

Guide to being an effective class rep.

Communication:

One of the things that many class reps experience as the most difficult aspect of their job is finding an effective way of communicating with their class. Whatever method you use to communicate it is useful to bear in mind these tips.

1. Why should students communicate with their class reps?

Many students do not fully understand what a class rep does therefore do not know what issues to approach their rep with and may not know how to communicate with their rep.

2. What difference does speaking to a class representative make?

It can be difficult to get your class to see the value of raising issues so they can be discussed and hopefully resolved therefore it is important that you encourage students to have their say by providing a means of communication; such as a Facebook page. It is also important to give information about events around campus etc. before they occur.

3. How should I communicate with my class?

Many class reps may be anxious about how to find out what the issues in their class are so here are some tips to help you communicate effectively. The sooner you start communicating with your class the more information you will gather.

- Ask your lecturer or tutor to give you a few minutes at the start or the end of a class so you can explain what it is a class rep does, how important it is and how they can contact you.
- At the beginning of a class pass around sheet of paper and ask them to write what they think is going well and what could be going better (one idea is to then collect this sheet and give it to your course co-ordinator or lecturer to keep them in the loop also)
- Some class reps hold class meetings where students can speak about issues and ask questions or you could hold an open meeting.
- Do not underestimate the potential of coffee breaks and nights out to discuss issues.

Remember the best way to discover the views of your class is to be accessible and encourage them to approach you. Listening skills are very important, try not to interrupt people when they are talking to you. Make notes and then ask for clarification of anything you don't understand.

Making a Plan,

When speaking to your class you will become aware of aspects that are perceived as negative or positive by others, but not necessarily by you. It is important when passing on this information to academic staff and the Students' Union that you are able to give them information that will assist them in using the feedback you have provided. This often means giving more than a simple list of strengths and weaknesses about a course. The following questions will assist you in collecting more information and hopefully get a better grasp of the issues you may be asked to communicate.

- What is the issue? Try and spell out as simply as possible what is wrong or right about the course.

- Why is this an issue? For instance... 'It affects teaching quality or impacts on the student's ability to learn because...'
- How do you know it is an issue? What complaints/comments have been made, what students have spoken to you (here you are attempting to provide evidence for what you are saying)
- Where is this issue? Is it in one module/ programme/ year?
- Who does the issue affect? Is it just certain groups or streams, the entire year or certain cohorts (males, females, part-time or international students, mature students...)
- When is it an issue? Should the academic staff/school be aware of deadlines or timescales around the issue which may impact on it?

After you have the facts follow these four steps.

1. Assess the situation

Most people don't remember information in a logical or chronological order, so it will be up to you to determine the key issues and order of events once you have the key information ask the class if you have everything correct, ask if they are in agreement, if not get them to outline the issues until you understand clearly.

2. Identify objectives

Ask your classmates what they hope to achieve by raising an issue and what their preferred outcome would be. This will help you to determine an action plan.

3. Agree objectives with your class, deciding what action is to be taken and by whom. Always set timescales in terms of developing a strategy you should consider:

- Should the person or issue be referred elsewhere?

Always remember you are not a trained counsellor, miracle worker, lecturer or timetable co-ordinator.

Some issues may be too big for you to handle or just simply out of your control, feel free to contact the SU for guidance on any issue.

4. Provide feedback

Remember it is important to keep your class and the Students Union informed of progress. A breakdown in communication can be frustrating and people may become disheartened thus making your job more difficult.

Negotiation

Class reps will be involved in a variety of communication and negotiation activities by liaising with individual students and academic staff, and representing student views at the programme committee and CITSU Union Council Meetings. To represent students effectively it is important to develop your communication and negotiation skills.

Remember informal routes of negotiation can sometimes be the most successful routes. Try to solve problems at the lowest level possible, i.e. in the first instance speak informally to lecturers on the module/programme. It is important to remember that on many occasions the programme committee will meet only once a semester and usually towards the end of it.

If there are problems with the course it will be only natural that students will want a resolution to these issues earlier than a mid-semester committee will allow. In such circumstances it is probably best to approach the course Co-Ordinator or Head of Department to discuss the problem and attempt to negotiate a solution to it.

Class Reps sometimes think or feel that it is a “them and us” situation, the students vs. staff. This doesn’t have to be the case, and the best results are achieved by students and staff working together in partnership.

