Managing your supervisor

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Health Warning

Managing your supervisor

Several supervisors asked me if this topic was a "good idea"

For whom?
Health warning

- You really ought to be asking Brahim, Zeynep, Emmanuel, ..
- How do you manage Toby?
- Or is that, can you?
- I’m not sure that I managed Alan Bundy that well!
Outline

- Understanding your supervisor
- Manipulating your supervisor
- Great expectations
- Common pitfalls
- Dealing with conflict
- Managing your career
Understanding your supervisor

- Their goals
- Their skills
- Their hates
- Their inadequacies
Their goals

- Supervision is a poorly paid job
- I have supervised students at universities that don’t even employ me
- Clearly your supervisor’s goal is not (directly) money
- So what is motivating them?
Their goals

- Giving back to the system
- They were well supervised, ...
- Creating a scientific “legacy”
- Ambassadors to spread their views, ...
- Multiplying their output
- My favourite programming language, ...
Their skills

- They *vaguely* know what it takes to get a PhD
- They surely have one themselves
- They offer different skills over the life cycle of your PhD
Their skills

- At the start
  - Identifying a good question
  - Knowing what has already been done
  - Anticipating when a problem will be too hard or too easy
Their skills

- In the middle
- Watching over the “bigger” picture
- Nudging your in good directions
- Identifying common pitfalls (see later)
- Keeping an eye on the clock
Their skills

- At the end
- Telling you when to stop
- Knowing what a thesis looks like
- Anticipating problem areas for your viva
Their hates

- Students who quit
- Wasted effort all round
- Students who finish late
- They know writing up isn’t that pleasant
- But it needs to be done
Their inadequacies

- Supervisors are only human too
- They are unable to
  - read your mind
  - manage their time
  - remember much
Try to Remember

- They are learning on the job
- There are no classes to be a supervisor
- They have little experience
- Like in medicine: do one, watch one, teach one
Manipulating your supervisor

- Inform them
- Scientific obstacles
- Personal obstacles
Manipulating your supervisor

- Be positive
- Your supervisor is more likely to want to help
- You’ll feel better
Manipulating your supervisor

- Work hard
- They will be more willing to work hard too
- You’ll more likely to get results
- A thesis is hard work
Manipulating your supervisor

- Write
  - Internal notes
  - Conference papers
  - Journal articles
- They will find it hard to ignore paper
Manipulating your supervisor

- Be their ambassador
- Scientific contacts
- Social networking
Manipulating your supervisor

- Make yourself invaluable
- Reviewing papers
- Helping run conferences
- Running the lab/group
Great expectations

- Your expectations
- Their expectations
Your expectations

- Intellectual support
- Quality assurance
- Telling you when (not) to stop
- Emotional support
- Encouragement
- Constructive environment
Their expectations

- You finish
- You go on to supervise
- Your drafts lack spelling mistakes
Common pitfalls

- Solving the world
- Manna from heaven
- Computer bum
- Ivory tower

Researcher's Bible, Alan Bundy et al.
Common pitfalls

- Misunderstood genius
- Love of jargon
- If I can do it, it's trivial
- Love of complexity
- Lost in abstraction
- Ambitious paralysis

Researcher’s Bible, Alan Bundy et al.
Psychological hurdles

- Self confidence
- Research impotence
- Thin skin
- Cold start
- Theorem envy
- Fear of exposure
Dealing with conflict

- Conflict is common
- Supervision is like a marriage
- Even divorce is possible
Dealing with conflict

- Communicate
- Conflict often caused by breakdowns in communication
Dealing with conflict

Irving and I reached a compromise; he finally understands it's better to just let me have my own way!

- Compromise
- There are two of you in this "marriage"
Dealing with conflict

- Speak to your second supervisor
- Approach a colleague of theirs
- Find your graduate officer
Dealing with conflict

- If all else fails, you can “change” your supervisor
- Formally or informally
- Funding may be an issue
Managing your career

- Your supervisor is your “best” friend
- Getting your first job
- Getting your second job
- ...
- Your success is their success
Managing your career

Unlike a marriage, they expect (and want) you to leave

To see you stand on your own feet

More like having children?
Managing your career

- Where to next?
- PostDoc
- Faculty
- Industry
- Seminary
Managing your career

- Your supervisor doesn’t know everything
- Experience other labs
  - Short visits
  - Post Doc
  - Sabbatical
Managing your career

- Exploit mentors
- Supervisor
- Thesis committee
- Visitors
- ...

Managing your career

- Help others
- Your scratch my back, ...
- Contribute
- Organize workshops
- Give tutorials
- Develop web resources, ...
Managing your career

- Set goals, make plans
- Standard career paths
- Less conventional paths
- Expect the unexpected
Conclusions

- Understanding your supervisor
- Manipulating your supervisor
- Great expectations
- Dealing with conflict
- Managing your career
The End