“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
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