

Toolbox Talk for students

Mistakes, Feedback and
Setbacks



Time: 15 minutes

Objective: To help learners understand that mistakes, feedback and setbacks are part of learning, recognise unhelpful reactions and feel more confident responding, learning and asking for support when needed.

Think about the feeling you get when you have worked hard on something and the result is not what you expected. You might fail an assessment, get corrected during a practical task or receive an email saying you have not been accepted for an apprenticeship. Useful feedback can still feel uncomfortable. Your first thought might be, “I’m useless at this” “Everyone else is better than me” or “There’s no point trying again.” A mistake or setback can feel very personal in the moment but one result only tells you what happened on that occasion. It does not tell you everything about your ability or what you might achieve in the future.

Why It Matters

Learning involves doing things we cannot do perfectly, yet! If we become frightened of making mistakes, we may avoid difficult tasks, stay quiet when we do not understand or only choose things we already know we can do. The pressure can feel stronger when an assessment affects your qualification or an apprenticeship feels like the opportunity you needed. You may also worry about disappointing your family, falling behind your friends or looking incapable in front of the group. How we respond matters. Hiding a mistake, blaming somebody else or pretending to understand can stop us learning. In practical training and construction, it can also create a safety risk. Taking responsibility does not mean attacking yourself. It means being honest about what happened, putting it right where possible and working out what needs to change next time.

What It Can Look Like

After difficult feedback, somebody might become defensive, argue with everything being said or immediately make excuses.



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Another person might go quiet, feel embarrassed and replay the conversation for days. A setback can also lead to harsh thoughts such as, “I always mess things up” or “I’m never going to get anywhere.” You might compare your result with everybody else’s, dismiss the parts you did well or decide one rejection means you will never get another opportunity. Some learners put enormous pressure on themselves to avoid making any mistake at all, which can lead to overthinking, delaying work or being afraid to begin. Feeling disappointed, embarrassed or frustrated is a normal reaction. It does not automatically mean there is a mental health problem. The concern is when those feelings continue, become overwhelming or cause somebody to stop attending, trying or taking care of themselves.

What Can Help

Give yourself a moment before reacting. If you feel angry or embarrassed, pause, breathe and listen to what is actually being said. You do not have to agree with every comment immediately but reacting defensively can make it harder to understand what would help. Separate the event from your identity. “I failed this assessment” describes one result. “I am a failure” turns that result into a judgement about your whole life. Use language that leaves room for progress: “I did not pass this time, so I need to understand what was missing.”

Ask for specific feedback. Useful questions include, “Which part needs improving?” “Can you show me an example?” and “What should I focus on before I try again?” Write down the answer and choose one or two actions rather than trying to correct everything at once. If you lose an opportunity, ask whether feedback is available, then consider what you can improve and what may simply have been outside your control.



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If you make a mistake during practical work, stop and tell the appropriate person, particularly if safety or somebody else's work could be affected. Trying to hide it may turn a manageable problem into a serious one. Explain what happened honestly, listen to the guidance and help put it right. Feedback should focus on the work or behaviour and help you improve. If somebody repeatedly humiliates you, insults you personally or uses "feedback" as an excuse to bully you, speak to a trusted member of staff, apprenticeship adviser or another appropriate person. Learning from correction does not mean accepting poor treatment.

Preparing for Life in Construction

Construction involves practical skills that take time and repetition to develop. Apprentices and new starters will need guidance from people with more experience. You may be corrected on how you use a tool, follow a drawing, complete paperwork or carry out a task safely. That correction can protect you and help you become better at your trade. A reliable person is not somebody who never makes a mistake. It is somebody who speaks up, takes responsibility and learns from what happened. Being able to receive feedback without giving up, while also recognising when it is being delivered unfairly, will help you throughout your working life.

Discussion Questions

- Why can feedback feel personal even when it is intended to help?
- What is the difference between taking responsibility and blaming yourself?
- What could someone do after failing an assessment or losing an opportunity?



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Takeaway Message

A mistake is something that happened, not a description of who you are. Feedback may be uncomfortable and setbacks can be disappointing but they can also show you what needs attention. You do not have to pretend that failure does not hurt. Give yourself time to process it, find out what you can learn and decide on the next useful step. One difficult result does not decide the rest of your future.

Action

The next time you receive feedback, avoid responding immediately with an excuse or putting yourself down. Ask one question instead: "What is the most important thing I can do differently next time?" Then write down the answer and use it.



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