

Understanding Behavior

“Misbehavior” may be viewed as the signal that there is a breakdown in communication. Understanding the breakdown and remediating its cause is a much more healthy and effective approach to “misbehavior” than treating the person “misbehaving” as needing correction and /or punishment.

In mentoring, the breakdown in communication is often caused by a failure of the mentor to be fully aware of the importance of the following four areas:

1. Planning
2. Listening and Sharing Feelings
3. Transitioning
4. Processing

Planning is critical because it provides a framework within which the mentor and the mentee are able to relate with structure and boundaries that have been explored and agreed to before the outing. Planning allows the mentor and the mentee to explore the outing before hand, looking at all of the variables and coming to an agreement how best to deal with them. By contributing to the development of the plan, the mentee feels empowered and becomes invested with keeping to the plan. The plan also provides reference points as to time and as to the activity. For children from dysfunctional families, structure is never constant. Their lives are constantly changing due to the breakdown of the family structure. By following the steps within the plan, the steps become reference points that provide structure to the outing. Just by staying with the plan is a success, and communicates that both the mentor and the mentee can follow through with an agreed upon commitment which in turn fosters trust. Trust is the key element in any viable relationship, and planning and sticking to the plan fosters this.

Listening to the mentee communicates to the mentee that what they say is important. It further communicates that the mentor is respectful, encouraging, supportive, and safe. When the mentor shares feelings with the mentee, it communicates to the mentee that the mentor trusts the mentee. Appreciation and trust are two of the most critical elements in a healthy relationship. By listening, the mentor is able to come to an intuitive awareness of what the child means when they speak. The spoken word is often different than the intent of the speaker. Too often people take what is said literally, when in fact it means something quite different. The words of the mentor need to support the development of appreciation and trust.

Transitioning is one of the most critical elements of a successful outing. Allowing the child sufficient time to prepare to separate from an enjoyable activity, or to terminate an uncomfortable outing is very important. Children and adults require a period of rest between elements of an activity, and providing this allows the enthusiasm of the mentor and the mentee to be maintained throughout an outing.

Processing is different for everyone. People process information and experiences differently. It is critical to come to an awareness of how the mentee processes information and experiences so that the proper encouragement can be provided.

The following example allows us to explore these four areas:

A volunteer, participating in a mentoring program, is matched with a teenager. The mentor has made the arrangement to pick the teenager up at 11:30 a.m. for a 12:00 p.m. movie. The mentor had an earlier commitment, which canceled. The mentor gets an idea that with the extra time now available, that it would be fun to get together with the teenager earlier so that they would then be able to go to a music store next to the theater to listen to some used CDs. Believing that this is a great idea, and that there was no good reason not to do this, the mentor calls the teenager and explains the change in plans. The teenager is enthusiastic, so the mentor picks the teenager up a half-hour early and they drive to the music store. They go in and begin listening to the used CD's that they like. Time flies, and suddenly the mentor realized that the movie starts in a few minutes. The mentor turns to the teenager and says, "Hey, the movie is about to start. We got to get going." The teenager respond to the mentor, "I don't want to go. I want to stay. I'm having fun." The question is, what should the mentor say?"

Most mentors respond in the following way, "OK, if you really want to, we can stay." However, after a half-hour the mentor is ready to go, being tired of listening to the CD's, and says to the teenager, "You want to go now?" The teenager says, "No, I'm really into the CD's." The mentor, taken by surprise by the teenager's response, says, "No, we've been here long enough. It's time to go and do something else." The teenager replies, "That's not fair. It's my day out. We should do what I want." The mentor feeling the sting of the words and feeling frustrated and somewhat taken advantage of responds, "That's selfish. I stayed with you when you wanted. Now it's my turn to get what I want. We're leaving." They do leave, but both have hard feelings with the other. What started out as such a great idea has deteriorated into an experience of frustration and intolerance.

In this outing the mentor failed to pay enough attention to the importance of the four critical areas of planning, listening and sharing feelings, transitioning, and processing. This failure was unintentional but non-the-less resulted in:

Breaking or altering the plan: Initially the mentor and the teenager had a plan, which was that the mentor would pick the teenager up at 11:30 a.m. The mentor changed it by suggesting that they get together earlier in order to go to listen to used CD's. Inadvertently the mentor broke the agreement and altered the set plan. This subconsciously caused the mentee to lose confidence in the mentor, and set up a certain degree of concern about the trustworthiness of the mentor.

Failure to provide time to transition from one activity to another: Secondly, when they lost track of time while listening to the CDs the mentor did not allow the teenager any time to get ready to go. This caused both of them some confusion.

Failure to respond with listening and/or the sharing of feelings: Thirdly, when the teenager expressed the desire to stay to continue to listen to the CDs, the mentor agreed. Because the mentor took the request literally, the mentor misinterpreted the intention of the mentor and further aggravated the situation.

Failure to remember that the teenager probably doesn't process information verbally: Lastly, when the mentor had enough, the mentor felt mistreated when the teenager still wanted to stay, and forgot that the teenager may not have been processing the dynamics correctly. The mentee was angry about missing the movie. The request to stay was really an attempt to communicate about the need for transitioning. Failing to intuit that the volunteer allowed the mentee to stay which wasn't their intent at all.

The critical juncture was in the music store and it was time to leave, the mentor had something to say to the mentee. The mentor at that point was about to speak, and in the way the mentor spoke determined the outcome. What else could have the mentor said to the mentee's request to stay rather than allowing the mentee to stay? The following is a response sequence that fosters intuitive understanding and a correction of the situation:

Tune In:	"It has been fun listening to the CDs, I'm having fun too."
Share a Feeling:	"Yet, I'm confused as to the reason for staying. I know that we've been looking forward to this movie all week."
Take Space:	"Let me get a feeling for what's going on for a minute."
Review the Breakdown:	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Planning 2. Listening and Sharing Feelings 3. Transitioning 4. Processing
Take Responsibility	"I guess I haven't done this very well."
Identify the Breakdown:	"...I didn't really give us time to transition , to get ready to go. I could have come over ten minutes ago to give us a chance to get ready to leave."
Highlight the Goal:	"It still would be fun to go to the movie."
Give Space:	"Think about it, OK?"
Give a Choice:	"Let me know."

Almost always the teenager will reply, "No, I really do want to see the movie. Let's go." Initially when the teenager asked to stay the teenager was really trying to communicate that they needed some amount of time to get ready to leave. Failing to intuit that, the mentor took the request literally and thus gave permission to stay. This subconsciously upset the teenager, because the teenager really wanted to go to the movie, and now inadvertently the mentor prevented it by giving permission to stay. What the mentor heard the teenager was taken literally, yet when reviewed through the four areas of breakdown, the mentor would have been able to see that transitioning had not been provided. This would have given the mentor the insight in how to interpret the teenager's request to stay to continue to listen to the CDs.

It is critical to know that what one is hearing may not be exactly what the speaker is trying to communicate, and that to take the statement literally closes off any other interpretation or insight. This often leads to misunderstanding, and what is commonly viewed as misbehavior on the part of the mentee. Actually the mentee is just trying to subconsciously signal that there has been a breakdown in communication. Given this, any punishment of the signaling behavior would be inappropriate. It is inappropriate to punish the mentee because the signal is important and if one suppresses it often the mentee is subconsciously forced to signal more forcefully, or the punishment suppresses the signal and so the miscommunication can only become more aggravated.