



Feedback exercises

Supervising PhD students

1. Slow mover

Your PhD student is working on his first paper. The work is going slowly, though, because he keeps rescheduling agreements you've made. This is annoying you. What's more, you feel like he is not a great talent at writing and that these agreements are essential to keep him moving forward. After a first draft that took forever to achieve, a month has now passed without any new texts from him. He has postponed this appointment twice already and you have had enough.

You decide to say something about the situation that will motivate him to improve his conduct. How do you formulate your feedback?

2. Present feedback

Your PhD student is feeling insecure about the presentation she will be giving for a department meeting in the near future. She has asked you to give her some feedback on her trial presentation that she has organised a week before the meeting.

During the presentation you notice the following: at first she is talking quickly and nervously and fiddling with the remote for the PowerPoint. The slides are very clear with exactly the right amount of text, with a pleasant lay out. After a while she starts talking more calmly. The next piece is about her results and you can see her enthusiasm. She is radiant. She shows you the results with lots of hand gestures and eye contact. You notice at that point that her English pronunciation is not perfect but that can be worked on. The presentation ends with a comment regarding her follow-up research that you disagree with.

How do you formulate your feedback to this presentation?

3. Messy lab

You are worried about your PhD student. He only just started but he comes across to you as rather asocial. The lab is a mess after he has been working, he doesn't clean up his things and is short with the head of the lab when she reprimands him. This is also making him unpopular with his colleagues and the students who use the lab. The other day you yourself had to deal with the big mess he had left behind.

You decide to have a meeting to discuss this problem. How do you formulate your feedback?

4. Cum Laude?

Your PhD student has been working for over a year now and you sense you have 'gold' on your hands. She is analytically razor sharp, good at separating primary from secondary issues and works hard. She has already completed a first article and is working on her second. Gaining her PhD in four years seems entirely feasible. She is justifiably relaxed and self confident about this; she would like to take on more teaching. She also has a busy social life. You feel like this PhD student could achieve even more: publications in A journals, a research internship abroad or maybe even a cum laude accolade (with a view to a NWO stipend). You want to encourage her to get the most out of this PhD.

You decide to have a meeting to talk about this. You would like to keep the meeting business-like. How do you formulate your feedback?

5. An unguided missile

You feel like your PhD student wants nothing more than to get on things on her own. She is very independent and knows what she wants. Rarely does she ask you for feedback, and the feedback that you do give her doesn't seem to register. This is especially noticeable in the way she works on her papers. She has barely done anything with the suggestions you made to give the paper she is currently working on more focus. In your opinion the paper lacks clear direction, it's going off in all directions. This is despite the fact that her aim is to combine all the different secondary projects together in this paper. Moreover she did visit the promotor recently to ask her what she thought of the paper.

You decide to have a meeting to discuss this. How do you formulate your feedback?

6. More input

Your PhD student has been working for about two years now and you think it is about time he contributed more to the content. He follows the project proposal that you wrote pretty well, but you also expect him to contribute his own input to the project. In the first article there was a lack of his own creative contributions in the discourse, so you gave him some ideas as suggestions, which he immediately used. Now he has started on a second article and you feel it is time he showed some more of his own input. Increasingly you wonder what moves him. You are not sure if he wants to continue as a researcher after obtaining his PhD, but you definitely don't see it happening if he continues as he is.

A meeting to discuss the set-up of this second article is scheduled soon. You decide to give him feedback about his own contribution. How do you formulate your feedback?