Research Lab Management Challenges and Solutions
A Note from the Publisher

Thank you for ordering “Research Lab Management Challenges and Solutions” from the Principal Investigators Association Library. This compilation is designed to help you with everything PIs need to know about supervising, motivating, and addressing other lab management challenges.

In addition to the special reports that make up the library, Principal Investigators Association offers weekly e-Alerts, grant application manuals, and a year-long series of audioconferences — all devoted to helping you improve performance and spend more time doing what you love: the research. Our goal as an association is to be the world’s leading source of real-world, results-oriented information for our members in all fields of science. Our unique approach — delivering targeted guidance, case studies, success strategies and best practices — has earned us a reputation for depth, usefulness and high-value information as well as a loyal group of members who rely on that information to help them with their administrative and funding duties. We’re glad you’ve joined them and invite you to review all of our products and services at www.principalinvestigators.org.

We are always on the lookout for interesting topics, researcher needs, and ways we can be of service to you. If you have a success story you would like to share with your colleagues, please do not hesitate to contact me. I would be delighted to hear from you, and I look forward to serving you and your organization with the best advice and information available in the future.

Best Regards,

Leslie Norins, MD, PhD
Founder
Principal Investigators Association
9990 Coconut Road Suite 316
Bonita Springs, FL 34135
info@principalinvestigators.org
Table of Contents

A Note from the Publisher ........................................................................................................... 2
Has Lab Become Dysfunctional? Some Common Causes, Solutions ............................. 4
How to Manage ‘Generation Y’ Laboratory Staffers ......................................................... 6
How Introverts Can Manage Effectively Despite Their Shyness .................................. 8
5 Clues That You May Intimidate Your Staff — and
How to Adopt a More Appropriate Style............................................................................. 11
How to Recognize and Handle a ‘Manipulator’ on Your Staff........................................ 13
Conflict Management That Brings Positive Change to Lab Environment .................... 15
How to Deal with a Dueling Duo........................................................................................... 18
Adverse Effects of Unresolved Conflict ................................................................................ 19
What Not to Do........................................................................................................................ 19
Two of My Staff Members Are “Avoiding” Each Other;
How Can I Resolve This Problem? ...................................................................................... 20
Talented Post-Doc Has Answer for Everything – How Can I Get Through to Him?........ 21
Is Burnout a Stealthy Saboteur in Your Lab? ...................................................................... 23
9 Signs that May Indicate Burnout....................................................................................... 24
Has Lab Become Dysfunctional?
Some Common Causes, Solutions

How can you prevent or correct dysfunction and consistently run a productive lab with a happy staff?

**Dr. Bruce J. Mayer**, associate professor of genetics/developmental biology at the University of Connecticut Health Center at Farmington, finds that his “hands-off” management style has worked at his lab for the past 10 years. He typically has six to 10 staff members — post-docs, graduate students and technicians.

He once faced a potentially serious situation when a graduate student began disrupting the lab environment with bizarre behavior. Mayer intervened, working with institutional sources; the student got psychological help and eventually left. Mayer said he didn't pay enough attention to warning signs during the hiring process. The individual had behaved badly at previous labs.

Mayer relies on an open-door policy and weekly staff meetings to support his management style; he encourages all to speak up at the meetings and trusts his staff to be self-motivated in handling their assignments.

**Dr. Steve Koch**, assistant professor of biophysics at the University of New Mexico, says he values the management principles he learned in a class on entrepreneurship he took while earning his PhD at Cornell University.

At the Koch Lab, he manages five graduate students and one undergraduate. He trusts his students to run the lab because they are good at it.

When he hires people, he tries to identify their specific talents and make lab assignments that match those talents, which typically results in a productive, content staff. He asks: “What's the most fun thing you do in the lab? What do you hate doing?”

*Example:* An undergraduate highly proficient with computer software will be happier and more productive recording and managing data on electronic spreadsheets instead of making written lab notebook entries. That task can be assigned to a staffer who takes pride in maintaining notebooks and who can’t stand to work with Excel.

Koch learned the managerial technique of recognizing and respecting individual talent from one of his mentors, **Dr. Francis Collins**, who ran the human genetics lab at the University of Michigan at Ann Arbor. That's where Koch earned his undergraduate degree. (Dr. Collins later led the Human Genome Project and is now director of the National Institutes of Health.)

“I was just an undergraduate washing dishes in the lab, and he invited me to lab meetings,” Koch said. “He did it to show me respect,” so Koch tries to emulate showing that kind of respect to all his staff members.

Here is a compilation of recommendations from Koch, Mayer and **Dr. Kathy Barker** of Seattle, a former PI and author of *At the Helm: Leading Your Laboratory*:

1. **Pay attention and intervene early when you notice a potential problem.** Warning signs vary but often include chronic lateness, slovenly appearance, radical outbursts or silence. These can be signals of at-home issues, substance abuse or conflict with colleagues.
Have a private talk with such individuals to see what’s behind the behavior. Give them a set time to improve on minor infractions, but let them know that disruptive behavior will not be tolerated. If two employees are in conflict, bring them together and hear both sides in an attempt to instill understanding and resolution. Many disagreements are over petty issues, such as length of lunch breaks, and can be resolved with uniform policies.

2. Issue firm reminders. If data recording, lab notebooks and lab organization are getting sloppy due to laziness, remind each staff member of his or her duties to keep the lab safe, clean and ordered for peak performance. Put those who ignore such reminders on notice.

For serious infractions, such as data mismanagement, personally review the data, determine the cause (sloppiness, actual fraud) and take appropriate actions. Sloppiness can be corrected with verbal and/or written warnings and continual close monitoring until a problem is resolved. Fraud is typically an offense triggering dismissal and will involve the Human Resources department.

3. Examine yourself. Could you be contributing to low morale by intimidating your staff? You might be if any of the following are true: You rely mostly on one or two people, creating a perception of favoritism; people don’t readily comment in your meetings; others give in too quickly to your opinion; staffers don’t seem confident, as though waiting for their ideas to be rejected; or few people come to you with questions or concerns. If these problems are in evidence, turn them around by spreading around important tasks, inviting and accepting opinions, and encouraging staffers to speak up; thank them for doing so.

