A medical student’s guide to feedback-seeking

1. Preparing to receive feedback-

It is important to nourish a positive relationship with the feedback provider and let them know that you are open to any type of feedback and looking for ways to improve. This process begins before any formal feedback. Part of this process is becoming emotionally ready for negative feedback and reflecting on how critical feedback can help accomplish your goals as a medical student.

1. **Consider the feedback provider’s personality and initial interactions with them to assess the best ways to seek feedback**
* Assess the feedback provider’s openness to giving feedback, their general approachability, and how they initially choose to give feedback. This is a helpful step towards determining the best approach for eliciting feedback from that person [1] [2] [3] [4].
1. **Foster a positive, healthy environment with the feedback provider that focuses on your common goal and recognizes inevitable differences between you.**
* Establish a positive, trusting environment between yourself and the feedback provider. Cultivate this environment by acknowledging generational differences, trying to understand the supervisor’s perspective, and separating feedback giver from content [5] [6] [7].
1. **Proactively communicate with feedback provider about wanting honest feedback, setting it as a priority in your relationship with them.**
* Be proactive and seek feedback early. Tell your supervisors that your school requires feedback and that you’re open to negative feedback, as this is a crucial step to develop a fruitful feedback relationship with that person [5] [8].
1. **Open yourself to feedback from people other than a feedback provider in order to learn about other’s perceptions of your work**
* Medicine is a team sport. Start a feedback loop with other health professionals or colleagues to ensure that you are doing everything possible to help this team function. For example, many residents identify their co-residents as important suppliers of feedback [9] [4] [10].
1. **Be ready to receive feedback at many different times in many different formats** [5][4]
* In the busy setting of a clinic, feedback will be offered at different times, from various people, and with variable effectiveness. Always be ready to receive feedback, positive or negative, in order to nourish a relationship built on communication [5][4]**.**
1. **Assess your strengths and weaknesses while acknowledging you aren’t conscious of all of them. Know the flawed process of self-assessment.**
* Prior to receiving feedback, take inventory on your perceived strengths and weaknesses in a setting. Acknowledge that self-assessment is flawed and according to Johari’s window you can never be aware of all strengths and weaknesses [5] [5] [10] [11].

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1. **Take your study seriously and acknowledge that feedback can help you achieve your goals**
* Feedback is an effective catalyst of change when the receiver understands how it relates to their improvement. Keep professional goals in mind and take your training seriously so that you’re more ready to use feedback in a constructive way [7] [4].
1. The Art of Asking for and Receiving Feedback

The relationship with a feedback provider is a crucial foundation for effective feedback, but this category focuses on the actual process of eliciting feedback. It is important to learn feedback skills in order to maximize the helpful feedback you receive and ensure that the feedback provider remains open to giving more in the future.

