Dealing with Personnel Problems in your Laboratory

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Common problems to deal with:

• Two trainees do not get along
• Somebody used the last of something and did not see that a new one was ordered (e.g., Western blot antibody)
• Somebody makes a mess and does not clean it
• “Borrowing” of items off of one’s bench (e.g., pipetters) and not returning them
• “Know it alls”
Common problems to deal with...

• People not being good “lab citizens”
  --cleaning sink, organizing fridge w/o prompting, etc.
• Not taking turns with lab equipment
  --sign up sheets (PCR, ultra, etc.)
People will bump heads occasionally no matter what

- Maintain a presence as leader
- Pop in regularly to chat (however brief)
- Can get a sense of environment from these visits
- Meet your people one-on-one and ask them how things are going—don’t push it. Just inquire.
- You might need to intervene, but don’t get to the point where they constantly ask you to do so
People will bump heads occasionally no matter what…

- Although this is/should be common sense…
  --discuss in lab meeting with everyone how the lab should be run
  --you’ll need to do this regularly (trainees tend to forget)
  --it reinforces the fact that it is your laboratory and you have ultimate responsibility
In the end, it is **YOUR** laboratory—the environment starts from you:

- Be seen in the laboratory
- Encourage communication
- Don’t breathe down their necks
- Let the petty things work their way out
- Get involved in interpersonal things only as a last resort (i.e., before a fistfight ensues)
- Nip problems in the bud
Other “problems” PIs need to deal with: “work ethic” of personnel

• 9 to 5’ers
• Mondays to Fridays
• Night-owls
• Disappearing acts
• Always there, but no data to show for it
• Taking advantage of you being nice
• Set rules as needed

AND stick to them!
The three most important things to do when dealing with problems:

• Document
• Document
• Document!

• Keep a file on each person in the lab
  --this way it is organized and easily accessible if ever needed
More serious problems—you need to be prepared to act swiftly

- Theft
  - personal items
  - laboratory supplies (e.g., antibodies)
  - reagents covered by MTAs
- Sexual harassment
- Other forms of harassment (e.g., racially-based)
- Threats
- “Borrowing” tools (reagents, pipetters, other pieces of equipment, etc.) and not returning them
Making changes in the laboratory

- Termination (firing)
  --technical personnel (6 months probation)
  --postdocs (e.g., T32)
- Postdoc yearly reappointment
- Suggesting a graduate student changes laboratories
- “The needs of the many outweigh the needs of the one”
- You are the boss
Who do you call for the most serious problems?

- Your current faculty mentor(s)
- Your PhD/postdoc advisors
- Your Chair
- IUPUI Police (also under “threats”)
- Deb Cowley (Academic Administration)
- University Counsel’s Office
Getting problem personnel to respond:

• Speak with them
• Speak with them again
• Warning letters
• Warning letters again
• Timeline for action
  --”three strikes”
• Stick to your guns
• If need be, terminate
• Document, document, document
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- Nip problems in the bud
- Sometimes, people just need some incentive to “behave” and are generally not bad (i.e., no need to terminate usually)
Others’ experiences to share...
Questions ?
Additional Feedback?

Let me know your ideas/other thoughts on this topic

Every little bit helps you AND your colleagues
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