4. Explain your management style. If yours is the “hands-off” style, let staffers know they are trusted to complete work without your constant supervision. You may need to adjust your style at times; some thrive on micromanagement, but that will become apparent if they consistently ask for help or instructions.

5. Have regular weekly lab meetings. Encourage everyone to speak by asking them questions, or handing out agendas where everyone has a topic on which to comment.

6. Distribute written policies on working hours, vacations, lab notebooks and other organizational matters to ensure fairness. For example, lifestyle conflicts over work schedules between parents and non-parents, a common occurrence, can be prevented or resolved with clear policies.

7. Communicate expectations. Unspoken expectations “are the biggest reason for conflict,” Barker says. Tell staffers at the time of hire what’s required, and give gentle reminders when necessary.

8. Celebrate victories with praise or get-togethers — perhaps special restaurant lunches, occasional after-hours drinks or a small party in the lab with cake or pizza. “Social interaction reminds staff members that you care and that they like each other,” Barker says.

9. Periodic staff evaluations provide you with a documented performance record and keep staff members accountable.

10. Terminate when necessary. If any problem becomes chronic, you may have to fire a staff member (working through the HR department). “If you are thinking of firing, this is where periodic evaluations are useful because you have documentation,” Barker says.
How to Manage ‘Generation Y’ Laboratory Staffers

The twenty-somethings who populate your lab — or soon will — sometimes are portrayed in the media as poorly dressed slacker geeks dressed in T-shirts and jeans who spend most of their waking hours sending meaningless texts and tweets from their cell phones.

That’s one way to view them.

But these members of Generation Y, or the “millenials” as they’re also called, also are by far the most technology-savvy generation ever to enter the workforce. Most are solution-oriented, team-focused, and committed to making work a meaningful part of their adult lives.

But they generally view the workplace and the employer-employee relationship differently than previous generations. Because to them an information economy has always existed, they’re more comfortable with ideas and learning as an end in itself — and less comfortable with repetitive tasks and punching a time clock.

In short, Gen Y’s can be ideal employees for research laboratories like yours. The key is learning how to engage them and keep them focused on the important work you’re doing.

Millenials, says consultant Karyn Gavzer, head of KG Marketing & Training Inc., Springboro, Ohio, are the generation that follows Generation X, the “lost generation” moniker given to the 33- to 44-year-olds who followed the 45- to 63-year-old Baby Boomers. Indeed, she adds, the 15- to 32-year-old Gen Y-ers are 76 million strong — a slightly larger population than the Boomers.

Derek Irvine, CMO and head of strategic consulting at Boston-based Globoforce, wrote this about Generation Y in a recent issue of Workspan: “They need a direct communication style with timely feedback, frequent encouragement and recognition of their efforts. They are more team-oriented, enjoy change, and need to respect their leaders to follow them.”

So how do you harness their energy and intelligence?

Start by forgetting what you learned about the workplace when you were their age. “Much of today’s management comes from the now-outdated industrial age,” explains Humanetrics LLC consultant Jay Forte. “Gen Y-ers want to work in jobs they are good at and that appeal to them. Too many older managers do not use that approach with staff-level employees.”

Recognize, too, that Gen Y-ers “like to have fun and socialize,” adds consultant Judy Capko, of Capko & Co., Thousand Oaks, Calif. “Because they grew up in an electronic world, they are excellent multi-taskers. They cannot remember a time when you didn’t have immediate access to information and communications — resulting in different work habits and expectations than prior generations.”

Key among those different work habits, Capko notes, is that millenials “sometimes question authority, wanting to know why something needs to be done a certain way before willingly accepting change.” But that’s not always a bad
thing. “They can have a positive influence on other generations,” she adds, “because they know how to get things done quickly and how to eliminate processes that have been bogged down by generations accustomed to a paper world.”

**Provide genuine feedback**

Not only are Gen Y-ers likely to demand context for assigned tasks, they like to hear how well they’re performing. “Millenials respond to frequent feedback,” Capko explains, “because they grew up in a world where everyone gets a trophy and Mom and Dad give constant praise.” She adds: “They need to know how their work is perceived and its impact. The annual review alone just doesn’t cut it for them. Communicate clearly.”

Adds Gavzer: “Gen Y-ers can spot fakes from a mile away, so be authentic with them.”

If that sounds more like a team approach to work than an individual-focused one, that’s because millenials have a more collaborative approach to business.

“What activates Gen Y-ers is constant and personal contact with management,” Forte points out. “Managers who are most successful with them are those who get to know their employees, provide constant feedback and coaching, realign their roles to play to their talents and build ‘performance ownership’ into their roles. Those managers act more like coaches than bosses.”

Here are a few of the experts’ tips for getting the most out of millenials:

- Forte suggests assessing their strengths and assigning them roles that fit their particular talents. Understand Gen Y-ers’ talents, values, and interests and relate to them as people. “Know what motivates them and use it to keep their attention.”
- Allow them to offer their perspectives. In fact, “require all employees to offer ideas and solutions, to help them have a voice and a stake in the enterprise’s success or failure,” Forte says.
- Capitalize on their strengths, Capjo urges. “Let them help older generations become more tech-savvy. If there is a change in their performance, be timely in your response. Use your listening skills.”

At the end of the day, Gavzer says, Gen Y-ers are more like previous generations of employees than they are different from them. “The mistakes millennials make often are the same ones that young, inexperienced workers have always made.” Employers should clearly state their expectations for appearance, attendance, and participation before they hire to ensure that both sides know what is expected, she says.

“I think the two biggest mistakes employers make,” Gavzer adds, “are not being clear about expectations and not providing sufficient training and feedback — and then blaming the young people for poor performance or attitude.”
How Introverts Can Manage Effectively Despite Their Shyness

Can you be a good manager and an introvert at the same time?

Yes, you can. It turns out that some of the best managers are introverts, such as Bill Gates and Warren Buffett, to name just two. That's according to Jennifer Kahnweiler, an executive coach and author of *The Introverted Leader: Building on Your Quiet Strength.*

She says that principal investigators who are introverts will have to overcome certain characteristics in order to manage effectively. Among these:

- **Taking too much upon themselves.** Introverts may have difficulty saying No or asking for help. This can lead to being overwhelmed by projects or deadlines. It can also lead to a perception by others that the PI is a micro-manager or mistrustful of subordinates, when the problem is they simply don’t want to ask others to help.

