are doing most of the talking.

The final stages of a structured, purposeful mentoring conversation are about working with what has been learned so far to keep things moving forward – even if you have not had time to finish processing. Discuss next steps or actions that could be taken before your next conversation. Be sure to focus not only on identifying actions, but also on the approach and what resources might be needed. For example, if you have discussed choosing a career direction, next steps might include researching top employers in a targeted geographic location or interviewing successful individuals who have chosen a particular path. You and your mentee might even discuss potential sources of employer information or specific individuals to interview. In either case, ask clarifying and filtering questions coupled with careful active listening. Remember that it is ultimately up to your mentee, not to you, to decide what they can realistically accomplish before you meet again. Encourage your mentee to capture their commitments in writing. This helps further clarify the actions and reminds you of what to check in on at the start of your next discussion.

Always close your conversation by asking your mentee to reflect on what was most helpful. This serves two purposes. It is a quick way to help your mentee crystallize what they learned from the discussion so that they are more likely to remember it. It is also important feedback for you. Hearing what resonated with your mentee will help you learn how to better mentor this individual.

Structuring conversations will add impact by guiding you in how to manage time, use your listening and questioning skills effectively, and create accountability. You may find it helpful to refer to the summary in Appendix A.

IV. Feedback

Delivering helpful developmental feedback is one of the most important mentoring skills for Advisers to master. In a recent postdoctoral Associate focus group conducted by the author, it was called out
as one of the most critical skills to include in Adviser training. Associates know they need feedback to develop professionally, both to help them understand what they are doing well and to help them correct mistakes and improve performance. Weaving this feedback into your advising interactions, effectively and appropriately, is a gift that you can offer.

**Integrating Feedback into Mentoring Relationships**

Sharing feedback should be a natural part of your mentoring relationship. It is important to consider not only delivering the message, but also creating the conditions for it to be received well. The trust that you have earned in the early stages of the relationship – by being trustworthy, transparent, honest, forthright, and accountable – is the foundation. Other ways to cultivate conditions in which your feedback will be welcomed and received include: offering developmental feedback, taking care to share at least as much positive feedback as corrective feedback, delivering feedback with context and discernment, and being sensitive to each Associate’s individual predispositions to receiving feedback.

In mentoring, it is offering developmental feedback that is so critical. The intention behind developmental feedback is to help another person grow. Other messages aimed at changing behavior are also part of working relationships; it is important for mentors to be able to distinguish between these. For example, the statement: “When you start your workday at 9:00 am it is difficult for me to fit our progress meetings into my schedule” is not developmental feedback (though it could be a good way to open a negotiation on mutually convenient scheduling.) Under different circumstances, the statement: “When you arrive at 9:15 am for our 9:00 am meeting it gives me the impression that you are disrespectful of my time” could be part of a developmental feedback message about professional behavior. Being mindful of your role in supporting a mentee’s growth and clear on the potential for learning when framing a message will help you offer feedback with developmental benefits.

For many people, the word “feedback” immediately conjures up negative associations, but feedback should include positive and encouraging messages, too. These help build confidence and capability by highlighting strengths and good behaviors. There is much to be gained in mentoring partnerships by being generous with positive feedback. It is an effective way to gain trust with a new mentee, setting the expectation that frequent feedback will be part of your interactions. It is also easier to master the basic “how-to’s” of crafting and delivering developmental feedback by practicing with positive messages. When feedback aimed at correcting or improving performance is needed, a mentee accustomed to receiving positive and encouraging feedback from you will be more receptive, knowing that you have their best interests at heart.

When delivering developmental feedback, especially on a complex task, setting context and being discerning can help the receiver absorb your message. To illustrate these points, let’s take two examples from advising mentees on communicating scientific work.

In the first example, imagine that you have just attended a mentee’s presentation. The presentation was well organized, logically sound and had high technical merit. However, there were typos and
grammatical errors on many of the slides, and some of the type was too small to read. You plan to offer developmental feedback on this. In this scenario, set context for your feedback by sharing your overall impression first, noting that the substance of the presentation was very good and the feedback you have to offer is stylistic and grammatical. Then offer your comments on improvements. By setting context first, you help your mentee put the feedback into perspective. You also avoid a situation in which a mentee who has actually done quite well might be inadvertently left feeling demoralized because your conversation focused exclusively on mistakes.

