

Your Academic Career: Managing Professional Relationships

In addition to a talent for research and dedication to your subject matter, success in academia requires a variety of sophisticated management skills. Throughout your career, you will be faced with a variety of interpersonal management situations. This will involve both managing up (managing the goals and expectations of your boss) and managing down (motivating and managing an individual or team). This handout aims to identify and discuss a wide range of skills specific to managing others in your academic career.

WHAT MAKES A GOOD MANAGER?

Very often, the difference between a competent manager and an exceptional manager is simply a genuine interest in people. If you take the time to understand what is important to your colleagues, you will be able to interact with them much more effectively at whatever level is appropriate. Clear, open communication between you and others minimises a whole range of potential problems before they escalate.

The ability to recognise and employ different communication skills based on specific situations is also critical to successful management. When managing a team, organisational skills, political astuteness, financial awareness and strategic thinking are particularly important. When managing your boss, tact, the ability to follow instructions and an awareness of deadlines are all crucial.

MANAGING UP

During your career, you will inevitably come across a senior individual who does not share your values, skills or interests. In academia this might be a PhD supervisor who seems unsupportive or a Principal Investigator (PI) who delegates practical tasks without paying attention to your intellectual input. In many cases, the problem is due to an inability to find common ground. If you want to influence the actions or attitude of your boss, you need to gain an understanding of the factors that matter to that individual. Then you can use this knowledge to enhance future interactions. While this might sometimes feel like you are compromising your principles, what you are really doing is enhancing your own effectiveness by improving your working relationship with your manager.

How to 'manage up' effectively

- Investigate your boss's current responsibilities and priorities. Is your supervisor trying to finish their own research for publication or are they involved in complex funding applications? Try to avoid interrupting them at times of high pressure or alternatively, offer your assistance.
- Understand where your work fits in with your manager's goals and the wider goals of the organisation; does your project complement their research or could it ruffle a few feathers within your department and beyond? You may be able to anticipate potential problems with conflicting

agendas and discuss these issues yourself before they escalate behind your back.

- Value your boss's time. Make sure you prepare well before each meeting you have with them. Take time to learn what irritates them and avoid those triggers, such as being late for meetings or using incorrect punctuation in written reports.
- Try to understand how your boss works and whether their style is very different to your own. Is their approach formal or informal? If you can never find them in their office, suggest a timetable for regular meetings each term. Do they like to see the bigger picture or focus on data and detail? If you find it difficult to pin them down to a detailed discussion, consider providing a brief email outline of what you hope to discuss in advance of your meeting. Conversely, if you are a bigger-picture person and they want to discuss detail, take along a print out of your latest results to satisfy their needs and then try to steer the discussion on to more conceptual topics.
- Consider asking your boss for feedback on your working relationship as well as your research output. If you feel there is a problem, try tactfully pointing out how their attitude is making you feel. If you can sort out any problems early on in the relationship, they are less likely to escalate in the future.

A tool that may help you understand how your boss's outlook and approach differ from yours is the Myers Briggs Type Indicator (MBTI). The MBTI focuses on your preferred ways of dealing with information, whether you prefer to operate in the outer world of people and events or the inner world of ideas and reflections, how you approach decision-making and how you organise your life. By understanding how you differ from others, you may gain a better perspective on how to interact with them effectively. Ask at your careers service for details of forthcoming MBTI workshops.

If you are having problems in your relationship with your supervisor, there are various support mechanisms available. These range from talking to your peers or another member of staff in the department, to making an appointment with a careers adviser or counsellor. More useful information can be found at The National Postgraduate Committee website, www.npc.org.uk, and the Vitae website, www.vitae.ac.uk.

MANAGING DOWN

It is very unlikely that you will be able to adopt a 'one size fits all' policy when it comes to managing people. Whether you are managing a team of staff or one or two individuals, it can be useful to have an understanding of different management styles. Factors that may influence the management style you use include the sector, profession and/or environment in which you are working, the size of the team, the age, personality and experience of the individuals involved and the particular project or activity taking place.

