

... have a productive relationship with your supervisor?

by Stefanie Henauer

The relationship with your supervisor can make your PhD life substantially easier or harder, especially when you are facing one of the inevitable obstacles you will encounter during your unique PhD journey. I am not suggesting though that building a respectful and productive professional relationship requires becoming close friends with your supervisor. Instead, the following strategies can help you foster a professional working relationship.

Note: While this article is aimed at PhD students, the advice can also apply to supervisors at all levels, including PhD candidates supervising Bachelor's or Master's students.

Clarify expectations and responsibilities

As humans, we are masters in having expectations and assumptions, which we do unconsciously most of the time. Unclear expectations can lead to misunderstandings and conflicts later on, so communicating and aligning them as early as possible can prevent difficult discussions in the future. Also in the supervisory relationship, this is key. You can integrate talking about expectations in a meeting or you can asynchronously assess a set of topics to which extent it is the supervisor's and the PhD candidate's responsibility or whether they do share this in equal parts. Comparing the answers will show possible deviations that you then can discuss. The list of items to clarify may differ immensely in length and content, depending on your field, project and circumstances. You could for example clarify a number of diverse points such as your expectations concerning who should initiate meetings, who is to suggest conference attendances, who gets into contact with cooperation partners, informs themselves about relevant policies, procedures and requirements, and who makes sure that the project stays on track. A written supervision agreement – templates for which might be available at your institution – can also help to formalise what has been discussed. A supervision agreement could include, beyond the usual parts on topic, timeframe, duties of supervisors and PhD candidates, e.g. publication strategy, access to resources, what happens in a conflict and what happens if the money runs out before the PhD is done. If more than two people are involved in the core supervisory relationship (e.g. a supervising PostDoc), all parties should discuss who will be involved in which processes and decisions, and to what extent.

Adapt to your supervisor – but also talk about your work style preferences

Of course, it helps to have chosen a PhD supervisor who is compatible with your own style of both communication and work. However, sometimes it will only become clear later on, whether this is the case and if it is not, you'll have to make peace with it, at least to some extent. This means that if you for example work best (not necessarily like it best) when your supervisor checks in on you and your project (relatively) regularly, it might be difficult to have

If you have topics for the „how to“ section we have not yet touched, please email us at jGfV@G-f-V.org.

a supervisor who gives you too much freedom and independence. Or maybe you can process information best in written form or in visuals, while your supervisor prefers to have a spontaneous, very verbal meeting in the hallway or the kitchen with no way for you to take notes. If your work styles deviate from each other in such a form, it is usually and unfortunately your duty to adapt to your supervisor in a way that you get what you need from them. This could mean that you negotiate a regular meeting schedule with status updates that fit both your supervisor and yourself. Or in the second example, you could suggest starting a voice recording of the kitchen meeting, allowing you in that moment to focus fully on all the important things your supervisor has to say about the project, engage in a discussion instead of memorising, and transcribe/make notes later on based on the recording. If you communicate your reasoning, your supervisor, too, should, hopefully, understand the advantages this solution brings.

Set and communicate boundaries and priorities

What's also often tricky is to set and keep boundaries with your supervisor. The first step is always to get to know your own boundaries and priorities by reflecting your values and goals. The second one is to be aware of those whenever a new request comes in and make an informed decision about how to react. You could ask yourself the following simple question: By saying "no" to this, what am I saying "yes" to? The answer might be "ensuring the good quality of something I'm already working on" or "more time to focus on my PhD project and handing it in on time" or simply "resting, and therefore keeping my sanity". Instead of literally saying "no" to your supervisor, you can therefore try to shift the focus to this alternative option e.g. by phrasing it as "I would rather/prefer...".

By the way, making your boundaries clear can also have many positive consequences, since it may increase your visibility and integrity as an independent researcher with your own goals and convictions. Also: your supervisor can only respect your boundaries if they know them!

Last, but not least: never rely on telepathy

Telepathy isn't possible yet. Thus, you still have to ask somebody what goes on in their mind if you want to avoid making wrong assumptions about their state of mind. The best practice for this is still to talk and keep communicating with a person. If this doesn't come naturally to you, choose the mode easiest for you, e.g. an email instead of a direct conversation. And remember: be brave! What's the worst that can happen? And before "bothering" someone, you can do this short self-check: if you were in the other persons position, would you see it as "bothering" or would you actually even welcome someone thinking and acting proactively?



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