In the second instance, imagine that you have just reviewed the first draft of a paper your mentee is preparing for publication. The paper has a fair number of grammatical errors, the figures lack error bars, and some references are not formatted properly – all essentially cosmetic or stylistic errors. In addition, your mentee has drawn some conclusions that are not supported by their data and has failed to consider the implications of a highly relevant body of prior work – issues related to the technical substance of the paper. You may be tempted to offer your feedback all at once, or to go through the draft sequentially, pointing out your concerns as they arise. However, in this scenario, using discernment will likely serve you better. Your mentee can only absorb so much feedback at a time, and the technical substance of the work is the higher concern. In setting context, you can share that you noted issues related to both technical content and style. In using discernment, you could note that you feel the issues of technical content are more important and will focus your feedback there.

Regardless of the nature of the message, remember that each Associate is an individual – and will respond to feedback in their own way. Some people are naturally very uncomfortable giving and receiving feedback. Others may have had prior bad experiences. As mentioned in Mentoring Guide #2, it is a best practice to talk with your mentee about giving and receiving feedback during the onboarding process. This creates the opportunity to learn about any sensitivities well before it is time to deliver feedback. It also helps if you frequently invite (and take) feedback about your own performance as an Adviser or the effectiveness of your advising relationship. You might ask: “What am I doing well? What helps you the most?” and/or “What could I be doing more of, less of, or better?” Modeling the behavior helps make requesting, offering, and receiving feedback feel like a normal part of mentoring conversations and may help your mentee gain comfort with the process. You are likely to receive some feedback that will help you develop as an Adviser, too!

**Delivering Feedback Messages Effectively**

These four steps will help you to skillfully deliver feedback:18,19

1. Ask permission
2. Describe the specific behavior you observed and the specific situation in which it took place
3. Convey the impact of the behavior
4. Close with a question to invite discussion

As an example, imagine you want to offer feedback to an Associate on a presentation they have recently given to your division. You might use the steps above to share something like this:

“Do you have a few minutes? I’d like to offer a few thoughts on your division seminar.”
Yesterday, during your presentation, your delivery of the material was superb. The cadence with which you delivered it was just right, not too fast and not too slow. The pauses you built in were helpful in bringing out questions at appropriate times and triggering discussion on the impact of your findings. (2)

I was really impressed. Even though I’m familiar with the work, I gained a deeper appreciation for its importance as a result of the clear and succinct way you shared the material. I also learned a lot from the discussion. (3)

“How did you feel about it? [and/or] Would it be helpful to discuss some things that you did in preparation that contributed to your success?” (4)

The importance of being specific in describing the behavior cannot be emphasized enough. Consider, for example, if you had simply said, “Great job on your presentation!” While this comment is certainly encouraging, it does nothing to clarify what your mentee did well and will want to be sure to do again.

The formula applies for constructive feedback too. Consider the following:

“Do you have a few minutes? I’d like to offer a few thoughts on your division seminar. (1)

Yesterday, during your presentation, your delivery of the material felt very rushed. You moved very quickly from one section to the next without pausing or summarizing, which made it difficult to ask questions. (2)

I had a hard time absorbing the material you were presenting because of the pace. I was also concerned for you, because you seemed nervous and uncomfortable, and I know that you put a lot of time and work into preparing your slides. (3)

How did you feel about it? [and/or] Would it be helpful to discuss some techniques for pacing presentations?” (4)

Notice that in step 3, the impact that is described is the impact on you. This is a best practice; generalizations such as “the whole audience was having difficulty following” are easier to reject and also may be completely unfair (you could not possibly know what everyone in the audience was thinking).

Another important feature of an effective feedback message is that any judgments embedded are made on the behavior, not on the person. For example, choose “your delivery of the material felt rushed,” instead of “you speak too quickly.” A focus on behavior, which can be changed, is consistent with the intent to offer feedback for the sole purpose of helping your mentee develop.

The goal of step 4, ending with a question, is to provide an opening for a mentoring conversation and to remind your mentee that you are there to help and support them. Depending on the person and the situation, your mentee might be ready to have this conversation immediately after receiving your feedback—or might need some time to reflect and process first.
For those wishing to learn more about giving feedback effectively, including crafting messages and delivery techniques, the booklet *Feedback That Works*\textsuperscript{20} is an excellent resource.

**Planning Feedback Conversations**

One final and important note about delivering effective feedback: do not forget to consider the *when, where and how* of your approach. Feedback is best delivered in a timely manner, while the details of the situation and behavior are still fresh. For example, in the scenario posed above, the discussion is likely to be richer and more useful if you share your thoughts within a day or so of the presentation. It is also important to deliver feedback only when you will not be rushed. Remember, a lot of the benefit comes from the follow-up conversation, so plan to share your feedback when you have enough time for a discussion. It is unfair and unkind to deliver a difficult message and then rush off to attend to other business. If you suspect your message may be very upsetting your mentee, try to find a time when your mentee is not likely to have another meeting shortly thereafter.