  If that’s your problem, here are three suggestions:
  
  First, “speak up — communicate — early and often,” says Kahnweiler. “Many introverts wait to share what’s going on with their work. Because they’ve taken too much on, they wait until there’s a crisis before communicating. An extrovert would’ve spoken up right away and redistributed the work — probably to an introvert, who gets stuck with all the work and no relief.”

  Others in your lab might take your lack of communication as a sign that all’s well. Introverts need to train themselves — force themselves, if necessary, until it feels more natural — to keep others updated, rather than shouldering too much work alone.

  Second, in learning to say No, introverts need to reduce their pattern of “self-talk,” Kahnweiler says. For instance, many introverts tend to “should” and “must” themselves to death in their internal dialogues, as in, “If that lab tech can’t do it, I should be able to finish this off” and “I should be able to meet that truncated deadline.” The result is they don’t draw a limit when they should.

  Third, if it’s still a problem, look for a mentor who can remind you of priorities and not to do your team’s work. Introverts may be hyper-responsible and end up not delegating. Having someone remind you to learn delegation goes a long way, Kahnweiler says.

- **Losing energy from people interactions.** Extroverts feel energized by positive interactions with others. Introverts may also feel positive, but also relieved when the interactions are over. In some cases, they may feel drained. They also need “alone time,” often for processing information internally before returning to discuss things with the team, experts say.

  **Suggestion:** Pace yourself. As a PI, you have control over your calendar. Build in time between meetings to decompress and give yourself some time to think. Control interruptions (e.g., when you need “alone time,” find a conference room where you can’t be interrupted for 15 minutes or so. You don’t want to disappear for good, but you want to give yourself time to recharge).
“You have to monitor your energy and plan your day,” says Kahnweiler.

• Overuse of written communication, such as e-mail. E-mail is fine for project-related communication. But it’s not effective and can be deeply counterproductive as a personal management tool.

Suggestion: If possible, don’t use e-mail to say anything you wouldn’t say to the person directly, and don’t use e-mail to resolve conflicts. It’s too easy to be overly harsh in an e-mail, and e-mail can easily be misinterpreted.

“I hear about this every single day with friends and clients,” says Kahnweiler. “E-mail is a multiplier of misunderstanding.”

Rule of thumb: If there are more than three e-mails back and forth, pick up the phone. Otherwise, as Kahnweiler says, “You can go down a rabbit hole.” E-mail loses the nuances you get from voice and face-to-face communication.

Suggestion: Match the medium to the message. Ask yourself: What’s the right way to communicate? E-mail is fine for simple project directions and the like — but it’s unfriendly to management tasks, especially anything involving discipline.

The positives – and how to obtain them

However, introverts also bring great strengths to the table when it comes to managing others. Among these:

• A calming influence. Introverts’ low-key ways, combined with PIs’ tendency to be well-prepared, project confidence that others will pick up on. A stressed-out lab team often will trust the person with the cool head who seems well-prepared.

• A propensity to think deeply first, then speak. Introverts don’t shoot from the hip – they think, examine the issues, and then make suggestions. One truly insightful comment in a meeting can make a meeting much more productive, says Kahnweiler.

• A desire for meaningful interactions. One biotech PI frequently questions her charges in-depth, expecting real answers for how to make the lab and its projects go more smoothly. There’s less chit-chat, but it’s expected that when there is interaction, it’ll be purposeful.

To develop these strengths, Kahnweiler recommends the “four Ps”:

1. Preparation. “That’s what introverts do very well,” she says. Introverted PIs will do a great job preparing technical and scientific work. Those who become great managers start by extending that preparation process to people skills. They get questions ready ahead of time for individual coaching sessions.

“Successful leaders prepare for people interactions as much as they do for the technical,” Kahnweiler explains.

2. Presence. “Once you’ve prepared, let that part go and just be in the moment,” says Kahnweiler. “Introverts are natural listeners and observers.” Those skills can open people up and allow for a deeper communication about their strengths and weaknesses in the lab, as well as ways to improve productivity and morale.

4. **Practice.** “Continue to hone these skills,” says Kahnweiler. “Maybe you weren't a good delegator at first, but you got there through practice.” Keep practicing.

**Source:** Kahnweiler, PhD, [www.aboutyouinc.com](http://www.aboutyouinc.com), is author of *The Introverted Leader: Building on Your Quiet Strength.*
5 Clues That You May Intimidate Your Staff — and How to Adopt a More Appropriate Style

Is it possible that you unknowingly bully your laboratory staff because of a management style that is intimidating to them? According to Valerie Grubb, a New York City management consultant and trainer, here are five tell-tale signs indicating that could be the case:

1. You rely on one/only a few people. This creates a perception of favoritism. Only the equally self-assertive may speak up. To assess yourself, consider a spreadsheet with your staffers' names and check off how often you speak to them. If you see a pattern, commit to broadening your communication efforts over at least a few months, to make it a habit.

2. People don't speak up at meetings. If you have too many “spectators” at meetings, consider ending each meeting with a question such as, “What are you going to do differently as a result of this meeting?” Give everyone a chance to speak. That not only keeps people on their toes, it accustoms them to presenting their ideas in front of you. (Plus, they learn from how others present their ideas.)

3. Others give in too quickly to your opinion. There's something to be said for a challenging discussion. One technique: If someone gives in too easily to you, smile and say something like, “You’re accepting it that easily? What about …?” and argue their side for a while. That'll indicate you want people to speak their minds.

4. Staff members don’t seem confident, or seem to wait for their ideas to be rejected. This can happen when you immediately poke holes in their argument. One effective technique to consider: Finish or “complete” their idea for them, or take the idea to the next level. Staffers will feel pleased that you understood and helped them understand their own thinking better. Repeat a few times and they’ll be even more eager to present thoughts to you.

5. Few people come to you with issues or concerns. You may want people to go through the chain of command, and certainly don’t want people going over their manager’s heads. But you also want to speak directly to people, too. When possible, have an open-door policy, even setting aside a specific time.

Choose an appropriate management style

If you see any of these signs, consider which management style you are using most often. Each is appropriate for specific times. Some broad categories include:

Command-and-control: This means you make the decisions and tell people how to carry them out. In a crisis, you need to be directive (and yes, a little intimidating). When the pressure’s off, however, you're better off using other styles.

