…supervise BSc/MA students and PhD candidates while managing your own projects

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Dr Neela Enke holds a doctorate in Biology and has over 10 years experience as a researcher and team leader in several European research institutions. She is a coach for research and administrative staff, professors, team leaders and teams.

Well, you are not alone with this problem! The simple solution is to reduce either the number of students/candidates or the time you spend on supervising each of them to have more time for your own research. However, as many simple solutions, they fail to look at the full picture. It is important to you to be a "good" supervisor? You fear that spending less time on supervision might impact its quality? Yet, quantity is not a prerequisite for quality. So, what can you do to provide good supervision *and* have enough time for your own projects?

Bundle

If you have more than one student/candidate, use regular team meetings for project updates and feedback. On top of saving time this will give everyone the opportunity to learn from each other. Out of fear to be perceived as incompetent, students and candidates might only present what went well and not where they struggle. Introduce a ritual to include a mandatory and specific question in each project report to be discussed in the meeting. It will take some time for people to get used to this new ritual but if you are persistent, it will be rewarding to everyone.

As a trainer she offers workshops on career development in research, leadership, as well as diversity and conflict management. She is a trained mediator with a focus on conflicts in research organisations.

Make sure that challenges and mistakes are handled as excellent opportunities for learning and professional development and not as something to be avoided and/or covered up. For very detailed questions, you can still offer individual meetings.

Delegate

You could delegate some of the responsibilities of your supervision work to the more experienced students/candidates. Set up tandems between a more experienced and a new candidate: Some of the "newbies'" questions may be answered by those you have already trained via your supervision. Clarify with these "peer mentors", which questions fall within their responsibility and in which cases the "newbies" should directly come to you. The mentors then will also learn something about supervision themselves that may be valuable for their own career. (Delegation is always connected to issues of control and trust – but this is a topic for another time!)

Phases and Personalities

The various phases during the PhD period require different levels of supervision: At the start, you need to be more present to get the project on track. Towards the very end the students/candidates might need your input frequently. In the middle phase, responsibility should shift gradually onto the candidates themselves as you step back. Also, you will have different types of students/candidates. While some are highly self-motivated so that your job is to keep them on track and focused, others might need deadlines from you to achieve progress.

Tailor your engagement according to certain phases and personalities.

Preparation
Your meetings will be more effective and more efficient if both the student/candidate and you yourself are well prepared and the purpose of the meeting is clear. Make sure to communicate how your students/candidates should prepare in advance.

Excursus for Students/Candidates: Dear students and candidates, we are aware that it is often difficult for you to get time for feedback from your supervisors, for they are very busy people. This is a fact you cannot change. However, one thing you CAN do is to make the best use of the time you get by preparing yourself and your supervisors: If e. g. you require feedback on a text, send this text plus some specific questions a couple of days in advance to your supervisor. Provide context what has changed since the last time you talked about the text. Concentrate on those central issues (not more than 3!) that only your supervisor can answer. Try to exclude points that a colleague may be able to answer. Make sure you have researched and formulated your questions well. Write a protocol of what you have discussed and send it to your supervisor. Use this document as basis for your next meeting. According to a rule of thumb, 1 minute of a meeting requires some 5 minutes of preparation – invest that time! Of course, your supervisors are brilliant, but they have many projects to think about at the same time. This is why they may be grateful if you make it easy for them to answer your questions.

Responsibility
Think about what you are responsible for: Beyond the technical, factual and methodological knowledge acquired throughout the PhD, the candidate also should emerge at the other end as an individual that is capable to conduct independent research. We have observed some supervisors doing work that should be done by the student/candidate themselves. Mostly, because it seems faster (at least for the moment – long-term it is another story…), it promises higher quality, they want to shield the candidates from unpleasant experiences or keep their own reputation intact.

So, instead of giving feedback, they just rewrite the publication of their PhD candidate. However, giving specific and constructive feedback to a candidate is among your core tasks, while rewriting their publication definitely is not.

Last but not least – Time Windows for Your Work

Create time windows (e. g. half a day per week/some days per months) to work on your own projects. It is essential to make your students/candidates understand that in these time windows they cannot simply walk in to ask you a question. You are only available if the lab is on fire! You can define "signs" for you "me-time windows", e. g. a closed door or a special symbol on your door.

Do you have any topics that you would like to have answered by Neela and Silke, our contributing coaches? If yes, then please email to jGfV@G-f-V.org.