Dysfunctional Advisee-Adviser Relationships: Methods for Negotiating Beyond Conflict

By Peter Fiske | Apr. 24, 1998 , 8:00 AM

In the career-development workshops and lectures I lead, I can always spot a few of them. They're the students who slip into the room right after the lights have dimmed, sit in the back, and try to disappear quickly once the lecture is over. Rarely, one will linger long enough to ask a furtive question. When I inquire about the source of their agitation, they admit fearfully:

"If my adviser knew I was here, he'd KILL ME!"

I wish this reaction surprised me more. But having labored through a Ph.D. myself, I am painfully aware of the difficulties many students have in communicating openly with their advisers. The subject of career goals, especially if those goals lie outside the hallowed path of academia, is particularly sensitive. Many students never dare to broach the subject openly with their advisers.

During one workshop, I suggested that students who were interested in nontraditional career paths should *not* tell their adviser at all, at least not until *after* graduating. However, several faculty members in the

audience reacts strongly, saying that their students' lack of candor about their career goals contributes to a climate of suspicion and resentment on the part of both student and adviser. This may be true, but many students know all too well the fragile nature of an adviser's esteem and the risks of alienating him or her by professing interest in a nontraditional career path.

How should a young scientist deal with such a dilemma? How do you sail your career between the Scylla of duplicity and the Charybdis of adviser disapproval? And how should you deal with conflict with your adviser? I think we should start by understanding a bit more about the peculiar nature of the student-adviser relationship.

Why is the student-adviser relationship so ... difficult?

I do not know a single young scientist who has ambivalent feelings about their Ph.D. adviser. There tends to be either mutual respect or mutual loathing. Some have had, and continue to have, a great personal and professional relationship with their former adviser. Others are barely on speaking terms. Yet, the strength of the adviser-advisee relationship is supposed to be one of the foundations of the Ph.D. To a great extent, that relationship influences not only the student's future direction but also whether the student completes the degree at all. And still, a surprising fraction of students have difficulty with their advisers.

In many ways, I think our "myth" of the Ph.D. adviser-student relationship is doomed to disappoint because it is naïve and unrealistic. Consider the title of the recent National Academy of Sciences (NAS) book on graduate advising, *Adviser, Teacher, Role Model, Friend.* This title expresses the idealized roles that advisers should play for their students. Is it realistic to expect that one person can, or should, fill all these roles? Maybe it's realistic to expect one's adviser to also be a teacher. It's hoped that they would also be somewhat of a role model. But sometimes the role of adviser is going to conflict with that of friend. I think NAS should have been more honest and titled the book *Adviser, Boss, Parent, Dungeon Master!* Okay, I'm being facetious. ...

The often blatant inequity of the situation also compounds the mythology of the adviser-advisee relationship. Let's face it: No matter how friendly and egalitarian advisers might try to be, they wield enormous power over their students. An adviser controls your sole means of support and can fire you. He or she controls your access to the facilities you need to do your work. And let's not forget the power of the pen: Your adviser holds the key to your degree, the object of your years of toil.

If that weren't enough, consider how difficult the Ph.D. experience is! Getting a doctorate involves late nights, frustration, risk, and stress. Rare is the Ph.D. candidate who can help but hold their adviser at least partially to blame for this. And from the adviser's perspective, life in academia is hard, too! Advisers need their students to pump out papers and proposals in order for the research group to survive, and many advisers demand a great deal out of their students. Given all this stress, it should not be a surprise that the adviser-advisee relationship is often bumpy.

So what can a young scientist do when a conflict arises?

For starters, it is important to accept that conflict is inevitable in the Ph.D. experience. It can come in all shapes and sizes, from small disagreements about the order of experiments to massive conflagrations

over the quality of the thesis and financial support. Too often, students and their advisers avoid any conflict at all or approach conflict in an adversarial manner. Because students may feel at a disadvantage, they often capitulate to requests from advisers too quickly, which can build resentment. And rarely do students or advisers utilize outside mechanisms for resolution, such as mediation by a department chair or dean, until the conflict has reached epic proportions.

Strategies for dealing with conflict

1. Forgiveness versus permission

You have probably heard the old aphorism, "It is easier to obtain forgiveness than permission." For small disagreements, I think this holds true. One of the goals of Ph.D. training is building independence. And doing things your way and not the way your adviser told you to is a fair expression of that independence. Furthermore, advisers often lack the time to check up on students to make sure they are doing exactly what they were told. Of course, there are limits: Deliberately countermanding a direct order from your adviser without at least warning them is unfair and unprofessional. In graduate school, you can be forgiven for practically anything ... once!