Example: There’s an accident in the lab, and you need people to isolate the problem and evacuate. At this point, you need to act like a drill sergeant and issue direct orders.
**Command-and-execute:** This usually happens when a lab staffer lets you down at crunch time, and you must step in and redo their work. It usually happens in small or cash-strapped organizations where there's not enough training time for staff development.

**Key:** If you have to resort to this management technique, make sure that, after the crisis is over, you offer coaching and encouragement. It's demoralizing (and intimidating) to lab staffers if there’s no follow-up.

**Example:** You had delegated a grant application to a senior staffer. You realize at the last minute that the work needs to be redone, so you re-write the answers. Afterward, go over what went wrong and how to prevent the crisis the next time.

**Consensus-building:** You communicate a vision and want the team to assist in deciding which goals to set and how best to achieve them. The PI as a facilitator explores other’s ideas and makes decisions based on consensus. That way, everyone feels their input is valued, and you have everyone’s buy-in on the project.

**Example:** A PI wanted to implement new safety procedures in a chemical-testing lab. He simply implemented them command-and-control style. This caused his experienced lab techs to balk – many had been using the old procedures for more than a decade and said the new procedures slowed them down. That PI was eventually replaced. Better: Ask the lab techs how they could meet new safety requirements while maintaining productivity. Together, you can create new procedures that everyone accepts.

**Coaching:** You provide individual mentoring to help others develop skills. You look at how they manage their lab area, how they document, and how they report. Then offer advice, suggestions for improvement, and encouraging stories about how you developed in your career. The result is a closer, more trusting working relationship and higher productivity and performance.

**Example:** A new researcher found himself in conflict over time schedules and use of equipment with a senior researcher. A micro-manager would have imposed a solution. An impatient manager merely would have warned the new arrival not to get a reputation as a hot-head. But a coach would have gone a step further, and helped the person develop the skills to resolve the conflict, e.g., “Here are some suggestions for peacefully working this out,” and “Here's how I handled a similar situation early in my career.”
Watch for 5 Behaviors, Deflect Them
How to Recognize and Handle a ‘Manipulator’ on Your Staff

A PI is having difficulty getting a data report from a staff member. First, the staffer blames the custom software’s reporting module. Next, he subtly implies that the PI doesn’t understand the time required to debug it. Then he suggests the PI’s time frame is unreasonable. Next up, he asks why the PI needs the report this week. Finally, the staffer gets angry.

Is this PI being “played?” If you can spot the warning signs of a manipulator, the answer’s “Yes,” according to Jennifer Alfonso, a consultant on workplace behavioral issues for angermanagement.org. She spoke recently on non-defensive communication at a Principal Investigator Association audio conference, “Powerful Lab Communication: How to Deal with Difficult Lab Staff and Create More Cohesive Lab Teams.”

5 ‘pretenses’ manipulators use

Alfonso names five communication “pretenses” used by manipulators. All seem reasonable and normal, she says, until you begin to see a pattern and realize the person is trying to control you or hide their own failure or a rules infraction.

1. Changing the subject. Non-manipulative communicators will answer your question. Manipulators usually deflect: “The problem is, the reporting module isn’t working.”

Solution: Gently bring the conversation back on topic: “The software seems a separate issue because I am getting timely data reports from others who use it. I don’t want you to spend time debugging the software. Input the data and I’ll have someone determine whether the modules are working properly.”

If your attempt to manage logistics sends you down a rabbit hole of more and more complications, you may have to go with a technique Alfonso calls “broken record.” That’s where you stay calm, stop explaining, and repeat yourself: “Find a way to get me the data report by Friday. Figure it out — Friday is the deadline.”

2. Joking or making fun of the request. In a professional environment, few openly ridicule others. Therefore, this maneuver must be subtle and said with a smile: “It takes a little while to debug this newfangled software report. I know back in (your) day this stuff used to be done with quill and pen but it’s a little more complex now.” You’re now manipulated into either seeming humorless or accepting the delay.

Solution: Either deflect back with humor or remain on track. Examples: “Yes, I started with quill and pen, but there were also wooly mammoths hunting us when I was a cub PI and we still got our data reports in on time.” Or: “The issue isn’t my technological savvy with the new software. The issue is the data reports.”

Rule of thumb: Remain calm, ignore the joke, and stay on track with your request. Use “broken record” if necessary.
3. **Criticizing or questioning the legitimacy of the request.** This is a more direct effort to get you on the defensive. The person responds with, “I *don’t think it’s reasonable for you to want this in that time frame.*” Now you have to decide if that’s true, and a good manager may reassess it. But let’s say you know that what you’re asking is reasonable.

   **Solution:** Find something to agree with, stay calm, avoid justifying yourself, and return to the subject. “*I agree that this is a tough timeframe and that we often have to get a lot of work done quickly. But it’s important you get this done on time.*” **Rule of thumb:** Don’t take the bait. That could escalate the conflict, Alfonso says.

4. **Asking you why you want what you asked for.** This can be a masked attempt to assist you. It’s only manipulation if you find you’re constantly justifying yourself. Worse, the manipulator has follow-up questions and, before you know it, you look like the one with the problem.

   **Solution:** Decide whether it’s a pattern. If it is manipulation, don’t change the message or embellish it. Any additional info will allow a manipulator to ask more follow-up questions. That in turn keeps the focus on you, not the issue at hand, says Alfonso.

   **Solution:** Acknowledge the question and return to the issue: “*I appreciate your concern for my reasons. They’ve been explained before. Now it’s time for you to deliver.*”

   **Rule of thumb:** From a management perspective, it’s crucial you determine that the question is actual manipulation — not a legitimate need to understand — before you decide not to answer. That’s because one of your most powerful motivational tools is to explain why something must get done. **How to tell the difference:** You’ve already explained personally why their role is important.

5. **Outbursts of emotion.** The person gets angry or upset. You’re taken aback and may feel so uncomfortable you want the conversation to end.

   **Solution:** Remain calm, acknowledge the emotion, and inquire as to what’s behind it. “*I can see you’re upset with my request but I’d like to know why. Help me understand what is upsetting about this.*”

   For most people, says Alfonso, this is will often reveal the actual reason — e.g., “*I fell behind in the data input and thought I could catch up.*” Or, “*I’m supposed to know how to use this reporting software but I’m confused and I didn’t want to tell you.*” Or “*I have conflicting priorities and have more trouble switching tasks than I should.*”

   That can start a productive discussion on how to solve the actual problem.

