

CHALLENGING FEEDBACK CONVERSATIONS

PRINCIPLES OF MANAGEMENT

Giving feedback does not always feel comfortable, especially feedback on areas for critical improvement. However, this kind of feedback often holds the most value for student learning when delivered appropriately.

1. Prepare for the conversation

Be clear on the following before initiating a conversation with a student:

1. Proficiency that needs to be addressed (limit to no more than 2 per conversation)
2. Examples of suboptimal practice of the proficiency (limit to 2 factual examples per proficiency)
3. The neutral phrasing you will need to initiate the feedback conversation

Instead of this...

"You weren't ready with your diet sheets and it delayed our assessment of two patients today. I gave you time to get ready this morning - your folder should have been prepared."

Say this...

"The diet sheets required to advise Mr Jones and Ms Ade were not on-hand when they were needed and this delayed the consults. Let's talk for 5 minutes about preparing for a day on the ward."

2. Stay neutral

Follow the short guide on www.dietitian.ie, [Giving Feedback](#), to structure the conversation. To sustain a neutral approach throughout the conversation, aim to:

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|---|--|
| 1. Keep your tone professional | <i>Your tone should not convey any strong emotion, positive or negative</i> |
| 2. Reduce pronouns | <i>Limit the use of 'you', e.g. you did, you didn't, you should have</i> |
| 3. Stick to the facts | <i>Don't expound imaginary consequences. Facts keep you on track</i> |
| 4. Avoid getting lost in little details | <i>Come back to the mandatory standard if the exchange goes off-track</i> |
| 5. Don't over-explain | <i>Don't repeat yourself - ask the student to summarise key points instead</i> |

3. Remember the goal of the conversation

The goal of feedback is to help a student to:

- Understand how their performance compares to the expected standard
- Identify concrete ways to improve on suboptimal practices and maintain existing good practices

Don't make a student's performance personal, e.g. I told you this already / Were you listening when I..., as this only heightens emotion and defensiveness, and makes the conversation longer and less helpful.

Long repetitive conversations only dilute your messaging and waste time. Commit to adhering to the time set to keep the conversation focused towards identifying concrete ways to improve performance.



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SAMPLE SCENARIOS

If a feedback conversation is approaching its time boundary

Gently stop the conversation to inform the student that you are close to time. The **student can help conclude** the conversation if you:

1. **Ask the student to summarise the actions discussed to promote their progress**
2. **Make the student aware of the next opportunity they will have to implement the actions**
3. **Clarify the next opportunity for further questions and end the conversation**

For example

Student: I think I was a bit tired from working at the weekend and I just hadn't the time to sort -

Dietitian: Sorry to interrupt, Zoe, but I can see that we're coming to time and I want you to pop back up to the ward before finishing today. I understand that things are busy outside of placement and that this might have affected performance this week. To be sure that you're clear on the actions that will help address this matter, can you summarise in 2 or 3 points what we've agreed today?

Student: [Summarises]

Dietitian: Yes, I think we're on the same page, which is great. We'll be advising two more patients tomorrow, so you'll have a chance to implement what we've talked about then, and if you have any further questions, we'll discuss them tomorrow. How does that sound?

If a feedback conversation stalls because a student is defensive

Students sometimes feel the need to over-explain or excuse suboptimal practices. You must **retain authority** and move the conversation to its conclusion. The student can help with this if you:

1. **Avoid getting mired in the little details or becoming defensive yourself**
2. **Boundary the remaining conversation to actions-only**
3. **Ask the student to summarise the plan**

For example

Student: I only did that because that was how my PE last week did it. When I came in on Monday we went straight to the ward and I wasn't shown the way you like to do that. I haven't been getting all my breaks or white time and that's why I didn't have time to review the notes you gave me -

Dietitian: Okay, so I'm going to stop you there so we can bring this back to what needs to be done to improve your practice. The standard of diet history-taking for the patients yesterday and today has not been in line with the standard we're working towards - we've already identified where there were gaps. We'll spend our remaining time focusing on actions you can take to become more consistent with this skill. What can you do to help remind yourself to ask about fluid intake?



If a feedback conversation stalls because a student becomes tearful

Students generally don't want to get upset in front of a PE or to spend a prolonged amount of time with a PE while upset. The feedback conversation can be progressed if you:

1. **Ask the student if they understand the points you have made so far**
2. **Contextualise the feedback in terms of overall progress**
3. **Offer to leave the room for 5 minutes to give them time to compose themselves**
4. **Clarify when you will talk again if it is best to postpone the remainder of the conversation**

For example

Dietitian: I can see you're upset. Do you understand the points I've made so far?

Student: Yeah, I know, it's just that I've been trying really hard and I feel like I've gone backwards this week.

Dietitian: There are lots of skills that are on-track - steps 1, 5, and 6 of the assessment all went very well with these patients. The biochemistry for these patient types is different to what you might have seen so far on placement, so it's an area that just needs more attention this week.

Student: Yeah, I know, I was just hoping to get a 'yes' for steps 1-6 on my assessment form this week.

Dietitian: I understand that it feels frustrating, but getting different kinds of exposure is what will enhance your skills and confidence in the long run, and you're still on track with the assessment form, regardless of how this proficiency is marked this week. I can see you're still a bit upset - would you like 5 minutes alone to yourself before we continue?

Student: No, no, I'm okay. We can continue, sorry.

Dietitian: No need to apologise, honestly. Let's think of a couple of actions we can take to help you make progress with this skill, okay?

Having a feedback conversation on behaviour

It can be difficult to initiate feedback on behaviour. The steps below can help with this.

1. **Describe the behaviour in a neutral tone using only facts**
2. **Avoid explaining the behaviour to the student in the first instance, i.e. don't talk at them**
3. **Ask the student to describe their behaviour to hold them accountable. Don't fill any silences here**

e.g. I notice you checked your phone while I was speaking just now. How do you think I might interpret that action?

e.g. You yawned twice while I was explaining this. What message might a colleague get from that, do you think?

e.g. You didn't offer to assist with the room set-up. How might that be interpreted in the context of teamwork?

e.g. Can I ask how you would describe the tone in which you spoke to the nurse just now?