

PRECEPTOR SERIES:

Stepping Up to the Lectern: Formulating Effective Feedback About Presentations

by Adam E. Gregg, PharmD, BCPS and Denise L. Walbrandt Pigarelli, PharmD, BC-ADM

The ability to deliver an effective presentation is an essential skill for pharmacists in a diversity of practice settings.

Consequently, opportunities to prepare and deliver presentations are a cornerstone of pharmacist education and training, both as components of the didactic Doctor of Pharmacy curriculum and postgraduate residency and fellowship training. The ability to deliver a successful and effective presentation is cultivated through practice and is guided by ongoing feedback and evaluation. Typically, this feedback is provided by a preceptor or mentor. As a mentor, providing constructive feedback is a fundamental obligation to the learner. It may help the mentor to consider feedback on two separate presentation components: the content and the presentation style. However, formulating feedback about presentations can often be challenging because it typically encompasses many “soft” characteristics that are an extension of the trainee’s persona and may not be as objectively evaluable. For many learners, speaking in front of an audience provokes anxiety. An already stressful situation for a trainee can be compounded by feedback

that may be construed as judgmental and overly focused on personal attributes. Therefore, to be most effective, the mentor needs to employ strategies which minimize focus on the learner as a person and direct focus toward actions and observed behaviors.

Feedback on Content

An effective presentation begins with effective planning, and the mentor can guide the trainee throughout the development process; four general concepts should be considered.

First, the purpose of the overall presentation must be clearly understood, as must the compulsory components of the presentation. To this end, the course assignment description (or residency equivalent) and the evaluation rubric/criteria should be reviewed with the student/resident as he/she prepares the presentation. The trainee should have the opportunity to carefully read the information and ask questions for clarification so that he/she understands the presentation expectations.

Secondly, audience expectations for the presentation must be determined, and the presentation content must be relevant

to the audience. This can sometimes be a challenge if a presentation is to be shared with a variety of audience members such as various members/disciplines of a healthcare team. Additionally, various practice experiences and career durations of the team members can be important to consider. Information presented should be applicable to the audience.

Third, information presented should be robust yet not seem like a “data dump”. Content should build throughout the presentation in a straightforward manner. (It may assist the trainee to consider in advance what three messages he/she would like the audience to remember after the presentation concludes.)

Finally, in order to create a strong presentation, objectives and general ideas should be delineated BEFORE making slides in order to facilitate optimal presentation flow. The trainee should carefully outline the presentation as he/she begins to develop it. The flow of information is important, as are considerations of what kinds of visuals to use and where to place them. The trainee could sketch out a storyboard of the presentation on a whiteboard or large pieces of paper; this method can help ideas and concepts to flow in a logical order without limitations that can be imposed by technology. The content arrangement can be thought of as similar to a good story: an interesting and vibrant yet simple beginning to engage the audience followed by absorbing content in the middle that illustrates major points and eventually ending with a rational conclusion.

Following the actual presentation, the mentor may review the four general concepts related to presentation content (purpose, audience expectations, information presentation, and presentation flow) and provide feedback using a method

TABLE 1. Examples of Feedback Dialogue

Identified Issue	Unhelpful Feedback	Suggested Text for How to Address Issue
Perceived lack of confidence	“You need to be more confident.”	“Frequently, the audience seemed disengaged during your presentation. Increasing the frequency of eye contact and slowing your pace would help improve your ability to project expertise and elevate the level of audience engagement.”
Perceived nervousness	“Don’t be nervous!”	“At times, I sensed you were nervous. Taking a deep breath and smiling are great strategies to relax yourself and, in turn, relax your audience.”
Distracting physical mannerisms	“You are too fidgety.”	“The frequency of your hand movements occasionally distracted focus from your content. Writing comments on your speaker notes may help increase your awareness of this.”

such as the “start-stop-continue” model discussed in the Dworkin and Hager article.¹ Using a rubric (as available) may help to objectify feedback related to content.

