Dealing with Personnel Problems in your Laboratory – As a Principal Investigator

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Common problems to deal with:

• Two trainees who 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 (e.g., tissue grinders in sink)
• “Borrowing” of items off of one’s bench (e.g., pipetters) and not returning them
• “Know it alls”
Why are there problems anyway?

- We’re only human...
- Lab dynamics are dependent upon who is in there
- Various levels of experience
- Various levels of maturity
- Humans are a possessive species
- Not everyone understands the importance of the big picture
Common problems to deal with…

• People not being good “lab citizens”
  --not cleaning sink, or 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 lab 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
Talk to your trainees regularly…

• How is your science going?
• Are you having any problems in the lab?
• For grad students: when is your next committee meeting scheduled?
• Go over their results and talk about the data critically—don’t “candy-coat” efforts that need improvement
• Communication is essential
Disagreements with your trainees

- Data interpretation
  --you are the Senior author usually
- Level of their effort in the laboratory
  --Not putting in the time you deem necessary for their project’s success
- Expectations of you as a mentor
- Personality clashes
- Hopefully, it only goes so far as to agree to disagree
- What if it goes beyond?
Authorship

• What are the “rules” in place for authorship?
  --what constitutes authorship?
  --who is the first author?
  --who is the last author?
  --where do you put everyone else?

• What happens if there is a disagreement?
  --e.g., a postdoc and grad student think they should be first author

• Multiple first authorships?
  --how do you decide???
In the end, it is **YOUR** laboratory—you set the tone and make the rules…

- 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
- Another PI’s lab “borrowing” your tools (e.g., 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) or other senior faculty members
• 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 (last resort)
• Document, document, document
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
- Sometimes, people just need some incentive to “behave” and are generally not bad (i.e., no need to terminate them usually)
Others’ experiences to share...
Additional questions?

Please fill out the evaluations and hand in as you leave

Thank you for attending…
Additional Feedback?

Let me know your ideas/other thoughts on this topic

Every little bit helps you AND your colleagues
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