

BOOK BONUS 3

Top Tips for Enhancing Your Relationship with Your Supervisor



No matter what stage you are at in your PhD, there are things you can do to foster a better relationship with your academic supervisor. Below are my top tips for enhancing the supervisor-supervisee relationship:

1. OWN YOUR PROJECT

Many students approach their interactions with academic supervisors through the lens of an employer/employee relationship. This is a wholly misguided approach in the context of a PhD. Even though your supervisor is more senior and has more experience, you are the sole author of your PhD. Supervisors are there to guide you through the PhD process, but it's still down to you to take ownership of your project and shape it the way that you want. A supervisor is simply not equivalent to a boss or a line manager.

2. COMMUNICATE YOUR NEEDS

Whether it's more frequent contact, clearer feedback, or joint meetings with your secondary supervisor, don't hesitate to ask for what you need. The truth is that your supervisor can't read your mind and if something isn't working well, it's up to you to communicate what your needs are. This will first involve identifying your needs and then making a clear and direct request to your supervisor.

3. SET EXPECTATIONS IN ADVANCE

As with any relationship, we have an opportunity to establish what the expectations are and set out how those expectations are going to be fulfilled in advance. For instance, when it comes to constructing a timetable for completion, you might wish to jointly work on this with your supervisor. In setting out the timetable, you could commit to certain dates for

submitting specific chapters to your supervisor, while your supervisor would in turn commit to certain dates for returning their feedback to you. In this way, you set a mutually workable timetable that establishes what work needs to be done by each person and by what date. This makes each person's obligations very clear, leaving little ambiguity over what you can expect from one another.

4. ADMIT WHAT YOU DON'T KNOW

If there is something you don't understand, don't shy away from admitting to your supervisor that you are confused or unsure about it. Pursuing research at the doctoral level will necessarily involve probing into unfamiliar territory or even a particular methodology that is brand new for you. You don't need to have all the answers, so let go of the expectation that you should be an expert on everything that is remotely related to your research area.

5. DON'T TAKE IT PERSONALLY

As I mentioned in my blogpost [‘Coping with Academic Criticism’](#), receiving a lot of negative feedback from a supervisor can feel extremely demoralising. Remember that it's your supervisor's job to spot potential holes in your research so try not to take it personally. Of course, it can be challenging not to take negative feedback to heart. What I encourage students to do is to sift through the feedback and ask yourself: ‘will this feedback ultimately strengthen the project?’ If the answer is yes, it may help you to view it more constructively.

6. ASK FOR CLARITY

It could be that your supervisor's feedback/comments to you are unclear, or contradictory to something else they said previously. Not only does this often lead students to feel stuck and uncertain about how to proceed, it can also be incredibly frustrating. Don't hesitate to ask your supervisor for more clarity. It could be that they have overlooked their previous advice to you or that they need to explain their feedback to you more fully. However awkward it may feel to ask for clarity on something, you'll save yourself a lot of time in the end by having this conversation.

7. BROADEN YOUR NETWORK

It is not uncommon to see students becoming overly reliant on their supervisors throughout the PhD – depending on them not only for advice about their thesis, but advice more generally relating to job applications, publishing, teaching, funding opportunities and much more. While it's great to draw on the experience and wisdom of your supervisor, it's also important to broaden your circle of support during the PhD beyond the tiny bubble of you and your supervisor. For this reason, I encourage students to make their own contacts and connections throughout the PhD, and to take advantage of opportunities to share their work with others. Expanding your connections in the field will not only enrich your research

by exposing you to other viewpoints, it will also put less pressure on the relationship with your supervisor.

8. REMEMBER THEIR EXPERIENCE IS NOT YOUR EXPERIENCE

Another reason to seek other avenues of support beyond your supervisor is because their experience is not your experience. The world may have changed a lot since they did their PhD and as a consequence, the advice they are able to offer you may be quite limited. So graciously accept their advice when it is offered, but don't treat everything they say as gospel. Talk to others and, above all, trust your own instincts.