Mitigating Conflict in Graduate Student-Supervisor Relationships

FGSR Professional Development Week 2016

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What is the Office of the Student Ombuds?

- We offer **advice and support** on academic and disciplinary issues.

- We are **advocates for fairness and equity**, working to strengthen the collegial relationship between students and the university.

- We act as an **impartial third party** to any conflict or dispute involving students and the University.

- We are a **source of information** on University regulations and policies.

- Our service is **confidential and free**.

- We are **independent** from the faculties and from the student associations (GSA and SU).

- We are **accessible** to all students (undergraduate or graduate), post-doctoral fellows, and medical residents, and we are located in an accessible area.
The psychology of conflict – why do we become positional?

- Our feelings are based on norms, values, beliefs, and ideologies that we wish to uphold (culture/gender/age/social class, etc.).

- We sometimes get “locked in” our feelings without recognizing the psychology of conflict.

- As our feelings escalate, we may move from criticizing the action to criticizing the person.

- Our selective perception of that person may lock us into stereotyping him/her.

- As we focus only on these perceptions of the person, we may feel entrapped by his/her behaviour.

- We become more positional and see a conflict as an issue of honour/ saving face.

- We move into a stalemate, and only when we get tired of this state can we move to resolution.
Conflicts are often not about fact or reality but *perceptions*

1. The perceived injury is *problematized* and *named* as a conflict.
2. The injury/conflict is *blamed* on someone.
3. The injured party *claims* that the party be either punished or compensate them.
"Everything we hear is an opinion, not a fact. Everything we see is a perspective, not the truth."

- Marcus Aurelius
Conflicts have a *rhythmic* and *predictable* cycle.

**Act 1 – Escalation (Waste of energy)**

- Figuratively “beating into submission”/ battle of wills
- Condemnation of the person and the act
- Building of positional alliances
- Thinking in terms of good versus evil dichotomy
- Positional “lock in”

**Act 2 – Stalemate (relationship on hold)**

**Act 3 – Settlement, De-escalation and Resolution (win/lose; lose/lose; win/win)** – *This is the time to use communication skills if you want to resolve; find common goal(s).*

(Source: Jeff Rubin, “Conflict from a Psychological Perspective”, 1994)
Shifting from positions to interests

- **Positions** — Positions are a dead end. For instance: “I refuse to work with Alysha anymore on group projects.” “If I don’t get this position, I will make sure Jordan doesn’t either.” In both example statements, the two parties in conflict have positions that cannot be met without the other party losing. We call this a “win/lose” situation. Or, if the party will fight no matter what the outcome, in order to ensure mutual loss, it is a “lose/lose” outcome.

- **Interests**: Thinking in terms of interests offers ways to move forward together out of a conflict. For example: “I believe that hard work should be rewarded with new job incentives.” “I expect that if we communicate respectfully, we can work better together.” These are “win/win” propositions. Once we identify these underlying interests, we can explore to find common ground. Example: “We both want to get ahead and will work on building trust and respect by setting common deadlines for this next project.”
Shifting from *positions* to *interests* (continued)

• Engage in active listening and questioning skills to ascertain assumptions that have been made about each person’s intentions.

• Use open-ended questioning to uncover basic values, beliefs, expectations, fears, and other feelings that contribute to the person’s position.

• Examine these values, beliefs, expectations, and fears further to identify interests that may help the parties shift from their positions and examine the underlying interests.

*Which of these interests are mutual? Is there common ground where a collaborative solution may be found?*
What are the PEACH BFVNs?

Use this acronym to examine the kinds of underlying interests: Priorities, Expectations, Assumptions, Concerns, Hopes, Beliefs, Fears, Values, Norms.

Roger Fisher & William Ury in *Getting to Yes* (1981) use 3 basic principles to resolve conflict:

1. Separate the person from the problem. Don’t assume that you know how the other person thinks. Try to find the feeling behind the emotions. Do not blame or take blame.

2. Examine the interests behind the positions. You both have your own view of the truth.

3. Instead of quick fix solution, generate as many options as possible with the view that you will evaluate each one for mutual agreement, and evaluate these objectively.
**Micro-skills in communication**

*ACTIVE LISTENING* - This is a very important skill and takes a lot of concentration. You must listen for content and for feeling.

*Reflecting feeling:* Mirror back to the party, his/her emotions being communicated.

Example: So you are feeling frustrated and unappreciated.

*Body language:* These are the non-verbal behaviours, movement, body stature

Example: You seem tired.

*Paraphrasing and summarizing content:* This is a brief response to the speaker that focuses on understanding what the speaker has said (content).

Example 1: You think your workload is heavy and your supervisor is too hard on you.

Example 2 (acknowledges feelings, body language, and object of discontent): You are feeling frustrated and tired because you carry a heavy workload.

Note: Always address the feelings and body language before the substance.
Effective questioning

**Probing questions:** This tool involves asking open-ended questions to the other party. Open-ended questions: Where? What? Why? When? How? (Be careful with asking too many “why” questions in a row, as the other party can become defensive).

Example: How would you like your supervisor to show appreciation of your work?

**Clarifying questions:** This tool involves questioning what the person means when he/she uses a particular term.

Example: What do you mean by “heavy workload?”