Try to ensure that when speaking as a Class Rep that you are actually being representative of the majority of students in your class. Confirm this by checking in with them for five minutes before or after a lecture to ensure that you have a clear understanding of the issues you have been asked to raise. When an issue is particularly controversial it is advisable to prepare a report to present at the programme committee. The Students’ Union can provide advice and assistance with this.

During a meeting

You don’t need expert level negotiation skills when meeting with lecturers, be sure however you prepare for meetings.

In meetings confidentiality is key. You must feel confident in what you are saying, that way you will not be caught off guard. It is important that you prepare your replies for any disagreement you may face.

Decide what you want to focus on within the meeting.

Remember negotiation is all about compromise, if no-one compromises then an agreement will not be reached.

Remember class reps form a community, so why not ask them for advice every now and again and also contact other reps in your course to see if they have ever come across or dealt with similar issues.

Always make notes and have a list of key points. It is important to avoid being in a position where you have to argue an ill prepared point of view.

After a meeting

Always take some time to reflect on the meeting and think about the following

- What did I learn (positive and negative) that may help in future meetings.
- What situations should be avoided?
- What was the outcome?
- Did I anticipate the outcome?
- Could I have done anything to change the outcome?
- What are the next steps?

Developing your skills

1. Get to know the rules.

Find out terms of reference for the committee or meeting and where it fits into CIT’s decision making process. Check how often the committee meets and how to get things put onto the agenda.

2. Learn from the past.

Talk to former reps about their experiences in different meetings to see if they have had any experiences you can learn from.

3. Be prepared.

Ensure you have checked the agenda and confirmed the date, time and location of the meeting. Prepare notes on any issues you may be speaking on.

It is a good idea to then ask for a slot at the beginning or end of a lecture to provide feedback to your class group.

4. Participate.

In order to be an effective rep you should participate at meetings. If you know you want to speak try to sit where the chair of the meeting can see you and next to any allies you have at the meeting. If you are unclear on anything ask the chair to clarify. Try not to be negative and if you agree with something say so.

5. Be assertive.

Being assertive requires the belief that you:

Have needs that need to be met

Other people have needs to be met

You have rights

You have something worthwhile to continue

It is also about feeling confident and having confidence in others, taking control of a situation and being yourself.

Tips for being assertive include

1. Do not read too much from prepared text.
2. Avoid interrupting others and do not let others interrupt you
3. Do not get into discussions with just one person
4. Keep your non-verbal behaviour assertive.
5. Time your contributions carefully.
6. Make your doubts and disagreements known and ask to have these included in the minutes.
7. Decide on which issues you wish to make a stand.

6. Report Back.

It is very important that you feedback to your class the results of any meetings you attend on their behalf. After meetings try to identify issues that may be of interest to your class or that may need further input.

Some do's and don'ts for reps:

DO'S

1. Attend union council meetings.
2. Attend all appropriate committee meetings.
3. Ensure you have registered as a class rep.
4. Never think any problem is too small or insignificant (or too BIG) to refer to the student's union for follow up.
5. Treat all fellow students and staff members with respect.

Don'ts

1. Use your own phone to contact the class on behalf of lecturers.
2. Do assignments for class mates

3. Do paper work for a lecturer
4. Lie on behalf of the class or a single student.
5. Incur any personal costs.
6. Undertake to raise funds for a class trip.
7. Accept any harassment or bullying.
8. Deal with sensitive issues (you are not a counsellor so always refer)
9. Ever think you are alone. Remember the students union is here to support you.

Boundaries and confidentiality.

From time to time you may be contacted by a classmate regarding a sensitive situation. This may be emotional or personal – do not take this on you are not a trained counsellor.

The best port of call is with cases like this is to refer students to the Student's union or other CIT services as they are trained and experienced in these areas.

Also be aware that the fallout for miss-guided, misplaced or wrong advice can be very serious.

Issues which are not in your remit include:

1. Personal issues – relationships, medical problems, family issues.
2. Accommodation problems
3. Bullying or harassment

You should immediately refer these kinds of cases to the counselling services or the Student's Union.

You will not be able to take on every small issue that comes your way **students should be encouraged to help themselves wherever possible and appropriate**. Part of your role is to point the student in the right direction- it is not your job to do everything for your class.

