Managing Your PI

Doug Kalish

If you haven’t already done so, please fill out the Conflict Styles survey on the front desk – or, if you have a computer, go to www.dougsguides.com/conflict_style and fill out the Excel spreadsheet.
Acknowledgement

Some content based on materials developed by Drs Carl and Suzanne Cohen, Science Management Associates. Used with their permission.
Personalities of scientists

• According to Fiest & Gorman (1998), scientists are:
  – More conscientious and orderly
  – More dominant, driven, achievement oriented
  – More independent, less sociable
  – More emotionally stable

• “Eminent” Scientists are:
  – Dominant, arrogant, self-confident, hostile
  – Driven, ambitious, achievement-oriented
  – Autonomous, independent, introverted
What do scientists find hard to do?

• Disagreeing productively over science
• Coaching, evaluating or terminating employees
• Dealing with pushy, obnoxious, competitive colleagues who defocus you from the task
• Resolving arguments over space, equipment, cleanliness
• Mediating disputes between others
• Dealing with others taking credit for their work; authorship disputes
• Recognizing cultural issues
Research myths

- Research is a solitary and individual endeavor
- How much science you know determines whether your research will be successful
- 95% of your time will be spent on technical research challenges
- Social and personal problems are a distraction from successful research
What can you do?

ADMIT:
- Good science isn’t enough
- Some conflict is inevitable – and healthy
- Emotional situations are a way of life and cannot be avoided

DO:
- Learn skills to help you cope with difficult situations
- Teach those skills to others
Agenda

• Personal styles of conflict resolution
• Handling difficult people
• Disagreeing without being disagreeable
• Taxonomy of PIs
• Handling PI problems
Your relationship with your PI is bound to be complicated

- Mentor
- Boss
- Advocate
- Problem Solver
- Confessor?
- Friend?

…but, ultimately Judge
Some conflict is inevitable and can be productive

- Research direction and scope
- Interpretation of data
- Scientific disagreements
- Interaction modes: e.g. email vs. face time
- Letting go
- What data is ‘yours’
Some conflict is toxic

- Lack of feedback
- Conflict with other committee members
- Authorship disputes
- Hostile lab environment
- Suspect ethics
<table>
<thead>
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<td>Avoiding</td>
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## My preferred styles

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<td>5</td>
<td>E</td>
<td>Avoiding</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
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“It’s not enough that I win – you must lose.”

- Minimal cooperation
- Opposing views ignored
- Wins by argument, rank, or politics
- Scorched earth policy

Can be appropriate when goal is quick action, unpopular decisions or vital issues
Compromising style (B)

“You win some, you lose some.”
• Giving up something to get something
• Assertive and cooperative
• Equally powerful and cooperative parties
• Able to evaluate fairness

Be careful not to give up something you can’t live without.
Collaborating style (C)

“Let’s find the solution that works for both of us.”

• Satisfy both sides
• Highly assertive and cooperative: win/win
• Merging perspectives, gaining commitment
• Open discussion of issues (concerns), not just positions
Accommodating style (D)

“Whatever you decide is ok with me.”

- Foregoing my concerns to satisfy you
- Sacrifice, selfless, low assertiveness

Appropriate to create goodwill, issues of low importance to me
Avoiding style (E)

“I’ll think about that tomorrow.”
- Conflict avoided
- Relationships maintained

OK with issues of low importance, when tensions are high, or other larger battles are looming.
Match the style to the context

• You can choose your style deliberately and strategically.
  – With your PI: Accommodating
  – With your friends: Compromising
  – With the cable company: Competing

• Worthwhile to consider: What style is the other side using?
How to deal with difficult people

1. Find something to AGREE with
   - It’s hard to argue with someone who is agreeing with you

2. EMPATHIZE with them
   - Acknowledge their emotion even if you disagree with their perception of the problem

3. INQUIRE to get more information
   - Make sure you understand the issues and then move as quickly as possible to common problem solving
Control your emotions

Do
• ignore insults
• be patient and non-defensive
• be considerate
• acknowledge screw-ups asap

Don’t
• be evasive
• point out their faults
• make excuses
Fred: “I need to use the ultracentrifuge that you are signed up for. OK?”
Freida: “No, I might need it.”
Fred: “Do you or don’t you? Because I have to use it.”
Freida: “I may need it depending on the results I get from my column run.”
Fred: “Look, I need a freaking centrifuge and yours is the only one available.”
Freida: “Better keep looking.”
Fred: ????
What could Fred say to defuse the situation?