   **Caveat:** This technique is also the last refuge of a hardened manipulator. **How to spot it:** You both come up with an agreed-upon plan to correct the real problem but you doubt the good faith of the response. Or you get another emotional “real reason” the next time. Rather than judge the person a hardened manipulator, exercise agreed-upon forms of discipline.

   To order the full transcript of this audio conference in CD, MP3, or pdf format, go to [http://www.principalinvestigators.org/Audio-Conferences/audio-conference-100831/](http://www.principalinvestigators.org/Audio-Conferences/audio-conference-100831/)
Conflict Management That Brings Positive Change to Lab Environment

If everyone’s quietly doing their job in your laboratory and there are no apparent conflicts, everything’s fine. Right? Not necessarily, says Howard Gadlin, PhD, ombudsman and director of the NIH Center for Cooperative Resolution and author on conflict management.

“Many approaches treat conflict as a bad thing — something that should be minimized or avoided as much as possible,” Gadlin told a recent Principal Investigators Association webinar audience. But conflict has some upsides as well, he says. These include:

- **The airing of problems.** If everything in the lab seems to be going along swimmingly, that may actually be the case. But it could also mean that no one is talking about the problems. There may be serious problems no one wants to discuss.

- **Expressing dissent.** You know that the party line can be wrong, and you want free-thinking, creative individuals on your staff. Dissent has an important role: It forces people to analyze their positions in front of others and vice-versa. The result of dissent (not insubordination) can result in better and stronger ideas.

- **The surfacing of discontent.** This is a little different from airing problems in that discontent might be something deeply personal. Someone may not be happy in their current role even though there’s no real problem with the lab management. Better it surfaces than lies buried and festers.

- **Stimulating change.** This is the greatest benefit to conflict. Resolving conflict can result in more trust between PIs and their staffs, demonstrating to all that problems are addressed and dealt with.

“Think about conflict as something to be appreciated, something inevitable, something that’s a natural outgrowth of people working and living together,” says Gadlin. “And that it’s important to figure ways to understand conflict, to appreciate it and, in some cases, to use it for our purposes.”

**What you can do**

Gadlin recommends the following five steps in managing laboratory conflict and using it to create positive change:

1. **Differentiate between hostility and disagreement.** Hostility is unproductive, often value-driven and is personal: People become far too emotionally invested in an idea or methodologies. But professional disagreement is necessary.

   “Science depends on disagreement,” says Gadlin. “Disagreement is conflict about intellectual and scientific ideas.”

2. **Be alert to signs that a conflict has become personal.** Avoiding personal conflict is an ideal. As Gadlin says, it’s naïve to think all personal conflict can be avoided. But you can identify when someone moved beyond disagreement:
• When the substance of the discussion moves from an attack on ideas to an attack on the person.
• When you see defensiveness rather than curiosity. “One of the signs that allows me to assess whether a conflict has become personal is whether the parties maintain a curiosity toward one another,” says Gadlin.

3. **Take a stance of curiosity toward any kind of conflict you find,** says Gadlin. Ask questions to find out why someone is agitated or concerned, whether it’s personal or ideas-based disagreement.

“When you demonstrate toward the other person’s argument, you open up the possibility of creating better understanding,” he says. “When you move away from that, you limit the possibility of better understanding.”

**Goal:** Get to the point where the disagreeing parties can move collaboratively toward making a decision. To do that, you have to identify the underlying assumptions.

4. **Know your own and others’ style of handling conflict.** This will help you understand how to proceed.

**Styles include:**

- **Competitors.** You win, they lose. *Example:* You get the laboratory space you want, and the other person doesn’t. If it’s about winning, call attention to it. Most people want to be seen as collegial, and making someone else lose, while occasionally necessary, makes people feel selfish and unconcerned for others.

- **Spiters.** Both sides lose. *Example:* The conflict degenerates to the point no one can use the laboratory space without being hassled or interrupted, and that takes away from research time. Both sides are hurt. Bring them together and talk it out.

- **Accommodators:** These are people who naturally give self away to avoid conflict. You agree to lose, they win, and the conflict goes away. Bring the parties together and reason it out. *Example:* Someone agrees to give up and let the other person have the space even though they may have a greater need for it and it may hurt their career. This is the flip side of competitors.

- **Collaborators:** This is the clichéd, but true, win-win. You identify the results you are looking for and see if there is a way for both sides to get the results they want. *Example:* You work out a schedule for sharing the lab in a way that is adequate to both parties’ needs while more space is obtained.

5. **Think about how to get the win-win while avoiding bad compromises.**

In all this, there is a problem called compromise. It falls into all these categories — compromises can cause both sides to lose, one to win and one to lose, or both sides to win. For example, say you agree to share the lab half the time every day. That could just slow down both your work and even threaten your funding.

However, say you work out a schedule based on a sliding scale, with lots of communication, where both teams are in the lab at the same time but use equipment more intensively when they need it, offering it to others during their less time-intensive periods. Individual conflicts are worked out on a case-by-case. Perhaps in extreme cases where both sides need the equipment at the same time the teams can plan for this and share the costs of renting out extra lab space.
Remember: People usually are united in the questions but divided by the answers. The first step is to agree on the question, and then see if there is a way to get the results they want. Usually, this means discussing the means to get there and uncovering any underlying assumptions.

For example, say that in the course of the discussion about sharing equipment you realize that the other PI's team has time requirements that don't quite add up to your experience. You probe further and learn that the other team has two new members who aren't as experienced on the equipment yet. Perhaps a win-win is to find ways for those newbies to get up to speed more quickly. Enhanced training and practice during low-use hours, even offering some of your experienced staff to help, may generate a win-win scenario.

To order a full transcript of this webinar in CD, MP3 or PDF format, go to http://principalinvestigators.org/communication-skills/.
How to Deal with a Dueling Duo

You first tried to ignore the quarrelling between two of your technicians. Then you admonished them to “quit it.” But, so far nothing seems to work. What to do now?