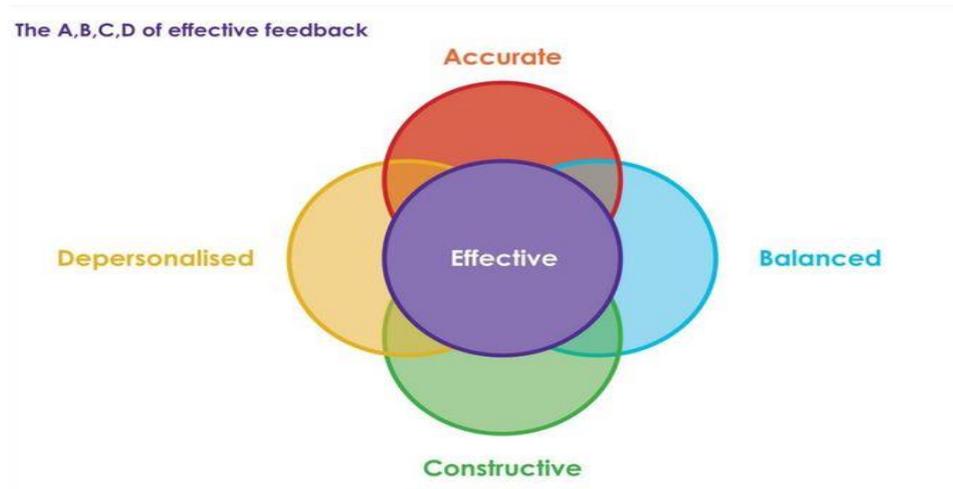
Do not feel pressured to have an instant answer for every student that comes to you it is ok to say **"I'll have to get back to you"**.

Remember that if you want to discuss a student's issue with a third party, such as academic staff or CITSU you must have the student's permission to do this. If you are in difficulty about what to do in a certain situation you can get advice from CITSU staff while maintaining confidentiality and while you must respect the students need for confidentiality, if you feel that they are at risk, you should get help from the CIT counselling service or the health services.

In relation to academic issues, you must seek permission from the student before taking any action or discussing their details with others. Not only is this simple good manners but it could be embarrassing if the student decides they no longer wish to pursue the issue.

If a student has issues with an individual member of the academic staff DO NOT take this to a programme committee. This is not the appropriate place; contact the SU office for advice. Offer to help students to make appointments and suggest they come to see you at some point afterwards to let you know how things went.

THE A,B,C,D OF EFFECTIVE FEEDBACK.



ACCURATE – for me

50% of the class

Avoid sweeping statements, generalized comments and exaggerations.

BALANCED – identify the positives as well as the negatives.

What works?

What doesn't work?

CONSTRUCTIVE – Information specific

Issue focused

Observation based

Avoid vague statements.

DEPERSONALISED – more about what works rather than what someone is doing wrong.

Top five duties of a class rep.

Dealing with
class issues
and queries

Providing
services

Representing
the class at
course board
meetings

Representing
the class at
union council
meetings

Feedback

Important steps for union council and committee meetings.

1. Get familiar with how the meetings works and check how to get things onto the agenda and how often the meetings are held.
2. Learn from the pas, talk to former class reps about their experiences and find out what the other members are like.
3. Be prepared, check the meeting details and read the agenda. Prepare notes on anything you are going to speak on. Ask your class do they have anything they would like raised.
4. In order to be an effective class rep try to participate at meetings.

Public speaking and negotiation.

The following are some hints to help you to effectively communicate and speak publicly.

1. Always go through what you have to say in advance.
2. Always ensure you have all the valid information you need.
3. Make sure what you have to say is of interest to the group – for example, in a course evaluation meeting there is no point in discussing canteen prices
4. Posture is what people initially notice about a person so practice
 - Standing up straight
 - Eye contact
 - Speaking clearly
 - Varying tone of voice and pitch
 - Pausing
 - Don't be afraid to use facial expressions
5. When dealing with personal issues here are some quick pointers
 - Don't presume you know how they are feeling even if you do
 - Listen
 - Don't be judgemental
 - Don't give advice
 - Don't feel you should have all the answers
 - Remember you are not a counsellor and do not feel obliged to deal with peoples personal issues always remember referral is the best option.

Services

1. The students union
2. Counselling services
3. Chaplaincy service
4. Careers service

Always keep record of action taken so you can follow up on issues.