2. Principled negotiation

In their book *Getting to Yes*, Roger Fisher and William Ury outline a strategy for approaching and negotiating agreement while minimizing adversarial conflict. Their strategy is called Principled Negotiation and is made up of four steps:

- Separating the people from the problem
- Focusing on interests, not positions
- Inventing options for mutual gain
- Insisting on using objective criteria

Rather than recapitulate what is contained in their excellent book, let me try to give you some Ph.D.-relevant examples for each step.

Separating the people from the problem: Often adviser-advisee conflicts are a combination of disagreements about issues and clashes of personality and style. It is critical to understand and separate the two. Understanding the specific issues--the number of experiments you have to run, the size of your thesis--and separating them from the mismatch in personal styles is much more likely to move you toward a fair resolution. Letting your adviser explain his or her perceptions, and explaining your own, is a key ingredient of clear communication.

Focusing on interests, not positions: Sometimes in the course of an argument, adviser and student may adopt specific hard-line positions, such as, "You have to submit four papers before you leave" or "You have to let me graduate by June." Often these polar positions mask what are really compatible interests: a student finishing quickly or getting the best start on a career. By asking "why" and "why not," you can unravel the interests behind the positions and can develop a common incentive for resolution.

Inventing options for mutual gain: Because the adviser-advisee relationship is unequal, it can be hard to approach a conflict with only an "either-or" resolution in mind. Unfortunately, it is most often up to the student to think up creative alternatives or substitutes. Before students go into negotiation with their advisers, they need to have carefully thought through all possible options and alternatives. To develop these options, begin by analyzing what is wrong, what the causes are, and what the possible actions are. Presenting your adviser with this logical progression will not only help lessen the degree of conflict but also demonstrate your maturity and ability to "think outside the box."

Insisting on using objective criteria: You may think your conflict with your adviser is unique, but I can assure you it is not! There are ways of comparing your desires and those of your adviser with some commonly accepted, objective measure. For example, if your adviser is not allowing you to graduate until you submit four papers for publication, you need to find out if this is a standard for all students in the group or in the department. If you and your adviser can agree that common standards exist, the argument changes from each versus the other to both of you versus the standards. By the way, one common standard that already exists is the opinion of the rest of your Ph.D. committee.

3. Outside help

Many students and advisers are reluctant to engage the assistance of other authorities in the department or school to help resolve conflict. Students are afraid to approach a department chair or dean, fearing that this will be perceived as an end run around their advisers. And many advisers fear ceding authority and admitting dysfunction by taking the issue up the chain of command.

Reminder: Deans and department chairs are paid the big bucks because it is their job to help with situations like this. If at all possible, both you and your adviser should approach an outside party together. But even if you have to go alone, you should realize that, as a student, you have the right, and even the responsibility, to seek out all the assistance you need to resolve the dispute.

Dealing with a really bad situation

I wish I didn't have to write this section, but I've been around the block a few times, and I have seen some truly horrible behavior, sometimes on the part of a student but mostly by an adviser. All of us have heard ghastly stories of abuse of power, dishonesty, and outright cruelty. I wish there were some easy antidote to these problems, but negotiating a settlement in these situations can be very difficult. Having seen a few of these scenarios, I would like to give the tormented graduate student some advice:

1. Document what is happening. Be specific. Use dates. Write everything down.

2. Discuss the issue with at least one person whom you trust but who is not a blood relative.

3. Decide whether you are going to confront and then stick to your decision.

Academia can be slow to react to cases of unethical behavior, especially when they relate to the goings-on of a particular adviser and his or her students. But academia does have accepted mechanisms for dealing with these cases, as do funding agencies. In order to be effective, as well as fair, you really should have

good documentation of the problem and its history. Do not be afraid to talk to a lawyer or an ombudsperson about what you need to do.

When I hear about a particularly egregious case of abuse of power, intellectual theft, or just advisorial incompetence, I wonder if a school could be held liable. I know of no cases of "educational malpractice," but I can only believe that a school that has looked the other way while a professor has destroyed careers, either through malice or incompetence, would have to bear some responsibility, just like a hospital with an incompetent doctor. If anybody knows anything more about this, I'd like to hear about it.

I'm happy to discuss any conflict and negotiation issues you are facing. Do you have any suggestions for your fellow students or young scientists facing difficult conflicts?

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