**Reframing statements:** This skill involves restating a negative expression of the problem into a positive expression of the implied hope or goal.

Example: So it is important for you to have the amount of work you do recognized and rewarded.
Understanding expectations to avoid conflict: Things you should discuss with your supervisor early in your program.

1. How frequently do you expect to meet with your graduate students?

2. How many hours of work per week do you expect from a graduate student?

3. What is your preferred mode of communication? (i.e. in person or via e-mail)
Things you should discuss with your supervisor (continued)

4. What are your timeline expectations for completion of the various stages of my program?

5. How available will you be to meet, discuss, answer emails?

6. What are your expectations in terms of publications and conference presentations?
Tips to diffuse conflict

• Deal with problems early – do not let them persist or worsen.

• Deal with problems appropriately – do not start by calling the president of the university.

• Talk to your supervisor openly and directly.

• Do not assume your supervisor knows that you feel there is a problem.

• Act professionally (even when the other person does not).

• Preserve the supervisory relationship whenever possible.
Where to go for help when things go wrong? First empower yourself with information

The Calendar, the Graduate Program Manual, the Code of Student Behaviour, and the GSA AEGS Collective Agreement:

- Outline the procedures, policies, rights and responsibilities for graduate students (including teaching and research assistants)
- Spell out the roles, rights and responsibilities for supervisors, departments, and faculties

- The Calendar is found online at: http://registrarsoffice.ualberta.ca/Calendar/2015-2016-Calendar-PDF.aspx
- The Graduate Program Manual is found on the FGSR webpage at: http://www.gradstudies.ualberta.ca/gpm.aspx
Getting Help

Seek assistance from a third party if you can’t resolve the conflict:

- Graduate Chair (a.k.a. Associate Chair-Graduate)
- Department Chair (when Graduate Chair is unavailable or has a potential conflict of interest)
- Graduate Ombudsperson
- FGSR Associate Deans

Other Resources

- The Graduate Students’ Association (GSA) (labour issues and advocacy)
- The Office of Safe Disclosure and Human Rights (discrimination and harassment)
- International Student Services (study and work permit issues)
- The Student Success Centre (writing and other academic guidance)
- Counselling and Clinical Services (Mental health assistance)
- Student Legal Services of Edmonton (legal advice in non-criminal matters)
- Student Accessibility Services (academic and other accommodations for health reasons)
Scenarios to Practice Building Skills (Part 1)

Break into small groups of 2 – 4; try to create a dialogue using some of the micro-skills and build a healthy conversation to uncover the underlying interests. Should you refer the student for other help, reframe the issue, or both?

1. (Joe) “I’m freaking out because my supervisor told me I have to have our samples classified by the end of the day! How can she be so unfair when she knows I have so much on my plate? She just doesn’t get it! I wish I could just switch supervisors some days.”

2. (Steve) “I really need that assistantship and I’m far better qualified than Kathy. I don’t know why anyone in the department would nominate her. I’m a better researcher and I participate more at lab meetings than anyone else, so I deserve it. If I don’t get it I’ll just quit. I don’t see how I’ll get through my last 2 years without that funding. And Kathy isn’t going to get it in the end either if I have anything to say about it!”
Scenarios to Practice Building Skills (Part 2)

3. (Stephanie) “I just really want my supervisor and cohort to like me and I’ll do whatever it takes to get this discourse analysis project done, even if it means I have to work every night and every weekend. I just wish I wasn’t so exhausted and that people would thank me for the work I’m doing. My supervisor doesn’t seem to remember my name, even though this is my second term in the department. I just wish it was friendlier here and people gave a damn. When my supervisor gets back, I’m going to tell her what a terrible job she does supervising students. She makes people feel unwelcome here. She needs a wake up call and I’m going to give her a piece of my mind!”

4. (Jose) “I heard from Samir and apparently the new Ph.D. student, Steve, in his department, is a real jerk! Apparently, he has a lot of problems and no one likes his jokes or the way he dresses. We decided to have coffee breaks without him and hope he gets the message that he just doesn’t fit in. We want to think of ways to make him quit.”
Scenarios to Practice Building Skills (Part 3)

5. (Amanda) “My supervisor is really old and has an outdated style. I’ve learned all the new widget engineering techniques from the university where I did my masters abroad (the place for widget engineering, let me tell you!). That has-been of a supervisor hasn’t published anything innovative for years. I want to change how this place runs. I wish he would get sick or retire. Tenure is wasted on the wrong people! I’ll have to do at least two post-docs for any chance at getting a job. It’s always cold in Edmonton and the coffee in this building sucks! And why are you looking at me like that?!"

6. (Alejandra) “I’m the only woman working in my lab. I find my labmates humour offensive. Specifically, there are a lot of sexual jokes and misogynistic remarks. My supervisor often starts the below-the-belt humour and sets a poor tone, one that the male post-docs and graduate students imitate. I tried my best to ignore the comments for the last 2 years, focusing on research. But this week, my supervisor invited me to his place to talk about my paper over a glass of wine on Friday night. My supervisor keeps telling me to “loosen up” and come out more often when he and the labmates go out for drinks. He has made comments about my clothing and my body that make me really uneasy. I’m depressed and afraid to go to the lab. I’m too far into my research to quit. I just don’t know what to do…”
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