**HOW TO MANAGE YOUR SUPERVISOR**

by Simon Moss

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| **Introduction** |

Your supervisor is granted the role to inspire and to help you. But occasionally, supervisors do not fulfill their role as well as candidates want and expect. For example, supervisors might denigrate all your suggestions or preferences and demand you apply the methods or answer the research questions they prefer. All supervisors could seldom meet and provide negligible support, guidance, or feedback. This document offers some insights on how to prevent and respond to these behaviors.

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| **How to develop a strong relationship** |

In many instances, and hopefully most, the relationship with your supervisor will develop naturally and effortlessly. You will develop a sense of trust and comfort with your supervisor within about three to six meetings.

But, in some instances, this relationship does not evolve as rapidly. The conversations might seem awkward. The meetings could feel too stiff and formal. You might not feel your supervisor values you or your work. The following table presents some interesting scientific discoveries that you can apply to prevent or to address these concerns.

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| Strategy to apply | Justification of this strategy |
| **Disclose complex emotions**, such as hope, disappointment, or embarrassment, honestly and candidly. You might indicate that you felt embarrassed by an error you committed or disappointed you could not fulfill some deadline. | After candidates refer to complex emotions—emotions that are unique to humans—supervisors tend to feel a sense of empathy or closeness. They tend to be more helpful (Vaes, Paladino, & Leyens, 2002). |
| Offer **evidence of the extensive effort** you devoted to some task. For example, if you need to recruit 100 participants, but recruited only 10 individuals, perhaps show your supervisor a list of all the people you contacted or all the websites you utilized. Likewise, before each meeting, demonstrate that you have prepared and organized your questions carefully. | When supervisors become attuned to the effort you dedicated to some work, they are more inclined to evaluate this work more favorably, sometimes called effort justification |
| Whenever supervisors help you, stress the extent to which this assistance was valuable. For example, if a supervisor proposes you should read a specific article, the next time you meet, you should indicate the extent to which you appreciated their suggestion and felt the article was helpful | Interestingly, when supervisors feel they have been helpful one time, they are more likely to be helpful on future occasions, consistent with a finding called the Benjamin Franklin effect |
| Whenever you request assistance, acknowledge the inconvenience of your request. You might, for example, write an email “I know this request might be inconvenient, but could you skim these two pages I have written”. | After people concede that a request is inconvenient, the other person is actually more inclined to fulfill this request (Werner, Stoll, Birch, & White, 2002) |

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| **How to accommodate the preferences of supervisors** |

One complication is the preferences of every supervisor—such as whether they prefer many short emails to one long email a week—are unique. But, most supervisors do not realize their preferences are unique. They assume you should know and accommodate these preferences.

So, during each meeting, perhaps ask one or two questions to clarify their preferences. If possible, however, do not inundate supervisors with too many of these questions; otherwise, they might feel manipulated or judged. Here are some examples of questions you could ask.

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| Questions you could ask over time |
| Do you prefer regular meetings—or would you prefer me to organize meetings when needed? |
| If I need to ask several questions over email, do you prefer me to send each question in a separate email or send longer emails? |
| When I email other stakeholders, such as organizations, would you prefer I copy you in? |
| How many weeks do you need to correct drafts—like a research proposal? Would you like me to warn you in advance if I am planning to send you a draft? |

Some supervisors, however, are oblivious to their preferences. Instead, you might need to observe their characteristics and respond accordingly. For example

* If your supervisor appears to be quite a dominating, assertive character—a person who likes to decide which topics to discuss rather than respond to your cues or preferences—you should then behave more submissively. You might answer their questions rather than set the agenda. You might pose questions rather than question this person explicitly.
* In contrast, if your supervisor appears to be more reserved, you could behave more assertively. You could set the agenda and decide which topics to discuss, for example.

As research shows, dominating characters interact more effectively with more deferential, reserved people. In contrast, reserved people often interact more effectively with slightly dominating characters. When two dominant people interact, they often experience a sense of conflict; when two more reserved people interact, the conversation is often stilted and labored (Tiedens & Fragale, 2003)

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| **Responses to behaviors you perceive as unacceptable** |

Whenever you feel the behavior of your supervisor is unacceptable or unhelpful, you need to decide how to respond. The following table presents some options that are available to you. This table also presents some options that tend to be ineffective or even detrimental

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| Suitable responses to  unacceptable or unhelpful behaviors | Unsuitable responses to  unacceptable or unhelpful behaviors |
| If supervisors are defensive, refer to your feelings or intuitions rather than attempt to construct watertight arguments. You might say “My intuition this approach might not work for me. I feel I might not be as motivated if I apply this approach” | If supervisors are defensive, they do not respond as well as you might predict to rational arguments. These arguments often amplify defensive reactions—a phenomenon called psychological reactance. |
| During a meeting with this supervisor, describe some of the feelings you are experiencing, but without criticizing this person. Prompt this supervisor to consider how he or she might respond in this circumstance. You could say “I’m feeling like I’m bit lost at the moment? How would you have responded in this situation? |  |

**Confidential discussions**

If you want to complain about your supervisor, you should contact your HDR convener in the first instance. If this person is unavailable, you can instead contact the College Dean.

Unfortunately, if you do not want your supervisor to be informed of your complaint, the university cannot investigate the matter formally. Nevertheless, even in these circumstances, your complaint could still be useful. They university can retain these complaints confidentially. The relevant individuals might be able to act on these data. For example, they might be able to organize workshops or other initiatives that are designed to address recurring problems, without breaching the confidentiality of candidates or the principles of natural justice.

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| **References** |

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