The venue for feedback conversations is another important consideration, particularly if you plan to deliver a difficult message. Deliver your feedback in person if you can, ideally in a collaborative setting such as sitting side-by-side at a table. If you are delivering feedback remotely, opt for video conferencing. Ensure that your workstation is set up to allow you to look directly at the camera with lighting that allows your mentee to see your face clearly. Whether speaking in-person or remotely, choose a location that affords privacy and limits distractions. It is important to eliminate concerns about others overhearing the conversation and to give your mentee your undivided attention.

Above all, do not lose sight of humanity when delivering constructive feedback. Practice empathy, remembering that we all make mistakes as we learn and that sometimes growth can be painful. Demonstrate respect for your mentee by being willing to offer your feedback directly, even when it may be difficult for you. By holding yourself accountable to delivering all feedback messages in a way that is supportive, respectful, and kind, you offer your mentee the opportunity to learn from successes and failures and to further develop into the impressive, successful professionals that all NRC Associates have the potential to become.

For those interested in learning more about empathy, the videos featuring Brene Brown and Simon Sinek are highly recommended.\textsuperscript{21}

**V. Summary**

In this third Mentoring Guide, we focused on the middle stage of an NRC Advising relationship, which typically represents the majority of your time together. We touched on practices that mentors can use to help their mentees stay focused, sustain progress, and grow as professionals. In addition, we pointed to core skills that help mentors develop competence in the “how” of these practices. For goal setting, we highlighted how mentors can help Associates refine and clarify their goals, noting also that regularly checking in on goals can create a sense of accountability. We also covered practices that create purposeful, momentum-sustaining, mentoring conversations; adding structure,
and using both active listening and effective questioning techniques. Finally, we discussed feedback: why it is so important, how it can be integrated, techniques for skillful delivery, and how to plan for a conversation.

The content of this Guide emphasizes specific mentoring skills. Important techniques were described, with examples, to demonstrate their relevance. Mastering these skills, however, can be accomplished only through practice. Opportunities for self-study are highlighted within the Guide along with associated supplemental references for those who wish to work on their skills independently.

For a deeper dive into mentoring core skills, techniques, or perspectives, please see the companion document NRC Mentoring Guides: Resources for Self-Study.

Comments and feedback are welcome and may be sent to Nora Beck Tan (nora@illuminaexecutive.com).

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APPENDIX A. Summary – Structured Mentoring Conversations, with intent listening & questioning techniques

Structured Mentoring Conversations: Putting It All Together

**Reflect on Learning**
- Powerful Questions
  - What is one thing you are taking away from today?
  - What stands out from our conversation?
- Listen to Learn, Active Listening (Summarize)
- Ask for feedback

**Check in & Set Agenda**
- Receive (or ask for) updates since the last time
- Identify topics for discussion and set agenda
- Listen to Learn, Active Listening
- Powerful Questions (open, divergent), such as...
  - What’s happened since we last met?
  - What would you like cover today?
  - What else?

**Plan Actions & Discuss Next Steps**
- Active Listening
- Powerful Questions (converge, filter)
  - What will you do next?
  - What is your top priority?
  - What do you need to move forward?
  - Is anything still unclear?
  - Did you get what you needed?
- Help your mentee to decide which actions to work on for next time

**Clarify Topic(s), Priorities & Approach**
- Listen to Learn, Active Listening
- Powerful Questions (open & clarifying, divergent & convergent), such as...
  - What’s important about (topic)?
  - Can you be more specific?
  - Can you share an example?
  - Which topic feels the most important?
  - Where shall we start?
  - What would you like from this conversation?
- Understand what success looks like for this conversation (refer to “What Advisers Can Do” – Garvin & Margolis, if needed)

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REFERENCES AND NOTES

1 Note: Throughout this document, the terms “postdoctoral researcher,” “NRC Associate,” “Research Associate,” “Advisee,” and “Mentee” will be used interchangeably to refer to the NRC Postdoctoral Research Associates. The terms “NRC Adviser,” “Adviser,” and “Mentor” will be used interchangeably to refer to advisers of NRC Postdoctoral Research Associates, who are also expected to be mentors to these individuals.


3 Adapted from Diaspora IdEA. (2015, January 22). Intro to micromentor for mentors [Video]. YouTube. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=azDMOJqyv3g


6 Note: Refer to Mentoring Guide #1 for a description of the facets of each of these areas and the associated roles of mentors.

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