

Dealing with Personnel Problems in your Laboratory

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June 4, 2008



SCHOOL OF MEDICINE

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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., pipettors) 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, pipettors, 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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