COMMUNICATION CASE STUDY 1

Dr. Tariq and his rotation student Pat meet to discuss Pat’s poster on her rotation project.
“I think the poster session will be a great opportunity for you to gain experience presenting your research,” Dr. Tariq tells Pat with a heavy accent. “I do think there are a few things you could improve.” She only stares and Dr. Tariq keeps his focus on the poster as he continues. “For example, you have too much text for a poster. You could try to shorten some to bullet points. It would also allow you to increase the font size a bit.” He looks up again and sees she is taking some notes. He waits for comment, and the silence drags on a few moments. “What do you think?” Dr. Tariq asks —his computer chimes as a new email arrives, and he glances over to see who it’s from. Oh, not again.
“I can look at it.” Her face remains expressionless as she glances up and briefly meets his eye.
“Ok then. You may also want to read some of the primary literature again related to your project.” Pat nods. There is another long moment of silence. “Well, do you have any questions for me?”
“Yes, I was wondering if we could talk about whether this lab could be an option for me when it is time for me to choose my lab home?” Pat asks.
“Ok…sure. Are you interested in coming back to do your thesis work here?” Dr. Tariq asks, a little surprised.
“Yes, I like it here,” Pat responds.
The phone rings. Dr. Tariq checks caller ID. I’ll have to call her back when this is over. “Well…(a pause)...I’m not sure about funding right now. I have a grant out for review. Let’s talk again in April.”
“Oh then, thank you.” She smiles feebly and reaches out to shake his hand and rises to leave. He takes it and smiles back. “Thanks.”
As Dr. Tariq fills out Pat’s evaluation, he ranks her “average” or “below average” in most categories, and places her in the top 50% of rotation students that he has had. In answer to the question about whether he would consider offering Pat a spot in his lab, he chooses “No” and comments that Pat seems to lack some foundational scientific knowledge that he expects of a first year student. In addition, the poster that she put together was poor quality and she didn’t seem to have a clear understanding of her project.
Meanwhile, Pat shares with her FYG leader that she thought the rotation went well and she feels reasonably confident that she has a shot at being able to join the lab.

Questions to ask in your group:
1. What are the main issues raised in this case study?
2. How could this situation have been handled differently? What should the mentor do now?
3. How do you interpret silence or minimal response from a mentee?
4. Does the PI have an obligation to provide honest feedback to the student so that she can try to make improvements in her next rotation? Why or why not?