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Mastering Your Ph.D.: Better Communication With Your Supervisor

Patricia Gosling, Bart Noordam
Germany
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Is poor communication with your supervisor getting in the way of your progress in the lab? Perhaps you've reached an impasse in your research and can't see a way through. Or maybe it seems that--from your supervisor's point of view--nothing you do is good enough. If you and your supervisor have different expectations of your output, and the two of you haven't spoken in months, then a lack of communication is surely holding you back.

Gauge your supervisor's enthusiasm and interest by paying attention to body language and other nonverbal cues.

Once settled into their projects, many graduate students are left to work things out on their own. That's as it should be, to a certain extent, as much of graduate training is focused on having you develop the ability to meet problems head on and solve them on your own. But your supervisor must ultimately approve your thesis, so keeping the lines of communication open is crucial. Don't wait until you get into serious problems before knocking on your supervisor's door. Even if your supervisor keeps her distance, as a seasoned

researcher, she should be able to provide appropriate guidance, and, one hopes, a neutral perspective. Even if you feel that your supervisor tends to place his or her interests above your own, initiating communication on a regular basis will give you the opportunity to voice your concerns.

Some people are born communicators; if you aren't, and talking to your supervisor feels like talking to a wall, take heart: Good communication skills can be learned. If you're having trouble connecting with your supervisor in a satisfying way, the key to better communication is understanding your supervisor's personality and communication style, as well as your own. Everyone is different: Some like the free-and-easy approach; others like more structure. Either way, better communication is likely to involve planning and a conscious effort on your part. If

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communication with your supervisor is poor or nonexistent, and has been from the beginning, don't blame yourself. It's also not a good idea to try to change your supervisor's ways; it won't work. Instead, focus on what *you* can do to improve the situation.

UNDERSTANDING COMMUNICATION STYLES

Does your supervisor always seem to address the lab as a whole rather than each of you as individuals with different needs, skills, and abilities? Perhaps in your weekly group meeting, she scans the room, asks, "Everything going okay? Any problems? No? Great," and then dashes back to her office or to another meeting. This kind of behavior doesn't make your supervisor a bad person; it may mean she is busy and perhaps insensitive to cues from lab members about the need for regular contact.

Possibly, your supervisor talks to you individually, but he's a "hit and run" artist, tossing out a query about your progress as he breezes through the lab and then hides behind a stack of journal articles on his desk.

If your supervisor is an assistant professor just starting out, she may spend most of her time in the lab working beside you. If that's the case, there will be many opportunities for discussions, formal and informal. And unless your supervisor is very bad at communicating, good rapport will develop naturally.

If your supervisor is established at the institution and highly regarded in her field, she may rarely appear in the lab at all. In between international conferences, she sticks her head in the door for a quick hello and may only meet with her most senior postdoc to assess the lab's progress. If this is your situation and you feel like a "worker bee," with a supervisor who is remote or hard to approach, it can be difficult to speak up and make your concerns known.

But no matter what your supervisor's style, you can find ways to make yourself heard. The most valuable thing you can do is to make an appointment to talk face-to-face whenever you have something important to discuss. Even if you have lots of access to your supervisor and engage in many informal chats, a formal talk will allow you to structure your questions and clarify important issues. If you prepare well for the meeting, all you'll need is 15 minutes or so of your supervisor's time.

No matter how busy your supervisor is, plan to meet at least once a month--more often is even better--to discuss your research and other issues you want to address. Suggest a time of day when a meeting is likely to be most successful. Is he more focused first thing in the morning? Then make your appointment before he is swamped with other priorities. Immediately after lunch is another good time. Avoid making appointments late in the day, because they are likely to be canceled as other priorities press in and the end of the workday approaches.

STRUCTURED COMMUNICATION IS KEY

Informal, spontaneous communication plays an important role in building relationships and establishing trust. Informal chats about work or other common interests can help build rapport, and the more comfortable you and your supervisor are with each other, the better. A good rapport based on trust and mutual respect can be a great asset.

It is not, however, something you can force, and you can still make progress without this kind of rapport. The most crucial form of communication takes place during regular, short, face-to-face meetings between just you and your supervisor.

