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Managing up: how to communicate effectively with your PhD adviser

Your supervisor has a vested interest in your success. Set the right tone and communication style when you meet with them.

[Lluís Saló-Salgado](#) , [Angi Acocella](#) , [Ignacio Arzuaga García](#) , [Souha El Mousadik](#)  & [Augustine Zvinavashe](#) 



Credit: Getty

When you start a PhD, you also begin a professional relationship with your PhD adviser. This is an exciting moment: interacting with someone for whom you might well have great respect and admiration, but who might also slightly intimidate you.

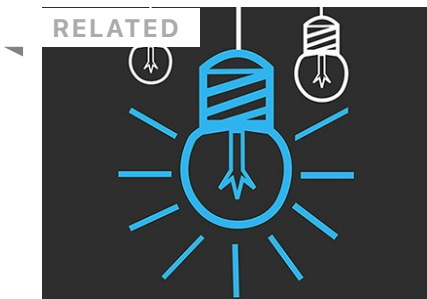
They will have their own management style, but ‘managing up’ is important, so you need to identify the style that will help you to thrive academically, and communicate that to your adviser.

In September, we ran a panel discussion for new graduate students in the department of civil and environmental engineering at the Massachusetts Institute of

Technology in Cambridge. One focus of the panel was how to communicate effectively with your PhD adviser; we based this on skills we have developed since starting our programmes three to five years ago. Our different nationalities, genders, academic backgrounds, research fields and advisers have led to five different experiences. But we agree on the following set of guidelines.

Be introspective

Understanding yourself and your needs is the first step to communicating your needs to your adviser. Do you work better under frequent, soft deadlines or infrequent, hard ones? Do you prefer clear guidance or the freedom to choose your own research questions? How much time do you need to prepare for an individual meeting with your adviser?



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It could be a while before you can answer these questions, and what is best for your productivity might be different from what feels easiest or what is required of you. Ask your adviser to clarify their research priorities and assess how you can adapt. Reflect on what patterns of behaviour or management are not meeting your needs, and discuss them with your adviser to prevent conflicts or misunderstandings.

It might be helpful to ask a senior lab member how best to communicate about a management issue. Feeling uncomfortable in these situations is natural, but remember that it is only by being introspective that you can help your adviser to advise you.

Set the right tone

Prioritize respectful communication. In case of doubt, err on the side of caution. Be observant, especially if you're working in a lab outside your own culture or country. How do other lab members and colleagues address your adviser? If you joined a new laboratory with no previous students, you could ask your adviser about the norms and culture they want to create. Your relationship with your adviser will naturally evolve, with events such as conferences and group retreats likely to render it more casual or informal over time.

Value one-to-one meetings

Your adviser is busy, so make the most of each one-to-one meeting by notifying them in advance of the topics you want to discuss, ranging from most to least important. Include one or two sentences summarizing the agenda and what you want to get out of the meeting.

During the meeting, be proactive. Take note of the topics you should follow up on, and their priority. Be guided by your peers and adviser on the preferred way to communicate research ideas. Does your adviser expect formal slides in one-to-one sessions, or a more informal discussion of ideas? Afterwards, summarize what was discussed and your next steps. When you require action or further input from your adviser, send a follow-up e-mail outlining what was discussed and what you need.

Regularly revisit long-term goals

You might need to set some research goals aside temporarily as you prioritize more pressing duties, such as classes, teaching-assistant activities or side research projects. But many PhD students are at least partially supported by their adviser's funds, so you should try to ensure that your research progress stays consistent with your adviser's project or grant timeline. If this seems implausible, work with your adviser to modify the goals they have for you.

Setting short-term goals helps to break challenging, longer-term aims into manageable, trackable pieces. Departments often provide documentation on degree requirements that includes predefined milestones, and academic administrators can be a great resource to ensure that you stay on track. Achieving these intermediate goals and milestones, and discussing them with your adviser, will help you to stay confident in your progress during periods without other feedback.

Remain flexible in communication

As your goals change through different stages of your PhD (such as completing general requirements, producing your first draft or starting a collaboration in an area outside your expertise), so will some aspects of communication with your adviser. You might need to change the frequency with which you provide updates, for example, or you might require a different type or amount of guidance. Harness your past experience to identify what worked well for which task and why. Include that when you discuss how to achieve your next goal. For example, if short weekly research summaries sent to your adviser helped you both to stay on track early in your PhD, keep this in mind as you progress; you will have more independence as a senior PhD student, but sending occasional updates on longer-term projects could help to keep your adviser aware of your progress and keep them engaged in your work.

Communicating with your adviser might feel daunting at first, but remember that your wins are also theirs. Our experience suggests that being introspective, respectful, proactive, aware and inferential will help you to communicate effectively and will set you up for success.

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COMPETING INTERESTS

The authors declare no competing interests.