Stepwise Process Recommended

According to Tim Hicks, Director of the Conflict and Dispute Resolution Masters Program at the University of Oregon, most people tend to be “conflict averse.” However, going out of your way to avoid the conflict is not the best way to address the situation. Instead, he recommends viewing the conflict as a problem, and using a systematic problem-solving approach.

Here is the essence of his 5-step plan:
1. Define the problem;
2. Establish a goal;
3. Find the cause(s);
4. Agree on a solution;
5. Determine each person's responsibilities.

1. **Define the problem.** Pick a time and a private place to meet with the combatants. Two rules: Meet with both together, and meet in private out of the eyes of the rest of the lab mates. Explain, without assigning blame to either party, the purpose of the meeting and the problem as you see it.

   For example, say: “We are meeting to resolve this apparent conflict between the two of you. For several weeks, every time the two of you get into proximity of each other, a squabble results. The disrespect I see is having a bad effect on the lab. Morale is going down. Worse, productivity is suffering. People are starting to take sides, and that has an effect on the quantity and quality of the work we do.”

2. **Establish a goal.** Tell the duo what you expect out of the meeting. For instance, “You each bring a great deal of value to this laboratory, and I would like you both to be able to keep contributing your talent and expertise. So, out of this meeting, I expect the two of you to figure out how to work together without this constant bickering. You don’t have to leave this meeting loving each other, but you do have to leave with a plan on how to settle your differences in a productive way.”

3. **Find the cause(s) to the problem.** Every problem has at least one cause. Tell the conflicting parties, “To resolve the problem, we have to figure out what is causing each of you to go ‘at’ each other. So, you will each now have the opportunity to tell your side of the story. The primary ground rule is that no one can interrupt while the other is speaking. I will act as facilitator, and I may ask questions to clarify. But each of you will listen without interrupting.”
Then give each technician the opportunity to explain the problem in behavioral terms. Ask questions to identify specific behaviors that create barriers to a good working relationship. Make notes as each person talks, to capture critical points.

When the first person is finished explaining the problem, summarize and check for understanding, by saying, “Let me check my notes and summarize what you have been saying. Mary, you say that John… Is this correct?”

Once the tech agrees or clarifies his or her position, ask the other individual, “Is what I’ve summarized what he (she) actually said?” Get agreement on what was said, then repeat the process for the other party.

4. **Agree on a solution.** Once both parties have aired their perception of the problem and its causes, ask, “How do we resolve this? What do you need from each other—or me—so that you can work together without conflict?”

(Note: Sometimes you as PI may have a role in details of resolving the conflict. For example, if the two parties are constantly battling over limited resources, you may have to provide additional resources or, perhaps, a schedule to use them.)

5. **Determine each person’s responsibilities going forward.** This is the “action plan” in conflict resolution. It is a summary step that assigns accountability. Restate the problem, the goal, the causes of the problem, and the solution. Then get agreement from each on what specifically is to be done. Schedule a follow-up meeting to discuss progress on implementing the solutions.

If your conflict management is successful, you should see lasting improvement. If you do not see progress, your next step will be to use your authority, and that might call for formal disciplinary action.

**Adverse Effects of Unresolved Conflict**

- Productivity will drop;
- People will take sides, which will further damage teamwork;
- The situation may create the potential for injury or violence (with liability resting on the lab); and
- As morale plummets, good workers may leave.

**What Not to Do**

- Don’t avoid the problem. It won’t go away by itself.
- Don’t meet separately with each of the two squabbling techs. This only encourages dysfunctional triangular communication. Most personality conflicts can be worked out if the parties involved learn to communicate directly with each other.
- Don’t take sides. Go into the problem-solving meeting with an open mind.
- Don’t ‘handle it’ for them. The meeting you set up should show the techs how to resolve their own issues. So try to utilize a solution they came up with (or a variety of it).
Two of My Staff Members Are “Avoiding” Each Other; How Can I Resolve This Problem?

Expert Comments by Howard Gadlin, PhD,

Reader Question

There’s a pall over my lab. Two staff members dislike each other and, rather than resolve their issues, they’re avoiding each other. It seemed a minor issue for a while but now it's creating a general tension in the lab. The two are asking co-workers to do certain jobs for them so they can steer clear of one another. My patience is wearing thin. I have seen a slight decline in productivity and don’t want to see that worsen. What’s my easiest and quickest solution?

EXPERT COMMENTS

The first thing is to address the problem. Don’t ignore it or hope it will improve over time because the situation could fester and become worse.

Your best bet is to clearly explain your expectation to these staff members that they must find a way to work together. They don’t have to be friends, but they have to work well enough together not to impede the lab’s work.

Often, a neutral third party or a university mediation program can help. They can facilitate conversation between the parties having problems and help them work out a written arrangement regarding how they’re going to work through it. This is particularly helpful if the two exchange data in the lab.

You also should be explicit regarding your expectations of how often, in what form, and what to do if disagreement breaks out. Basically, you want your staffers to work out a specific understanding that is realistic for them to honor. And don’t be reluctant to indicate that, if they’re unwilling to meet your terms, they could be invited to find work elsewhere.

Expert comments by Howard Gadlin, PhD, Ombudsman and Director of the Center for Cooperative Resolution, NIH.

READERS RESPONSE

written by Rosanna

Without knowing enough background, it's difficult. Is the dislike personal or professional? Either way, it is now interfering with productivity and needs resolved. Pull both into your office and explain that it is interfering with work, regardless of the nature and act as a mediator to settle. Agree that discussion does not go beyond your office door but solution does and stay there until it's resolved.
Talented Post-Doc Has Answer for Everything – How Can I Get Through to Him?

Expert Comments by Howard Gadlin, PhD

Reader Question

I’ve just received my first grant. On my newly assembled team there’s a talented post-doc who’s a little too free with his advice. Anytime anyone mentions what they’re going to do, he offers an unsolicited suggestion, as if he has all the answers. Others are starting to complain. When I approached him, he offered me suggestions on how to deal with the others’ complaints and why his points were all correct. He’s talented; I like him on my team, but he needs to tone it down and respect others’ boundaries. Any suggestions on how to deal with this “know-it-all” post-doc?

EXPERT COMMENTS

The most important rule: Do not avoid the problem, and do not assume it will go away on its own or that the post-doc will catch on over time. The earlier you intervene, the greater the hope of a successful transformation. Talk with him.

