Tips for Interacting with Teams

Below are some tips to help prepare mentors and event volunteers with best practices for interacting with *FIRST*® teams.

Learning and thinking differences are variations in how the brain processes information. They affect how people learn, work, and interact. While some differences are visible, other differences are hidden. We want to provide an environment where everyone feels confident sharing their ideas and thoughts. The best way to achieve this vision is to treat others with respect, patience and understanding. Here are some best practices while interacting with teams:

- Not everyone is comfortable looking directly at you because of nervousness, or cultural or learning differences. No matter the reason, do not equate this as being disrespectful. Be understanding and an attentive listener.
- Consider a different greeting and closing than a handshake or high-five. Not all students will welcome physical contact.
- Event days are often long. This can be stressful for anyone to manage and can take a toll on someone's concentration, movements, and energy.
- Even when you believe you have provided adequate information in your communications, teams will have all kinds of questions. Remain flexible and gracious and be willing to provide whatever information is needed to answer questions and be mindful of translation barriers. Although you may have been asked the same question many times, a team or student is asking you for the very first time, so answer it as if you never answered that question before.

Volunteer's Responsibility to Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion (ED&I)

Your role as an event volunteer and/or mentor is to support the program participants. As a representative of *FIRST*, you are committed to our notice of non-discrimination and our pursuit of ED&I. Think about your volunteer experience and use these tips to ensure that all students feel that *FIRST* is a space where they belong:

- *Who are you trying to inspire?*
- *Who do you recognize in their pursuit of STEM success?*
- *How do you do that in your volunteer role?*

Understanding Bias

We strongly encourage our volunteers to complete the Strategies for Inspiring Success modules found under the Coach, Mentor, & Volunteer Training section to develop a better understanding of unconscious biases. While these resources are designed for coaches and mentors, the concepts can be applied to all volunteer roles.

Everyone has different beliefs and demonstrates that in various ways (i.e., wearing pins, attire, rings, colored hair, etc.). When interacting with teams, please keep the following in mind to ensure your interactions make all feel valued and welcomed:

- Know and be aware of your own biases (i.e., do you tend to automatically approach male students to ask mechanical questions?) and how they can affect your interactions with students.

- Don't make assumptions. Avoid using pronouns unless you know them. If you need to talk to another student and don't know their name, ask to speak to "them" or "the student in the hat" rather than using gender specific pronouns.
  - It is the best practice to introduce yourself with your preferred pronouns, e.g., "Hello my name is Sarah. My pronouns are she/her." This tells people how to address you and opens the door for them to tell you their preferences.

How can you support our students?

Not all obstacles are in your control, but your responses to obstacles are in your control. You can take control of your behavior and actions to inspire and recognize students in their pursuit of STEM success as an event volunteer.

Micro-messages are hidden messages. They can contradict the messages we want to send by inadvertently creating disadvantages for the student participants.

Instead, take control and use positive messages to improve participation and the event experience. Consider using micro affirmations like using a team's name, being positive, and giving encouragement.

6 ways to communicate micro affirmations:

Message Type	Positive Micro Affirmations	Negative Micro-messages
Verbal	Gender neutral	Refer to engineers as 'he/him'
Para-Verbal (tone)	Speaking with purpose, clarity, and respect	Sounding uninterested or annoyed
Non-Verbal (body language)	Standing straight, maintain eye contact when able	Slumped over, not paying attention
Contextual	Approaching a team and asking who is driving the robot	Making an assumption of which student on the team is driving the robot
Omission (what we do not say)	Listening to concerns from all	Only responding to concerns from male students
Praise and Feedback	Giving all students similar feedback regardless of gender	Providing feedback to girls on robot design and boys on robot functionality

Additional Resources

- *FIRST* Youth Protection Program Resources
- *FIRST* Equity, Diversity, & Inclusion Training & Resources