

“This Attending is Terrible!”—Teaching Trainees to Write Evaluation Comments That Make an Impact

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Setting and Problem

The Accreditation Council for Graduate Medical Education requires that every training program must have a process for trainees to provide written, anonymous, and confidential evaluations annually of faculty members. Barriers to effectively meeting this standard include lack of trainee time and instruction in giving “upward feedback,” and uncertainty about how trainee evaluations are used. As a result, evaluation comments may lack specific, actionable items that promote improvement.^{1,2} This multi-institutional study sought to empower trainees to provide accurate observations of faculty and proposed a framework to make writing valuable evaluation comments easier.

Intervention

We designed a workshop to teach trainees a framework for composing high-quality narrative comments on professional evaluations. The workshop first reviewed the importance of high-quality narrative feedback in physician professional development, then used a case example to teach the comment framework and a small-group exercise to apply the framework by rewriting comments for simulated teaching scenarios. Comments were extracted from actual, anonymized faculty evaluations and demonstrated shortcomings typical of trainee comments (ie, nonspecific, inflammatory, or lacking solutions); background scenarios were crafted to provide context for each comment. Using the Kirkpatrick Model of learning evaluation, we assessed application of the framework and learner satisfaction following the workshop.

A pilot workshop was delivered in 2020 at Phoenix Children’s Hospital (PCH). Reworded comments from the small-group exercise were collected and analyzed by 2 separate reviewers and scored from 0 to 5, based on how many elements of the framework were incorporated. Results demonstrated that this approach was feasible and successful in teaching this skill. In spring/summer 2023, the workshop was

held again at PCH and separately at University of Wisconsin (UW) for medical students, pediatric residents, and fellows. Workshop participants completed a survey that was analyzed using Likert scores frequencies. Open-ended comments were grossly reviewed for themes. The study was deemed exempt by the institutional review boards of both institutions, and a data-usage agreement enabled data to be shared.

Outcomes to Date

During the 2020 pilot small-group exercise, participants (N=29) readily applied the 5-element framework on comment rewrites (BOX). The most commonly incorporated element was 3 (26 of 29; 90%), followed by 2 (24 of 29; 83%) and 5 (21 of 29; 72%). Elements 1 (19 of 29; 66%) and 4 (16 of 29; 55%) were less frequently incorporated and led to modifications in workshop content. Approximately 65 trainees at PCH and 40 trainees at UW attended the 2023 workshops. Sixty-six of 105 total participants (63%) completed the post-workshop survey from both sites: 18 of 66 (27%) medical students, 14 of 66 (21%) residents, and 8 of 66 (12%) fellows. Just over half (34 of 66) had received prior training on how to write comments on professional evaluations. Regarding specific elements of the workshop, 44 of 59 (75%) respondents found the framework to compose effective comments to be “extremely/very valuable” and 36 of 59 (61%) found the activity of rewriting comments based on the scenario to be “extremely/very valuable.”

Attendees commented that the framework can “decrease the cognitive load of providing oral and written feedback,” and specifically noted that the use of subjunctive tense alongside categories to reference when crafting comments (ie, physician as leader, clinician) “helps minimize the mental block often encountered when trying to come up with specific feedback.” Areas for workshop improvement include adding descriptions of how programs utilize trainee feedback to make changes and tips for peer-to-peer feedback. Additionally, participants recommended a similar workshop be offered to faculty to improve their narrative comments for trainees.

DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.4300/JGME-D-24-00822.1>

BOX Five-Element Framework for Effective Feedback Comments

1. Specific situation/location where the observation took place
2. Description of faculty strengths*
3. Description of what could be improved*
4. The expected effect of improved practice
5. Use of the subjunctive mood (eg, expresses a wish rather than a command: "I suggest that..." or "I would like if the faculty member would...")

*Focus on faculty as: physician, team leader, teacher, person

Note: Adapted from van der Leeuw et al,¹ and Lim and White.²

Our study shows a workshop teaching a framework to improve trainees' comments on faculty evaluations is an effective, feasible, and acceptable way to teach this skill for all levels of learners and specialties. Next, we plan to investigate if better-composed comments truly change faculty behavior and improve teaching.

References

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