It’s very important to keep the conversation on topic and not introduce side issues. Be clear out the outset what you are hoping to accomplish. You want to be sure the conversation is your best recourse, and in this case it clearly sounds as if it would be.

During your talk, make the distinction that your aim is to help him understand his contribution to a difficulty that’s developed in the lab vs. blaming him for it. Be as specific as possible about what the post-doc is doing that is contributing to the problem, rather than making general characterizations of his personality. Statements like, “When you did this or said this, it had this impact or consequence”... are useful.

In terms of the post-doc making unsolicited suggestions and trying to justify everything, I think it’s important to interrupt that scenario whenever it occurs and try to re-orient the post-doc “on the spot” toward understanding how his remarks affect others. That can help him alter his way of speaking or actions so as to have a more positive impact once he sees what his style is producing. It doesn't seem that the post-doc has any hurtful intention; the impact is different from what he intended, and he needs to understand the difference.

Many academic institutions offer sensitivity-training courses. Your human resources staff might steer him to a course appropriate for him.

I suggest that PIs prepare a written “Welcome to the Laboratory” statement for everyone joining the lab, in which they make clear the spirit with which they run the lab and will address issues like talks, abstracts, participation in meetings and seminars. It’s important for the PI to lay out his/her expectations. For example: What goes on at lab
meetings? What kinds of support will there be for attendance at outside meetings? What are the expectations for giving presentations within the institution and outside in academic societies?

This gives new staff members a clear idea of what to expect and establishes conduct norms. Then, if one of them has to point to problematic behavior or conduct of someone in the lab, this document can be referenced. It makes any actions you take seem less subjective and less personal.

The statement also could cover data presentation, conduct of research, how decisions are made with respect to authorship and collaboration, what technical support is available, how working in the lab is connected to career development, how and on what dimension people will be evaluated.

It’s also helpful to speak explicitly about your expectations as to work habits, quantity and quality of laboratory time, interactions with others, and about notebooks and record-keeping.

Beyond that, I can recommend these resources: *Difficult Conversations*, (Stone, Patton, and Heen). *Crucial Conversations*, (Patterson, Grenny, McMillan, and Switzler).

*Expert Comments by Howard Gadlin, PhD, ombudsman and director of the Center for Cooperative Resolution at the National Institutes of Health. Dr. Gadlin will conduct a live webinar Wednesday, Nov. 17, at 2 p.m. on “Conflict Management for PIs.” For details on how to join the conference or to order a CD, MP3, or PDF transcript, visit the [http://principalinvestigators.org/Audio-Conferences/audio-conference-101117/](http://principalinvestigators.org/Audio-Conferences/audio-conference-101117/).*

*The content above is brought to you by the Principal Investigators Association, an independent organization not connected with the NIH or endorsed by it. The views expressed are solely the personal ones of the commentator.*

**READER RESPONSE**

written by Richard

Alas, I have seen this type of individual prosper far too long within our own organization. The likelihood that he or the Post-Doc you portray, will ever get rid of his egomania is doubtful. He needs to hear that, contrary to..., he does not walk on water and, should he continue to try to do so, his academic future will see him sink below the waterline!

The individual I refer to is coming up for promotion this coming year and hasn’t a clue that it will be his colleagues and peers who will cast the ultimate and damning vote.

A Post-doc has some time before he or she reaches that point so, one way or another, he or she needs to hear the clarion call of humility, politeness, and sharing of ideas before his clock runs out of the opportunity to redeem his reputation.

Yes, good ideas are invaluable to the team, and should be considered seriously. That said however, the damage he is doing to the team’s morale can devastate. It is time for the P.I. to fish or cut bait on this issue and face the person front on! 
You’ve heard about it, but you may not believe it affects your lab. “Burnout,” after all, is for people who can’t handle hard work or who don’t love what they do, and that’s not you or your grad students, right? Wrong. “It’s important to be open to considering that you or your lab assistants are under stress or are working in a ‘burned-out capacity’,” notes Alan H. Rosenstein MD MBS, Medical Director at Physician Wellness Services. “Sometimes just awareness is the key issue.”

He explains: “If you’ve worked under stressful conditions for your entire career” – which describes most researchers and the students alike – “you may not even recognize that it’s influencing your behavior. And even if you do, you may react by saying you know how to handle it” If you’ve noticed changes in your demeanor or that of a coworker, Rosenstein counsels, or tasks that aren’t getting done like they used to, or irritability, disengagement or simple mistakes on your part or on the part of one of your grad students, unrecognized burnout may be simmering.

The key is knowing what’s burnout and what’s not, the experts say, and duration is the answer. Burnout is generally a short-term condition that can easily be fixed – if you determine what’s bugging you and do something about it. If the malaise in your lab lasts and lasts – weeks|weeks or months – you may be looking at depression instead.

Intensity is a determinant as well. “If for more than a day or so, you have no desire to get out of bed that’s depression,” notes Shari LeDonne Frisinger, President at management consultants CornerStone Strategies LLC, in Friendswood, TX. “With burnout, there are things you want to do, but you can’t make yourself do them. With depression, you don’t care at all.”

“Burnout itself is a feeling of extreme fatigue and disconnection brought on by a period of overcommitment, and it often manifests as a lack of interest in the things you used to love” says Jay Forte, head of management consulting firm Humanetrics, in Louisville. It may not be that your lab’s research has gotten off track; it may be that you or someone else in your lab cares about your research less.

Your mind and body can only handle so much stress and just plain hard work, and when you put too much pressure on yourself year after year – and what lab can afford not to? – your physical and mental selves may ultimately have no choice but to push back. “Self-preservation kicks in when you’re dealing with burnout,” notes Frisinger, “and takes over your rational mind. There’s apathy where there was once passion and excitement, because you become resigned to the status quo. You have no initiative to change and therefore no optimism.”

And it’s not just a lack of joy, Frisinger comments. “When you’re suffering from burnout, things that would usually get you irritated or angry don’t,” she says. “You’re just, ‘Oh, that’s fine.’” Is that the reason a lab assistant never mentioned that he suspected a colleague of fudging a few minor findings? Maybe he just didn’t care.