Management styles

There are numerous papers, books and courses available to help you identify and develop your own style of management, and the list of styles is extensive. Four of the main categories are summarised below:

- **Directing:** managers make all the decisions and tell staff what to do and when/how to do it. This style is useful when dealing with new, inexperienced staff and when things need to be done quickly.
- **Coaching:** managers provide advice and guidance to enable staff to develop their skills and competence. This style is suitable for staff who have some understanding of their role but lack experience.
- **Supporting:** managers encourage and motivate staff to make their own decisions, through praise and constructive feedback. This style is appropriate with competent staff who lack confidence or enthusiasm.
- **Delegating:** managers explain what must be achieved and employees are given responsibility to achieve it. This style is best used with competent, experienced staff who are committed to their role.

Skills required for effective management

The skills required to succeed in a management role are well documented. You will already be proficient in areas such as problem-solving, project and time management and multi-tasking, but there are other crucial skills that you may currently feel less confident using:

- **Leadership:** although your career to date may not have required you to lead a team, it's worth reflecting on situations which have already required you to use leadership skills. These include:
 - Supervising a tutorial group or individual student, which will have given you valuable experience in motivating people and guiding a discussion.
 - Organising a departmental event, which may have involved making quick decisions and delegating tasks.
 - Suggesting a new initiative in your research group, during which you may have had to convince others of its value.
- **Team Building:** as a manager driving your team in a particular strategic direction, it is also important to focus on the needs of individual team members. If you have facilitated tutorial groups you will have already used a variety of team building skills to encourage interaction between students. How did you draw out the quieter group members, subdue the more boisterous ones and manage conflict within the team? Other group environments where you can observe and practise team building include departmental staff/student meetings and field trips.
- **Change Management:** when you take on a new management role you will almost certainly want to make your mark by implementing new ideas. This can be extremely difficult - particularly with an established team - and clear communication is key. While preparing to introduce change, you might want to consider the following:
 - Think about when change in the workplace has affected you and try to analyse how it might have been introduced more smoothly.
 - To gain experience within the academic environment, try introducing a new policy or system within your department, or volunteer to help a colleague who is already doing this.
 - Familiarise yourself with the sometimes complicated bureaucratic channels you will have to go through in order to effect change.
 - Plan strategies to get colleagues and students on board.

- Ensure you are able to emphasise both the short and long term benefits of change. Senior managers are more likely to have an interest in the long-term advantages and colleagues will probably be more concerned with the immediate operational benefits.

- **Strategic Vision:** this is another important aspect of management. A good manager will have a clear idea of the strategic direction in which they wish to steer their team. If you have ever had to persuade someone that your research ideas are valid and original, you can draw on this experience when explaining or promoting your vision to colleagues. Using the previous example of introducing change to a department, strategic thinking comes in when you consider elements such as:

- Why do you want to make the change? Is it to enhance the effectiveness of your team or is it to boost your own career prospects by raising your profile within the department?
- Who will you have to influence in order to introduce this change successfully - senior management, colleagues, students?
- How will you influence them? Do you need them to think it was their idea in order for them to support you?
- How do you plan to introduce the change - subtly, through a series of smaller changes or in a single action?

You may find it easier to identify your desired operational outcome first and then consider your strategy for achieving it.

If you are interested in the theory behind successful management, you may find it useful to read an introductory textbook aimed at management students. You may also be able to access relevant staff training courses through the careers service, graduate school or staff development unit within your institution.

FURTHER INFORMATION

Managing up

- *How to Get a PhD: A Handbook for Students and Their Supervisors*, E.M. Phillips and D.S. Pugh, Open University Press, 2000
- www.vitae.ac.uk Select 'Researchers', then 'Studying for a Doctorate', then 'Managing yourself', then 'Beating problems common to PGRs', then scroll down to find the link to 'your relationship with your supervisor'

Managing down

- *The Academic Career Handbook*, L. Blaxter, C. Hughes and M. Tight, Open University Press, 1998
- *Management: An introduction*, D. Boddy, FT Prentice Hall, 2005

Useful websites

- www.vitae.ac.uk Vitae - see 'Researchers' section of the website for advice on time management, career planning and marketing yourself to employers
- www.npc.org.uk the National Postgraduate Committee aims to promote the interests of postgraduate students in the UK

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