

“Developing a Positive Research Group Culture”

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A few thoughts on mentoring and developing a happy, productive team

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First, a bit of my history:

Grad school at UW in the late 1970s:

- 1) No “lab groups” or camaraderie
- 2) No practice presentations
- 3) No Graduate Student Symposium
- 4) Many students lacked funding
- 5) The word “mentor” was never heard
- 6) Many of us were lonely and stressed as well as underpaid

And a bit more history:

Hired in the mid-late 1980s, I had or got:

- 1) No supervisory experience or training
- 2) No mentoring by other faculty
- 3) No discussion of student mentoring
- 4) Almost no teaching experience
- 5) So, I made plenty of mistakes

Mentoring styles reflect ourselves:

- 1) I try to lead by example rather than dictate (my wife says that I am a conflict avoider)
- 2) My students know that I work very hard and efficiently, but I take breaks and they know that too
- 3) I encourage collaboration and support among the students and post-docs in the lab
- 4) My students know I care about them as people and I prioritize their work above my own
- 5) My students see me as a whole person, not just as a professor (wife, children, outside interests, etc.)

Some pitfalls:

- 1) We are not paid to be their friend or therapist, and it can be hard to find the right role to play.
- 2) Students are junior academics but have fully formed personalities. We need to treat them differently, yet still be fair to all, and that is not easy.
- 3) We should be free with praise when it is earned, and that is easy, but knowing how to criticize is much harder yet also necessary (my weakness).

Final advice:

- 1) From Ron Merrill: Faculty members should give their best ideas to their students. Sometimes they will fumble the football but we must let them run.
- 2) Do the best you can and treat them as people, not as tools to advance your career.
- 3) From Shakespeare (Polonius) “To thine own self be true.” Find your own style, do not imitate others.
- 4) When you make a mistake, admit it, apologize, learn from it, and move forward.

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Research Group Culture

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A couple of things I have learned

1. Every graduate student is different
 - You will not have the same rapport with your students as you had with your PhD supervisor
 - Optimal productivity requires adaptability
 - Being the more experienced half of the team, you are the one who has to adapt
 - Be attuned to cultural differences

A couple of things I have learned

2. Know yourself

- What is your personality type?
- Consider taking the Myers-Briggs Personality Indicator
- Think about how your personality affects the way you interact with your students and your group culture

INTJ

- I = Introvert (vs. extrovert)
- N = Intuitive (vs. detail-oriented)
- T = Thinking (vs. feeling)
- J = Get things done in advance (vs. improving them until the last minute)

Hands-off supervision style

- Advantage
 - Good learning experience for the students
- Disadvantage
 - Some students are not ready or comfortable
 - Can lead to some bad surprises

When things go wrong..

- Pay attention to the group dynamics
- Be approachable
- Don't ignore the problem
- React fairly quickly but sensitively
- Ask for advice
- Courage is a virtue