Feedback on Delivery

Providing directed feedback on delivery style and performance as a speaker is another key component of evaluating presentations. By definition, presentation style is personal. Because of this, it is important for mentors to carefully construct feedback so that it does not criticize personality. Rather than identifying “good” or “bad” verbal and nonverbal characteristics of the speaker’s performance, focus instead on how those characteristics support or compromise the trainee’s ability to effectively convey content to the audience. Often, framing feedback around the mentor’s personal perception of the delivery style rather than the absolute “truth” can reduce the level of emotionality and, in turn, establish a platform upon which the learner is more receptive to the feedback.² Similarly, using “I” statements rather than “you” statements may help minimize a trainee’s perceptions of the feedback as accusatory or personally critical.³ Another useful strategy is for the mentor to ask the presenter to lead the feedback session with self-reflection. This would allow the mentor an opportunity to validate and reinforce trainee-identified strengths and areas for improvement, but also to share aspects of the trainee’s delivery that he/she may not recognize, including any vocal tics or physical mannerisms that may compromise the impact of the presentation.

Focus feedback on delivery style toward concrete behaviors and actions that the presenter can modify through practice and attention. For example, telling a trainee “You need to be more confident” is ambiguous and offers no guidance of how he/she can specifically reinforce or change his/her behavior in future presentations. Reframing this feedback to focus on specific, actionable behavior increases clarity and utility for the trainee (Table 1.). Providing specific illustration about how performance could be improved is as important as identifying the characteristics to improve upon and

increases the likelihood that the trainee will integrate the suggestions into altering future performance.

As with all feedback, timing is critical. Providing feedback as soon as feasible after the presentation is completed increases the accuracy and specificity of the mentor’s observations. If it is known in advance that scheduling does not allow for feedback immediately after the presentation is delivered, the mentor should keep detailed notes inclusive of specific examples that can be referred to when delivering the feedback at a later time. Recording the presentation may be another useful tool for both the presenter and the mentor to explicitly identify behaviors and actions from which feedback can be anchored.

Before concluding the feedback session, the trainee should be allowed an opportunity to ask additional questions for clarification or reflect further on the feedback he/she received. Explicitly asking the learner what aspects of the feedback has been most helpful is often a useful strategy to probe for understanding and helps foster a collegial relationship. Further, this provides immediate reinforcement for the mentor on his/ her effectiveness to guide the trainee regarding presentation assessment.

Summary

Providing constructive feedback is an effective and necessary tool for mentors to help students and residents improve their

presentation skills. Feedback should focus on both the content of the presentation as well as the delivery style and speaker performance. Multiple strategies can help the mentor formulate more substantive and meaningful feedback; these include emphasizing the presentation purpose and audience expectations when evaluating content, choosing language to defuse perception of criticism as personal, and focusing on actions and behaviors the trainee can change through further practice. ●

Adam Gregg is the PGY1 Pharmacy Residency Program Director and Education and Staff Development Coordinator at Gundersen Health System, LaCrosse, WI. Denise Walbrandt Pigarelli is an Associate Professor (CHS) at the University of Wisconsin-Madison School of Pharmacy and a Clinical Pharmacy Specialist in the Diabetes Clinic at William S. Middleton Memorial VA Hospital, Madison, WI.

References

1. Dworkin EE, Hager DR. Taking the fear out of feedback: models for success. *JPSW*. 2016; 19 (2): 22-25.
2. Giving constructive feedback on presentations: Duke University Center for Instructional Technology. https://cit.duke.edu/pdf/grad/constructive_feedback.pdf Published 2008. Last modified October 30, 2013. Accessed June 6, 2016.
3. Berger B. Conflict management. In: Berger B, ed. *Communication skills for pharmacists: building relationships, improving patient care*. 3rd ed. Washington, DC: American Pharmacists Association; 2009.

