

PGR Tips Issue 10 / December 2006

How can I have a better relationship with my supervisor?

The relationship to your supervisor (and your supervisory team) can be the most rewarding and most frustrating aspect of your doctoral training and it is likely that you will experience both aspects at some time.

Your supervisor shares an important goal with you - the successful completion of your degree. However, it is up to you to discover the specifics of what your supervisor expects from you. In general terms you should:

Be independent

You will need support, but you should demonstrate you can think for yourself. Don't use your supervisor to set your objectives, produce project plans, analyse your findings, or as a spell checker for your thesis.

- Invite feedback rather than wait to be criticised. Am I doing enough research? Are these results credible? Am I planning my work effectively? Am I using the literature appropriately? Questions like these demonstrate that you are independent or can respond to previous feedback.

Arrange formal supervisory meetings

Remember that your PhD is only one of many constraints on your supervisor's time.

- Take the initiative by arranging meetings rather than waiting for them to happen.
- Don't be afraid to send information in advance.
- If you intend to discuss results ensure you do some thinking in advance and present ideas and hypotheses rather than raw data.
- Keep a written record of what has been agreed, to highlight any problems immediately and prevent misunderstandings in the future.

Be honest

You are not expected to get everything right first time and talking through your mistakes will give you the benefit of other people's experience.

- Gain the respect of your supervisor and avoid the worst-case scenario of them discovering your errors on the grapevine.
- When having difficulties remember supervisors are there to help you, but cannot do this is if you don't ask, and may interpret a lack of progress as being the result of a lack of effort.

Keep a sense of perspective

As a trainee researcher you must expect to receive feedback and criticism. The purpose of this is to improve your performance: you should try not to take it personally.

- Discuss your personal development and training needs with your supervisors, and gain their support (including financial support if it is needed) to attend training courses and events in your institution, and outside.
- Try also to get your supervisors' support to attend and present your research at conferences.
- If you feel demoralised by largely negative feedback then ask for suggestions on how to improve - these may come from other sources if you prefer not to approach your supervisor.
- Challenge suggestions with your own if you feel you have a better solution, but never ignore your supervisor's advice. They've been doing this a lot longer than you have.
- Where necessary, negotiate a new deadline.

If you do experience difficulties in your relationship with your main supervisor, the wider supervisory team and/or local graduate school or tutor are likely to be your first ports of call.

- If you need to speak to someone confidentially, make it clear that you don't expect what you discuss to go any further
- Rather than speaking to individuals separately, arrange to meet two or more of your team for an open discussion so that everyone is kept in the loop.
- See also PGR Tips Issue 9 on building support networks.

Show that you are enjoying research

In many disciplines, your research is also part of your supervisor's research portfolio - probably the reason they chose an academic career. This is their passion and they can feel insulted when their researchers aren't enthusiastic about their work.

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