

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

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November 4, 2010



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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., pipettors) 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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