

Managing difficult post doc – mentor relationships

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Steps to having a productive post doc/mentor relationship

- Choose wisely
- Establish clear expectations
- Manage your relationship
- Assume the best
- Communicate effectively

Dynamics of the relationship

Post doc

- Limited power/control over major decisions
- Extensive control over day to day decisions
- Needs to respond to authority, but demonstrate independent thinking
- Productivity critical to career success
- Limited “soft skills” training

Mentor

- Extensive power/control over major decisions
- Limited control over day to day decisions
- Needs to exercise responsible authority, promote independence
- Productivity critical to career success
- Limited “soft skills” training

Choose wisely

- Previous trainees success
- Projects available, other participants?
- Not every mentor is the best, or even effective, for every post doc
 - How does mentor measure productivity?
 - How are research resources allocated?
 - How are key decisions made on projects?
 - What were the important attributes of people who were successful in that laboratory?
 - How is the lab run on a day to day basis?
 - What are the specific and general expectations of post docs?

Establish clear expectations:

If I join your lab...

- I will work on _____
- The ultimate goal will be _____
- If this doesn't work we will _____
- We will publish _____
- I will work with _____
- Our goals/benchmarks will be _____
- When I leave, I will take _____
- Make a list of what you want from the lab/mentor/post doc

Manage your relationship

- Don't avoid your mentor!
- Check in on expectations—communicate on progress in a way that your mentor understands
- Be open about challenges and limitations and how you are addressing them
- Remember your PI is probably a busy, stressed, human—and try to manage your own emotional responses
- You can't change or control ANYONE but yourself
- Let your mentor know if you are concerned about YOUR expectations being met

Assume the best

- Remember, you both have common goals
- Listen carefully
- Assume your mentor is trying to help you, work hard and ask questions to understand their decisions
- Its okay to admit that you don't see/understand how a situation or decision is in your best interest, just be calm and rational about it.

Communicate effectively

- Listen, and try to understand the other point of view
- Ask questions to clarify
- Present your side as rationally as possible
- Ask for time to think / calm down if you think you need it
- Avoid gossiping.

When difficulties arise

- Continue communication
- Listen, and try HARD to understand the other side
- Focus on the solutions
- Try to identify compromises
- Be cognizant of your frustration over stress and limited control
- Remember, you can't (and shouldn't) change your mentor.
- Try to acknowledge YOUR contributions to the difficult situation (at very least, to yourself)

Coping with a difficult person

- Assess the situation
- Stop wishing the other person were different
- Formulate a plan
 - Keep your eye on your ultimate goal—to have a productive post doc, to get a good letter of recommendation, to get a good publication
 - Remember, these are probably shared goals
- Implement the plan
- Assess the plan and readjust if necessary

Helpful Websites

- Howard Hughes Medical Institute – Lab Management
 - <http://www.hhmi.org/resources/labmanagement/moves.html>
- National Postdoctoral Association
 - <http://www.nationalpostdoc.org/component/content/article/3-rcr-toolkit/113-rcr-toolkit-difficult-communication>
- Science Careers
 - http://sciencecareers.sciencemag.org/career_magazine

- Agree emphathize inquire
- Manage your mentor
- <http://www.dkalish.com/nyas.html>
- When you have your own lab:
- <http://www.the-scientist.com/?articles.view/articleNo/24690/title/Dealing-with-Conflict/>