

SO YOU WANT TO DO A PhD?

Part III: Managing your supervisor

by 10,000 monkeys

A good supervisor can be a valuable resource as you strive to progress towards your PhD. Usually, though, they just get in the way. Often, students find that the key to success in postgraduate life is careful management of their supervisor or supervisors. Excellence in this endeavour depends on understanding your supervisor's personality, motivations, strengths and weaknesses. In our experience, supervisors can be divided into eight basic "types", divided along three axes. If you know what your supervisor's type is, it becomes easier to avoid the worst pitfalls of this type.

Authoritarian ←————→ Democratic

(A/D): The Authoritarian supervisor likes to be in charge. You will do as instructed, or she will cease to support you (and may actively work against you). If your supervisor knows what she is doing and has your best interests at heart, an 'A' type supervisor can help to fast-track your PhD, although your thesis may bear little resemblance to whatever you wanted to study. More, likely, the Authoritarian supervisor will set you to work on the dull, time-consuming things that she needs done for his own work. A type 'A' supervisor who doesn't know what she is doing will drive you firmly down beaten paths shown long ago to be ineffective, or off on weird new tangents with little hope of success.

The Democratic supervisor will go out of her way to avoid unduly influencing your decisions, because it is, after all, your PhD. Traditional supervisory roles such as discussing problems, providing feedback and reading your drafts may all be done away with in the interests of your personal academic development.

The A-D axis is the one that will have the most influence on the character of your group meetings. An authoritarian supervisor will prefer tightly scheduled group meetings at the very least once a week, and may also schedule individual meetings wherein you are required to account for your self; a democratic supervisor will have less frequent group meetings, but these will be gala events, with a standing invitation to all other academics, postgrads, honours students, visitors, cleaners and random passers-by, all in order to better encourage "the flow of ideas". Presenting your work at this type of meeting can be every bit as harrowing as a departmental seminar, but it is quite likely that food will be provided. This is to be encouraged.

The strategy for dealing with both types of meeting is exactly the same: don't, under any circumstances, reveal all of your work. Sure, the fact that you've quite significantly outperformed all of your fellow group members in the past month may look impressive now, but that will be completely forgotten by the next meeting should you happen to fail to provide new results due to a technician's strike, laboratory explosion, misapplied experiment or week spent playing *Civilisation II*. You are reminded that these events will be interpreted, quite unfairly, as being entirely your own fault. If you have nothing

to say at a progress meeting, don't ever be tempted to admit that you have made no progress. Bluff your way through or, if that fails, try performing an interpretive dance illustrating the conceptual soul of your work. People will back away and avoid looking you in the eye, but you will be spared further questions.

Big Picture ←————→ Small Picture

(B/S): The Big Picture supervisor focuses on – you guessed it – the Big Picture. He is inspired by projects that have some wider practical or theoretical context. He will support grand ideas, but doesn't want to be bothered by small details. Details such as whether the requisite experiments can actually be performed outside a perfect vacuum, how to get funding, or when your PhD candidature will expire.

The Small Picture supervisor has much more time for details. He will encourage you from the outset to embark on a project like her own, with a title along the lines of "Stomach contents of *Premivopterus spiroila* (bogusilia) in south-south-western Western Australian wheat crops grown in amended podzolic soils, November 2002-January 2003." He will take it as his duty to impress upon you the absolute importance of sixty-three replicates and will diligently comment on each of the seventy-four drafts of your thesis that he will demand.

Renowned ←————→ Unknown

(R/U): The Renowned supervisor has achieved a level of fame within the field. An 'R'-type supervisor is likely to have many students but little time for any of them. This can work in your favour, as it is much easier to hide your lack of progress if your supervisor never sees you. Hand in your annual review forms to be signed at particularly busy times and your scholarship money will continue to be deposited into your bank account at regular intervals. A Renowned supervisor will also have many contacts. This, too, can come in handy. If your supervisor likes you – or is just keen to get rid of you – when you eventually hand in the thesis, she will be able to choose from among her contacts three or four people who are sure to pass you, whether due to apathy, ignorance, or simple intimidation.

The Unknown supervisor, by contrast, has yet to make a name for herself. You may well be her only postgraduate student and are therefore something of a prize. You will be introduced proudly to colleagues until the novelty wears off. If young and inexperienced, the 'U' type supervisor is likely to blame herself for your lack of progress. This can ease the burden on you, but it can also be true. Perhaps there is a reason that your supervisor is Unknown.

A type 'U' supervisor is likely to take credit for your work, because she needs to expose. A type 'R' supervisor will also take credit for your work – that's how she became Renowned in the first place.

Next, maybe: Writing a paper.