In the short term, Forte adds, the staffer suffering burnout – whether it’s you or your technician – should “reconnect to his or her passions. If you’re a sufferer, identify what you are passionate about and reintroduce it
into your life to balance the stress of the workplace." He also recommends "developing an exercise, meditation or refocus activity to keep things in perspective."

Of course, the signs may not point to burnout, but to something more fundamental. If the cause of the symptoms is workplace-related, "engage management in a discussion to address the issue," Forte suggests. "Propose options and help implement the solution." If the trouble starts at home, he says, "consult a counselor or psychologist to help talk through the issues, solve the problems and make plans to correct the situation."

Forte adds: "Problems in relationships that exist even in non-burnout periods obviously aren't burnout." Don't blame temporary burnout, in other words, for years of unhappiness with your spouse or the prickly nature of your contact with the head of your department at the university or one lab assistant's increasing hostility toward another. Similarly, Forte says, "chronic health conditions that are out of the normal range – such as chronic sore throat, joint pain, stomach or abdominal pain, headaches, angina or vision challenges – are not burnout and should not be dismissed as problems that will vanish after your next vacation."

### 9 Signs that May Indicate Burnout

1. Disinterest in tasks and activities that are normally of great interest.
2. Disengaged and disconnected from family, friends and things that used to be important to you.
3. Trouble staying focused on conversations, activities and tasks. For example, you find yourself reading the same passage in a grant proposal over and over – and you never do fully understand what it says.
4. Irritability about normally inconsequential events – such as totally blowing your top over a small spill or a broken beaker.
5. Symptoms of chronic fatigue without any specific contributing event. That might explain why a lab assistant who isn't working longer hours still just can't seem to stop yawning during your morning meetings.
6. Feeling helpless and loss of control. Your funders are going to decide whether to continue your grant based on their own selfish motives and not based on the quality of your work, it suddenly seems. It's all just politics, right? So why bother, right?
7. Reduced resistance to colds and the flu. It may not be "the season." It may be that your burnout-addled body just can't fight back like it used to.
8. Sleeplessness and dreaming more – and more vividly – than before.
NEW RELEASE
NSF Grant Application Mentor: An Educational How-to Series

A collection of 7 reports, each targeting a unique area of the NSF grant application process.

This unique 7-part series of instructional reports coaches you on how to optimally prepare the vital components of your NSF grant application. You may choose to purchase individual reports or purchase the entire series for additional savings and a complete how-to resource.

Parts 1-4, as outlined below, will be sent to you immediately in PDF format. You will receive the remaining reports in your series over the next 60 days as soon as each is finalized. Learn more!

PART 1: Preparation: What Every Researcher Should Know Before You Start Applying
Gain a full introduction to the NSF grant-making system, with an overview of NSF divisions and eligibility rules. Experts discuss strategies for launching a successful grant-writing effort: choosing a topic and project, creating a title and outline, contacting a program director, and establishing a writing schedule. In addition, you will receive advice on honing hypotheses...read more.

PART 2: Knowing Your Audience: Understand NSF’s Review Criteria and Reviewers
Learn all aspects of the essential NSF merit review criteria. All NSF grants are judged by 2 criteria; intellectual merit and broader impact. NSF is very clear on the importance of these criteria, but they can seem unclear to the uninitiated. Inside this report you will explore the meanings of intellectual merit and broader impacts and look at specific examples from successful proposals...read more.

PART 3: Successfully Present Your Project and Your Individual Qualifications
Don’t miss this detailed expedition of the all-important Project Summary, a one-page document that must capture your readers (the reviewers) while explicitly emphasizing the NSF merit review criteria. Experts will discuss strategies for writing this section, and you will look at examples from successful proposals...read more.

PART 4: How to Document Your Resources and Commitment to the Research Community
Let our experts guide you through how you should document your institution’s commitment and support of your project, looking at the Facilities and Equipment section and learning from examples from successful proposals. Experts also explain the requirement for documenting your data management plan, and explore how to create the section...read more.

continued on page 2...

Early-Bird Offer!
Purchase the 7-Report Series at an introductory rate of ONLY $299! (Reg. Price $699)
Order today! 3 convenient ways: Online, Phone: 800-303-0129 ext. 506, or by FAX.
PART 5: Demonstrating the Significance of Your Research Topic

Learn the fundamentals of the most essential section of your proposal, the Project Description. You will examine the requirements and review strategies for creating a compelling narrative, as well as review examples from successful proposals. Experts will briefly discuss the References Cited section....read more.

PART 6: NSF Special Considerations: Reporting and Compliance Essentials for Human Subjects and Animals

Estimated Release Date: November 2012

Inside this report experts discuss strategies for establishing a budget and for reporting on budget justification. This section will also cover some of the more common “special considerations” that investigators must deal with, such as the use of human subjects....read more.

PART 7: The NSF Review Process: Tactics for Submitting a Winning Proposal

Estimated Release Date: November 2012

This comprehensive report will discuss the submission process and describe the review process and its aftermath....read more.

Early-Bird Offer!

Purchase the 7-Report Series in PDF format at an introductory rate of ONLY $299! (Reg. Price $699)

Pre-order your print version of the entire series for only $75 more.

Order today! 3 convenient ways:

Online, Phone: 800-303-0129 ext. 506, or by FAX.

Option to purchase individual reports: We recommend the full set to get the most complete benefit, and the lowest price per report. But if you wish only certain reports, you may selectively purchase one or more, individually, at a cost of $99 each. Parts 1-4 will be sent immediately. Other reports selected will be rushed to you the minute they are released over the next 60 days. But your price is locked in and will not increase.

About the Co-Author:

Dr. Stephen Matheson served as co-author for this series. Dr. Matheson has a master’s degree in toxicology and a PhD in neuroscience. Currently working as a scientific writer and editor, Dr. Matheson taught at an undergraduate college for 10 years after a postdoctoral research fellowship at Massachusetts General Hospital. While in academia, Dr. Matheson was a PI or co-PI on several NSF grants, including three successful MRI proposals, and wrote a successful NIH R15 proposal. He has reviewed NSF grant proposals and scientific manuscripts for several journals.

This report series is brought to you as a training tool by the Principal Investigators Association, which is an independent organization. The presented information is not connected with the National Science Foundation (NSF), nor is it endorsed by this agency. All views expressed are those personally held by the authors and are not official government policies or opinions.