

Constructive Feedback Guide

Module 4.9 — Mentoring Others: The SBI Model and Five Failure Modes

What Makes Feedback Useful

Strong feedback is a skill — as learnable as any other advocacy skill, and just as rare. Useful feedback is specific (you can act on it), honest (it doesn't soften truth into uselessness), and growth-oriented (it develops capacity, not just corrects behavior). No softening, no false praise, no brutality.

The SBI Model (Situation – Behavior – Impact)

Adapted for advocacy mentoring. The SBI model prevents feedback from becoming personal or vague:

Element	What to Say	Example
S — Situation	Name the specific moment or context	Not: 'You always do this.' Yes: 'In the city council testimony last Tuesday...'
B — Behavior	Describe the observable behavior — not the interpretation, not the intent	Not: 'You seemed nervous.' Yes: 'You paused for 8 seconds before answering the first question.'
I — Impact	Describe the concrete effect — on the audience, the message, the outcome	Not: 'That didn't land well.' Yes: 'The pause shifted the room's attention from your content to your discomfort, and the council chair moved on faster than you needed.'
+ Growth	Offer a specific, actionable alternative or development focus	Not: 'Practice more.' Yes: 'Before your next testimony, do three run-throughs at full pace with someone interrupting you at random. That's what you're preparing for.'

Five Failure Modes of Mentoring Feedback

Failure Mode	What It Looks Like	Example	Correction
1. Too Soft	Softening honest feedback into meaninglessness to protect the mentee's feelings	'You did really well, just maybe think about the pacing a little bit...'	Be honest. If it didn't work, say so — specifically and kindly. Softened feedback fails the mentee.
2. Too Vague	Feedback that identifies the problem but gives the mentee nothing to act on	'You need to be more confident' / 'Your message wasn't clear'	Translate every vague observation into a specific, nameable behavior they can change.
3. Too Personal	Feedback that slides from behavior to identity or character	'You're not a natural speaker' / 'You're too emotional for this kind of work'	Always behavior, never character. They can change behavior. They can't change who they are.
4. Too Prescriptive	Telling the mentee exactly how to do it your way, rather than developing their judgment	'Here's what I would have said: [script].' Then assigning your answer.	Your job is to develop their judgment, not replicate your approach. Ask: 'What do you think would have worked better?'

5. Too Comparative	Measuring the mentee against you or another advocate at a different development stage	'When I was at your level, I was already doing X.'	Compare mentees only to themselves and to the specific goals they're working toward.
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Feedback Preparation Checklist

Check	Status
Is this feedback based on a specific, observable behavior?	Y / N
Can I name the situation (when, where)?	Y / N
Can I name the impact (what actually happened as a result)?	Y / N
Am I staying with behavior, not character or intent?	Y / N
Do I have a specific, actionable growth suggestion?	Y / N
Is this honest — not softened into uselessness?	Y / N
Am I ready for the mentee to push back, and will I hold the observation?	Y / N