

## CAREER DEVELOPMENT : ARTICLES

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### Mastering Your Ph.D.: Dealing With Difficult Colleagues

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In an ideal world, your lab would contain only bright, capable people working harmoniously together in the pursuit of scientific knowledge. If this describes your lab, count yourself lucky, because most scientists work in close quarters with at least one person who tries your patience or is difficult to get along with.

By difficult people, we mean those whose attitude and behaviour can sabotage your work and career. Take a look around your lab or department (and in a mirror, too!) to see if you recognise any of these "types" who have the potential to sink your career or your self-esteem:

- **Star Researcher (a.k.a. The Hotshot):** The Star Researcher is on the fast track to success--or so he thinks--and has an ego to match his ambition. He or she dominates group meetings and touts his own success while belittling the contributions of others. Your supervisor gives him the best projects and showers him with attention and praise.

- **The Energizer Bunny:** This dynamo seems to live in the lab. He's there when you arrive in the morning and when you leave at night and seems to run twice as many experiments as anyone else. All this would be fine if it weren't for his tendency to treat with derision anyone who doesn't show the same fierce dedication that he does.

- **The Stealth Bomber:** The Stealth Bomber attacks without warning. Right in the middle of a group meeting or department gathering, she'll say something about your latest failed experiment or cock-up in the lab. The Stealth Bomber operates best in front of an audience and loves nothing more than to ambush others.

- **The Know-It-All:** Without any prompting, this person will launch into a lecture on the right way to do a procedure or protocol or look over your shoulder and announce that what you're doing is "all wrong." "Here, let me show you" is the Know-It-All's mantra as he plucks a pipette from your hand.

- **Woe Is Me:** Ah, the chronic complainer. Everything in this person's life is grist for the mill. Experiments aren't going well, she isn't getting along with her supervisor, there are problems in her personal life, and the equipment is not up to par. If it exists, this individual will complain about it.

- **The Hornet:** A prime candidate for anger-management coaching, the hornet will explode with wrath for no reason at all or if confronted, challenged, or rubbed the wrong way. You and everyone else in the lab walk on eggshells in fear that The Hornet will deliver a nasty sting.

- **Sneak Thief:** The Sneak Thief borrows your equipment and expertise, picks your brain for ideas, then refuses to give credit when credit is due. When the Sneak Thief has a success, he'll say he did it all on his own.

- **Who, Me?:** This person has a hard time keeping commitments. Say that you've decided to work on a project together and have divided up the work. Then it comes time to deliver: "Who, me? Was I supposed to do that experiment? Order those supplies? Calibrate the machine?"

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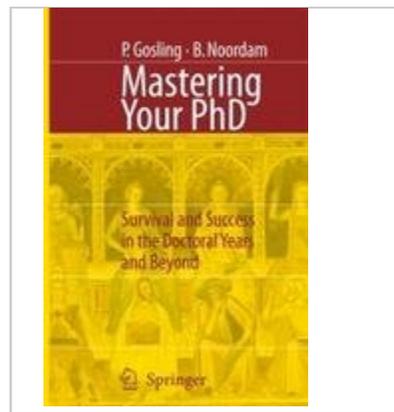
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Perhaps you're the type of person who usually turns the other cheek in difficult situations and prefers to avoid conflict at all cost. If that's the case, your strategy so far has been to ignore the difficult person. But in a lab situation, avoiding the difficult person will only make matters worse: He or she will go on being difficult, and you will feel increasing discomfort, not to mention resentment. Bringing the problem to your supervisor's attention may seem like another option, but not all supervisors are good managers.

So how do you deal with a difficult co-worker? Each type of person requires a different approach, but there are some simple things you can do to diffuse the tension. For some types of difficult behaviour, the best approach may be to talk to the individual about how his behaviour affects you. For other types, more subtle and oblique ways of dealing with the problem behaviour may be required.

When dealing with the Star Researcher, it's easy to get defensive: "Why does she get all the attention?" In this case, though, the best response is no response. Confrontation may cause things to escalate, and you'll end up with a powerful foe. When alone with your supervisor, resist the temptation to mention your irritation with the Star Researcher's ego; criticism from you will seem like sour grapes. Second, concentrate on producing great work. When you submit your own (dazzling) work for publication, the peer-reviewers won't know or care about the Star Researcher's outsized ego. It's the work that counts in the end, so make sure yours is top-notch.



To the Stealth Bomber you might say: "During group meetings, I've noticed you habitually bring up problems I'm having with my research. I understand that this makes for dynamic discussions, but I'd feel better if I could bring up those issues myself." The advantage of this approach is that by explaining why a certain behaviour upsets you, you focus on the behaviour rather than the individual. By being direct but subtle, you also allow the Stealth Bomber to save face by, it is hoped, getting him to see your point of view. This approach also lets the Stealth Bomber know you're aware of what he's doing. Every time it happens, bring it up again until he stops.

With the chronic complainer, you might try adopting a stance of neutral listening rather than co-complaining and feeding the complaint cycle. For example, acknowledge what the complainer is saying by nodding and making neutral statements such as, "Hmm, I'm sorry to hear that." Let the complainer moan about how bad everything is for 2 minutes and then move into problem-solving mode. You might say: "It must not be easy to get work done when your equipment keeps breaking down. So what are you going to do about it?" In short, reward positive action, not endless complaining.

When dealing with aggressive individuals such as The Hornet, the best way to cope with an angry outburst is to do nothing. In some cases, it is best to let such an individual rant. Remain cool and detached, and when he's finished, walk away. Or, depending on how volatile the situation is, you might suggest that you'll discuss the issue when he's ready to talk calmly about it. By adopting a Zen approach and not allowing an outburst to escalate, you probably will eventually stop being a target of his anger.

The Know-It-All can be particularly irritating in the competitive atmosphere of a lab, where everyone is working hard to become an expert. One way to defuse the Know-It-All is by agreeing with everything he says. Nod thoughtfully and then introduce your own thoughts and opinions in a questioning manner: "Your way of doing that procedure sounds terrific, but have you ever considered ... ?"

As for the Energizer Bunny, so what if she puts in 16-hour days in the lab and runs marathons on the weekends? If that's not your style, so be it. Embrace your positive attributes and don't beat yourself up because you work at a pace different from someone else's. It might help to find subtle ways to let the Energizer Bunny know that your work is just as important to you as hers is to her. If you make it clear that you won't be intimidated by her input or output, you may even earn her respect.

## MONITOR YOUR RESPONSE

Finally, take a look at how you react when dealing with a difficult person. Do you get defensive, angry, intimidated, irritated? Or are you able to brush it off? A big part of dealing with difficult people is having confidence in your own work. Building confidence takes time, but as you start to amass a steady stream of successful experiments and publications, other people's attitudes and behaviours will matter less. In the short term, it might help to remember that difficult people often act as they do out of fear. And ultimately, because you can't really change another person's behaviour, all you can do is change how you handle it. So keep working on your own goals and don't allow others to undermine you.

Working with difficult people is never easy. But if you learn how to cope with contrary colleagues early in your career, particularly in the competitive atmosphere of a lab, you will develop valuable coping and people-management skills that will serve you time and again, wherever your career path takes you.

Patricia Gosling is the author (with Bart Noordam) of

Comments, suggestions? Please send

*Mastering Your Ph.D.: Survival and Success in the Doctoral Years and Beyond* ([Springer, 2006](#)). Gosling is a senior medical writer at Novartis Vaccines & Diagnostics in Germany and also works as a freelance science writer.

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