Fred:

“(AGREE) I know that you have signed up for the centrifuge and (EMPATHIZE) you have a right to it.

(INQUIRE) Is there some way we might both be satisfied? When do you need it? For how long? Can you delay your run for a few hours?”
A better way?

Fred: “I need to use the ultracentrifuge that you are signed up for. OK?”

Freida: “Fred, you’re in the middle of an important procedure, right? I can see that you’re in a bind. I may need the centrifuge depending on my column results.” [AGREE, EMPATHIZE]

Fred: “Do you or don’t you? Because I have to use it.”

Freida: “Is there some way we might both be satisfied? When do you need it? For how long? Can you delay your run? Can we run together?” [INQUIRE]
Fred: “Frieda, I forgot to sign up for a centrifuge this afternoon and now I’m in a bind. Is there any way I can get in just before or after your time, or can we combine our runs?”
What would you do?

Your PI is pressuring you to complete some experiments in a week. You think it will take at least two weeks to get the data.

Her: “I need all these experiments done by the end of the week.”

You: “Dream on. It’s too much work.” (wrong)
Dealing with critical and judgmental people

You’re on a project when one of the other team members (not your PI) comes to you and says:

“You really screwed this project up royally. We’re going to have to re-do everything you’ve done. You’re a parasite.

How do you respond?
What would you do?

“Why did you share our results with Fenster’s lab?? You know she talks with Schmendrick and he’s working on the same project!! Are you a complete idiot???”
Disagreements

Published on June 14, 2011
### “I” vs “You” Statements

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>“You”</th>
<th>“I”</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>“You never show up on time for meetings”</td>
<td>“I’m frustrated from having to wait for you”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“You don’t appreciate all the hard work and long hours I put in”</td>
<td>“I’m feeling unappreciated and taken advantage of”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Your work is garbage”</td>
<td>“I’m concerned that we won’t have a good publication if the quality of your work doesn’t improve.”</td>
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### Your Turn

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>“You”</th>
<th>“I”</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>“You’re an idiot”</td>
<td>“I disagree”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“You’re a bully and a loudmouth”</td>
<td>“I’m offended by what you said”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“You never listen”</td>
<td>“I don’t feel heard”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Your work is sloppy and useless”</td>
<td>“I need higher quality work from you”</td>
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### Disagreements

**ATTACK!**

Fred: “That binding data can’t be right. You didn’t use Mg++. Everybody knows that reaction requires Mg++.”

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**DEFENSE!**

Freida: “No, it doesn’t need Mg++. There’s new evidence that any divalent cation will work. I mentioned that last week. You never listen.”

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**ESCALATION!**

Fred: “The problem isn’t me, it’s your crummy experiments.”

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**What could Fred have said initially?**
“That may not be the stupidest thing I ever heard, but it’s definitely in the Top Ten. Are you a complete idiot?”
Managing your PI

• Understand your PI
  – You are not the highest priority
  – Know your PI’s motivation and goals
  – Know your own goals
  – Align your interests with your PI’s

• Know what’s expected of you
  – Discuss expectations and make them concrete
  – Insist on feedback

• Don’t hide problems
  – But bring your PI possible solutions, not just problems
Taxonomy of challenging PIs

And how to deal with them
Everybody’s Friend

- Michael Scott from ‘The Office’
- Avoids conflict and making unpopular decisions
- Lack of accountability in the lab – toxic behaviors tolerated
- Stronger personalities may take over

Strategy:
Step up or withdraw!
MicroManager

• No detail, no decision, no activity is too small to be overlooked
• Distrust of skills and decision-making abilities of others
• Fear of failure
• Frequent pathology of new PIs

Strategy:
Reassure, build trust slowly, insulate from failure…
The Seagull

- Flies into a project, makes a lot of noise, craps over everything and flies off
- Disparages all the work but doesn’t provide real direction
- Infrequent and unhelpful advice
- Preoccupied

