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

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Post doc</th>
<th>Mentor</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• Limited power/control over major decisions</td>
<td>• Extensive power/control over major decisions</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Extensive control over day to day decisions</td>
<td>• Limited control over day to day decisions</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Needs to respond to authority, but demonstrate independent thinking</td>
<td>• Needs to exercise responsible authority, promote independence</td>
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<td>• Productivity critical to career success</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Limited “soft skills” training</td>
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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 empathize inquire
• Manage your mentor
• When you have your own lab: