When personalities clash

Conflict in the laboratory can depress attitudes, dampen prospects or even derail young science careers. Kendall Powell finds out how to resolve issues and stay on track.

We've all heard horror stories about scientists behaving badly. The postdoc who threw pipettes around the laboratory. The adviser who forced lab members to look after her incontinent dog. And of course, the thesis committee member who made a pass at a visibly pregnant student.

Most conflict in the laboratory stems from common, less dramatic problems. Nevertheless, personality conflicts, poor communication and perceived favouritism can all make lab life miserable.

A difficult or uncomfortable relationship with an adviser can wreak havoc on a trainee's scientific career.

"I had slowly given up what I wanted to do without even knowing it," says Jacob*, a former molecular-biology graduate student at a US West Coast research institution. He was so burnt out by the strained relationship with his adviser that he gave up research after completing his PhD and took a job as a nature guide. Jacob eventually returned to an industry career and now accepts that his adviser taught him critical thinking and healthy scientific scepticism — even though it was painful at the time.

Workers in other labs agree that even the worst experiences taught them something about themselves and how to deal with sticky situations. But what can we learn from their experiences?

Friction

Jacob's conflict with his adviser arose from a scientific cultural gap. "He lived in the ivory tower," says Jacob. He was frustrated by his adviser's lack of empathy for a modern graduate student's concerns, such as the need to save money and the increased competition for permanent jobs. Jacob was looking for a career-building thesis project, but his adviser had other views: his boss's mantra was 'science for the sake of science'. These different expectations led to daily aggravation.

Differences in career goals, working hours and needs for publication are major sources of friction between principal investigators and their trainees.

Work hours are a personal choice, but if yours do not overlap with your supervisor's, tensions can build. "Reading research papers at home on a Saturday doesn't do you any good," says one former postdoc. Your adviser simply cannot see the effort you are putting in.

To avoid problems, be clear about goals and research milestones up front, and ask other lab members what the boss expects when you join the lab.

Advisers sometime cross the line of acceptable behaviour by restricting holiday time or even forbidding workers to attend family functions that require long-distance travel. In these cases, it is important to set boundaries and explain that spending reasonable time on holiday or with your family will make you a more productive, less distracted scientist in the long run.

Clashes also occur frequently over publications. In frustration, one student submitted a paper without her adviser's permission. The move backfired and her angry adviser asked her to pull the article from review.

This is not an approach that one former departmental head at a UK university, Colin, would advocate. Instead, to trigger action on a manuscript, he advises: 'Keep talking to the supervisor and suggest that you will write the experimental section.' Try polite reminders first and get a third party involved only as a last resort.

Mary Bradley, director of postgraduate affairs at Washington University in St Louis, notes that many research universities have clear authorship guidelines, stating who should be included as an author and what contributions earn first author spots.

"Generally, it's a communication issue," says Bradley, who often counselling postdocs. "Make sure you fully discuss what you both think you are supposed to be working on."

Nightmares

But graduate students and postdocs who find themselves arguing constantly with an adviser, or worse, being ignored by their lab head, must make hard decisions. Is an interesting project worth continuing with in such a hostile environment? Would switching laboratories be too much of a career setback? Can you remain professional and productive with a broken mentor relationship?

Brandy, a former biology graduate student in the Midwest of the United States, found herself in such a relationship halfway through her thesis. From her perspective, she felt she was expected to obtain a higher standard than other students in the lab. When she confronted her adviser, he admitted this and said he felt she was not achieving her full potential. He criticized her writing, was unsupportive in committee meetings and asked her to do unnecessarily tedious or redundant experiments.

At first, she complained only to friends and family, because she expected things to get better. Then, her adviser asked her for a personal favour for his family. Brandy bristled at the idea of crossing a professional line and told him she was not comfortable doing the favour. After her refusal, her
relationship with her adviser soured further.

“Knocking graduate students down and then trying to build them up to what you want them to be is not mentoring,” Brandy says. She decided to stick it out because she did not think that complaining to others would help — her adviser had a big reputation at that university.

Instead, she cultivated a closer rapport with a thesis-committee member and made sure her science was infallible when it came to defending her thesis. She also learned an important lesson about herself — how not to be a doormat for others. “Now, I insist that people treat me with respect,” she says.

Michelle, an environmental studies master’s student based in the Midwest, also had a poor relationship with her adviser. She says he made unreasonable demands of her, such as asking her to drive ten hours for an appointment that turned out to be a ten-minute conversation, or making her learn obsolete computer software.

“I was more of a lackey to him than a student,” she says. “At one point I had had enough and I basically quit.” But after a weekend at home, she realized she wanted to graduate and returned to finish her project.

Michelle and Brandy survived because of the support they both received from other faculty members in their scientific field. “You need to have recommendations, if nothing else,” says Michelle. “You have to prove to someone that you do good work and you are worth hiring.”

Of course the adviser isn’t always at fault. Colin put his own credibility on the line recently when he defended a student charged with unethical and illegal activity by the university. Believing the student’s claim of a one-time offence, Colin lobbied the university not to end the career of a hard-working, productive and contrite student.

Resolutions

There are no short-cuts to conflict resolution, notes Colin. It usually requires large chunks of time to satisfy all parties. But many students and postdocs fear that they will be labelled as troublemakers if they turn to department or university officials for guidance. Also, trainees commonly perceive that faculty members will automatically stick together. But these fears may be unfounded, says Colin.

“Students should have more confidence that other academics will take a detached view and treat both parties as equals. In general, colleagues do not protect an academic if he doesn’t deserve protecting,” he says.

Bradley says most postdocs just want someone to listen to their grievances. As an advocate for postdocs, she puts people in touch with the correct university offices for serious concerns such as research fraud or sexual harassment. For dealing with personality clashes, she gives pointers on how to overcome the “dreaded fear of having a difficult conversation with their adviser”.

Her advice? Do it sooner rather than later — procrastinating will only result in more stress. Use ‘I’ statements and not accusatory ‘you’ statements, as in,

“I was under the impression that I would be first author on this paper, but then John became first author and that really frustrated me.’ Make a list of three to five things you want to discuss.

“This is your career. You are going to have to talk about it. Then let the investigator’s response determine what you do next,” says Bradley. A more formal route might include a visit to the university ombudsman’s office to investigate mediation.

“We offer coaching and role-playing to help people acquire the confidence to work things out on their own,” says Lois Price Spratlen, the university ombudsman at the University of Washington in Seattle. After a confidential meeting with Price Spratlen, and if a client does not want to proceed alone, a mediation procedure is set into motion.

From Price Spratlen’s office, the client calls the manager of the person about whom there is a complaint. That manager — an investigator, department chair or dean — has 24 hours to get the problematic person to make an appointment with Price Spratlen. After she meets that person in private, she brings both parties and the supervisor to the mediation table. Her job is not to take sides, but to get the two sides talking.

Not everyone wishes to go forward with mediation. "When people are uncertain what to do, I give them my 24-hour rule,” says Price Spratlen. "Take 24 hours to think about ways you have managed conflict before and whether those methods would help in this situation,” she says.

She also advises clients to write down their story. Finally, she relies on the golden rule — treat others as you wish to be treated — for keeping emotions in check.

Perhaps a bit of conflict and suffering is necessary in every young scientist’s life, but communicating your own needs and expectations to your adviser can make a miserable situation more tolerable.

“You won’t know what is a positive or negative event in your life until the end,” reflects Jacob. He even questions whether he should have ever applied to graduate school. But in the end, he says, it has worked out well. “Now I have this job, which is what I really want to do with my life.”

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*Some names have been changed to protect privacy.