1. **Seek brief, informal coaching moments by asking consistently for feedback. Be proactive about asking!**
* Chop feedback into more manageable chunks to enhance specificity and improve feedback relationships [9] [4]
1. **When possible, establish upfront and early a specific time and individual meeting with your feedback provider to discuss feedback.**
* It may be difficult to deliver/receive effective feedback during the course of a day in a busy clinic. For this reason, it is often important to have established, individual feedback sessions to develop a feedback relationship [1] [12] [4].
1. **Give the feedback provider a list of learning objectives before meeting**
* Create a short list of goals and objectives (no more than 3-4) for yourself that primes instructors to observe you more closely and determine how they believe you could grow towards these goals [12].
1. **Practice indirect, non-inquiry methods for feedback such as priming feedback provider to provide feedback, praising feedback provider, and using critical reflection of your performance**
* If direct approaches to feedback feel unachievable, use indirect methods to help develop a feedback loop such as those below to seek feedback in alternative ways [4] [1] [13].
* Praising the feedback givers’ experience or expertise
* Prime the feedback provider by asking them to focus on specific behaviors before they observe you so they are prepared to provide feedback
* Use critical reflection (ex. “I felt like I did really poorly with \_\_\_\_\_\_”) to show that you perceive weaknesses in yourself and are focused on improvement
1. **Avoiding asking questions that have yes or no answers, start them with ‘how’ or ‘what’**
* Avoid non-specific feedback by asking questions that can’t be answered nonspecifically [9].
1. **Use questions such as “What’s one thing I should stop/keep/start doing” to ask questions that require specific answers.**
* Broad, non-specific feedback makes it much more difficult to develop a SMART (specific, measurable, achievable, and time-bound) action plan. Ask for specific action points to solicit feedback in a future-focused manner [9] [14].
1. **Focus on the future. Ask questions like “what can I do better going forward”? and** **present yourself as emotionally ready to accept feedback and move forward.**
* Shift the feedback conversation from judgment of past work to future improvement to demonstrate that you honestly care about the content of feedback because you want to be better [8] [2].
1. **Listen to the feedback provider words, tone, and body language to gain a more complete picture of what they’re communicating.**
* Listen thoughtfully to the person giving feedback by remaining alert and focused, making eye contact, receiving and interpreting nonverbal messages, and keeping an open mind. Careful listening improves the ability to interpret the feedback provider’s entire message [10] [15].
1. **Be receptive, not defensive. Receive all feedback openly while remaining physically and emotionally neutral.**
* Demonstrate openness and reject defensiveness while hearing feedback to maintain open feedback relationships. This is critical and very difficult. Not all feedback is helpful or correct, but acknowledging that you have a blind spot of awareness (Johari’s window) can help maintain emotional neutrality when receiving negative feedback [8] [10] [5] [15] [16].
1. **Demonstrate confidence to feedback provider by thanking them for positive feedback and being attentive to the details of positive feedback**
* Just as accepting negative feedback non-defensively nourishes a feedback relationship, signaling that you care about positive feedback shows that you are confident and appreciative of their perception of your strengths [5].
1. **In a non-defensive way, seek clarification and context of feedback by probing deeper, asking specific questions.**
* This step is potentially challenging due to the emotional nature of feedback, but it is very important to seek clarification and specific examples that form the basis of feedback. This is called “unpacking the label”. Make sure “unpacking the label” doesn’t come at the cost of your supervisor’s perception of your openness to receiving feedback by doing so tactfully and non-defensively. [9] [8] [10] [2] [7] [17] [5] [15]
* Ask “Can you explain what you mean by \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_?”, “How could I have been more \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ in that specific situation?” “What kinds of things should I do to make sure this doesn’t happen again?”
1. **Paraphrase your understanding of the feedback**
* Recap what you understand from the feedback to demonstrate your active listening and avoid miscommunication over the content of the feedback [15]
1. **Write down what they say**
* If appropriate, write down important points when hearing feedback. This process provides you something concrete to reflect on and can serve as the basis for a future action plan [8].
1. Reflecting on feedback and creating an action plan

Responding to feedback is perhaps the hardest and most important step in the process. This skill requires careful self-reflection and evaluation of the feedback presented to you, followed by synthesis of this information into an action plan.

1. **Balance being self-confident and humble when reflecting on feedback**.
* Overconfidence and lack of confidence are both unproductive when responding to feedback. It is important to neither disregard nor accept fully the feedback you receive without careful evaluation [7].
1. **Lean on your emotional support network after receiving critical feedback.**
* Create a dialogue with peers and people who you feel emotionally safe with to help you react to negative feedback and reflect on it [10] [7].
1. **Engage with emotions that arise from feedback, but reframe the feedback in constructive way that demonstrates your commitment to grow.**
* Emotional responses to feedback are a significant barrier to using that feedback productively. Chose to a) accept your emotions and name them, b) not overreact to them, and c) reframe them in a constructive way [10] [18] [5] [15].
1. **Develop a feedback filter. Carefully evaluate feedback, allowing time to process it, and determine what aspects you want to respond to.**
* Not all feedback given was mindfully considered, and even mindful feedback from trusted supervisors can be off-base or unhelpful. Evaluate and scrutinize feedback in order to determine its value to your goals [7] [17] [15]
1. **Keep your professional goals in mind when responding to feedback.**
* Always keep context in mind, and in most professional settings the goal of feedback is to take better care of our patients. These goals supersede any individual pearl of feedback, therefore it is important to frame feedback and recognize how it can help you achieve these goals [7]**.**
1. **Find common themes from feedback to develop a constructive learning plan.**
* After allowing appropriate time to reflect, it is important to synthesize feedback, come to conclusions, and define your plan to act on these conclusions [7] [10] [17]
1. **Create a S.M.A.R.T (specific, measurable, assignable, relevant, time-based) plan to implement helpful strategies from feedback and take small steps towards improvement.**
* Don’t attempt a complete overhaul of your professional life to adjust to feedback. Set SMART goals to break action towards improvement into manageable chunks [17] [10] [5] [12].

Summary:

By employing these tips for eliciting and receiving feedback, students can enhance their learning experience, improve their clinical skills, and develop more productive relationships with supervisors, colleagues and staff they work with. This guide provides a three step approach to improving feedback relationships with the ultimate goal of becoming better doctors and maximizing patient care.

# Works Cited

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Developed using Stufflebeam’s Checklists Development Checklist (CDC)