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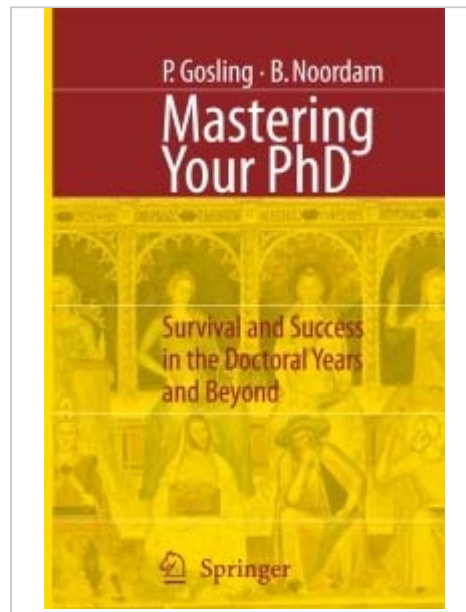
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Once your appointment has been set up, take time to prepare. Go to your meeting with a written list of questions and concerns. Keep them brief--no more than three issues per meeting. Be specific; it won't do any good to ask, "So, how do you think I'm progressing?" A question like that will just encourage your supervisor to respond in general terms or say something encouraging but meaningless, or--worse--disparaging but meaningless. If you need guidance on how to move your research forward, for example, come to your meeting with two or three of your own ideas about how to proceed. Give your supervisor enough context to be able to provide you with helpful input. If you haven't spoken for a while, give him a brief summary of your most recent results.

During the meeting, take notes and jot down your supervisor's suggestions, assuming it's okay with her; some people find it disconcerting to have their remarks written down. As you chat, gauge your supervisor's enthusiasm and interest by paying attention to body language and other nonverbal cues. At the end of the meeting, thank your supervisor for her time and immediately send a follow up e-mail that summarizes what you discussed. That way, you'll have a record of your questions or concerns and your supervisor's responses. Print out the correspondence and keep it in a file, along with your original list of "talking points," for future reference.

In addition to your face-to-face meetings, you may want to chat with your supervisor whenever the chance arises, as well as send him informal monthly updates of your progress by e-mail. Even if your supervisor is unwilling to work with you on creating a [Monthly Progress Monitor](#), sending an e-mail at the end of every month, with a brief summary of the experiments you've done and results you've achieved, is another effective way of keeping your supervisor up-to-date on your work. But none of this should substitute for regular, short, structured meetings with an agenda you prepare. Allowing too much time to pass between structured communications may cause your research--and your relationship with your supervisor--to veer off in a direction in which it shouldn't go.

With all the focus on structure, why bother to have a meeting? Can't it all be done by e-mail? Not really. E-mail and other electronic forms of communication are useful, but they aren't adequate. Even if you're reciting lists and focusing on facts during your face-to-face meetings, you're sending and receiving a complex set of verbal and nonverbal cues that are crucial to establishing trust, the foundation of a strong working relationship. E-mail fails to convey this crucial information. Emoticons are no substitute for real emotions. Meeting frequently and regularly with your supervisor, asking relevant questions, and documenting her input will increase the probability that good communication flows in both directions and that your research is in line with what your supervisor wants and expects.

Learning good communication skills in an unstructured environment can be a challenge. But fostering effective communication with a supervisor, particularly if he or she is a poor communicator or difficult to approach, is a skill that will serve you well throughout your career. Even if you become an independent entrepreneur without a boss, you will surely have clients and colleagues who will benefit immensely from your ability to communicate well.

<p>Patricia Gosling and Bart Noordam are the authors of <i>Mastering Your Ph.D.: Survival and Success in the Doctoral Years and Beyond</i> (Springer, 2006). Gosling is a senior medical writer at Novartis Vaccines and Diagnostics in Germany and a freelance science writer. Noordam is a professor of physics at the University of Amsterdam, the Netherlands, and director of development and engineering at ASML. He has also worked for McKinsey and Co.</p>	<p>Comments, suggestions? Please send your feedback to our editor.</p>
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