Strategy:
Confront (inquire) or ignore
Mushroom Farmer

- Keeps you in the dark and buries you in horsecrap. If you stick your head up, it gets lopped off.
- Information control freak: need-to-know only
- Evasive and insecure

Strategy:
Share information with rest of team, confront (inquire)
The Absentee

- Who the hell is that?
- Preoccupied and disinterested
- Passive-aggressive

Strategy:
Can you (or the team) manage yourself?
Hysterical Toddler

• Every problem is a disaster
• Everyone (else) is to blame
• Every problem is a personal attack

Strategy:
Empathize, reassure, and try to avoid sarcasm
Honey Badger

- **Doesn’t care**
- “You’re in my lab to learn. Just do what I say, don’t ask questions, stay at your bench, and everything will be fine.”
- Zero emotional intelligence; zero empathy

**Strategy:**
You aren’t going to change the HB’s behavior; find ways to cope and get out asap
The Narcissistic PI

• has a grandiose sense of self-importance
• is preoccupied with fantasies of unlimited success, power, brilliance, beauty, or ideal love
• believes that he or she is “special” and unique
• requires excessive admiration
• has a sense of entitlement
• is interpersonally exploitative
• lacks empathy
• is often compensating for low self-esteem
• shows arrogant behaviors or attitudes

From: http://www.narcissisminrelationships.com/dealwithboss.html

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Handling the Narcissist

• Manage your emotions – don’t believe the bad stuff or the good stuff
• Increase their sense of security – neutralize threats
• Set personal boundaries
• Don’t be misled by empathic statements or behavior on their part – they want something
• Frame all advice and suggestions in terms of their needs and desires
• When you can’t take anymore – leave
Disagreeing with your PI

- PIs will differ in how well they handle disagreements
- You have the basic skills to manage disagreements
  - Understand your and your PI’s Conflict Resolution Styles
  - Pick an appropriate and comfortable style
  - Use AGREE, EMPATHIZE, INQUIRE
  - Use “I” statements, not “You” statements
- Avoiding personalizing the disagreement (on either side)
- Discuss consequences in a non-threatening way
- Look for ways to be collaborative in solving problems
Disagreeing with your PI

Her: “You’re wasting your time with this project. I want to go in a different direction.”
You: “I sure am having trouble with this. I guess this isn’t what you had in mind. What specifically is the problem?”
Her: “Everything – it’s just wrong.”
You: “How would you like it changed?”
or
You: “What would you like me to do about it?”

and
You: “Can you help me frame the next steps? It would help me get a better understanding of what you want done.”

Agree/Empathize/Inquire
Ask for specifics
Involve them in the solution – get feedback
Collaborate on your career

• You can’t get what you want until you know what you want
• Enlist your PI as a mentor – ask questions, don’t make demands (if appropriate)
• Know your PI’s goals (ask; don’t assume you know them)
• Look for alignment: how can you help your PI attain his goals?
• Document discussion and decisions
• Review and revise frequently
• Consider using the FASEB IDP as a structure

Getting out

1. Get agreement on the general idea first
2. Agree on a target date
3. Agree on objective criteria
4. Iterate on 2-3 until the criteria look to be achievable in the agreed timeframe
5. Get the agreement of the rest of the committee (if grad student)
6. Document the decisions in writing
7. Review progress and the commitment frequently
8. Watch out for traps – “One more experiment…”
If things get tough, don’t go it alone

- Other lab members
- Peers not in the lab
- Faculty
- Friends
- Ombudsman

You have to establish these relationships BEFORE the problem arises.
Avoid problems next time: finding the right PI

- The science is not enough!
- Rotations (for grad students) or lab visits
- Talk to the current set of grad students and post-docs
  - Meets deadlines?
  - Genuinely interested?
  - Good feedback?
  - Face time?
- Talk to people in nearby labs and previous grad students/post-docs
In the history of human relations...

...no problem has ever been solved by being ignored.

Don’t avoid problems or hope they will go away.
There’s more you have to learn

- Managing Your PI (today)
- Finding Your First Real Job (Mar 14)

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