Setting Expectations and Managing Conflict

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Agenda

• Purpose of this session
• Campus Context
• Common Types of Conflict
• Postdoc and Faculty Workshops at Stanford
• Recap, Tools and Resources
Purpose of this session

Is to introduce you to...

1. the common types of conflicts and strategies to address them.

2. coach you on setting expectations and managing conflicts by negotiating your interests

3. leave with new information and tools to help facilitate similar activities at your institutions
Campus Context

- 2000 postdoc trainees in biosciences, natural sciences, humanities and social sciences
- 800 faculty members who are postdoc mentors across all ranks
- Mentoring initiative to effect a culture change towards postdocs
  - Learning orientation vs. production orientation
  - Carrots and sticks
    - Formalize University expectations
    - Provide tools and resources to coach and to support on an ongoing basis
    - Mentor Award and Best Practices Resource and Case Library
Common types of conflict in academia

- Perceptual Conflicts
- Boundary Conflicts
- Interpersonal Conflicts
- Value Conflicts
What to do? First steps...

• Diagnose the situation correctly: distinguish between the symptom(s) and the source(s) of the issue
• Address the conflict quickly
• Apply the right strategy
# Common Strategies to Solve Conflicts

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Who and How</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Problem Solving</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>Parties come together to talk it out</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Expansion of Resources</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>Obtain more $$, staff or time</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Goal Setting</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>Superordinate mission: cure cancer; publish in science</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Interdependence Analysis</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Who needs to do what? How do we depend on each other? Is that equally important to each of us? Why?</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Compromise</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>You want X. I want Y. We get Z (a hybrid of X and Y)</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Authoritative Command</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>I am the PI and this is what this lab will do.</td>
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Thomas Harvey and Bonita Drolet “Managing Conflict” from Building People, Building Teams (Lancaster, PA Technomics, 2003)
## Common Strategies to Solve Conflicts

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<td><strong>Third Party Intervention</strong></td>
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<td>Can’t solve it on my own. Need someone to facilitate. Go to the boss, or the Ombuds.</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Role Analysis Technique</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>You do X. I do Y. Please don’t try to do X because that’s how I will get my name of the paper (and how it’ll be worthwhile for me)</td>
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<td><strong>Norm Setting</strong></td>
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<td>Lab members must cancel equipment bookings if they will not use it!</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Better Communication &amp; Feedback</strong></td>
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<td>Weekly check-ins; progress updates; email recaps of important decisions; letting others know when it’s not working out</td>
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<td><strong>Smoothing and Avoidance</strong></td>
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<td>I’ll just pick up a new line of inquiry because I just can’t work with this other postdoc in the lab OR I’ll change labs</td>
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*Thomas Harvey and Bonita Drolet “Managing Conflict” from Building People, Building Teams (Lancaster, PA Technomics, 2003)*
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Scenarios

1. Two postdocs are fighting over who should represent the lab with a group of potential industry partners who will visit next week. They have disliked each other for a long time. Each thinks that the other is not “representative” of the lab.

2. A postdoc wants to teach a course next term. The PI doesn’t think that the postdoc is ready yet. They like and trust each other.
Exercise

• Determine the actors
• Identify the kind of conflict
• What strategy should be used?
In academia

- All types of conflicts occur
- Tendency to deploy smoothing and avoidance strategies... even when situations don’t call for them as the most effective
- Formal training in this area is not common
- Significant power distance can interfere with healthy conflict management processes
- Two training workshops (quarterly) to start at the base: setting expectations and values

*Interest-Based Approach*
Goals of each workshop

For Postdocs
• Set clear expectations
• Communicate effectively
• Deal with conflicts
• Become self-aware
• Better understand your PI’s point of view
• Practice strategies that allow you to negotiate your needs without feeling confrontational

For Faculty
• Set clear expectations
• Give productive feedback
• Deal with conflicts
• Become self-aware
• Use a formal framework to set goals, values, direction
• Role model and share experiences and learn of best practices from other colleagues
The Workshop Components

• Self assessment of personal style in conflict situation
• Establish basic assumptions
• Through role plays, learn to:
  – identify the issue(s) and develop options through an Interest-Based Approach lens
  – Use expectations to clarify potential for miscommunication
  – Learn techniques for effective communication
  – Prepare for a difficult conversation with a PI (or with a postdoc)
Basic Assumptions

- Many issues in your postdoctoral training are not negotiable (Laws, Contracts, Requirements).
- A power disparity between postdocs and faculty mentors will always exist, but postdocs have more power than they might realize.
- Disagreements will happen. How matters are handled is what matters.
- The Postdoc – Your relationship with your faculty mentor relationship is key to your professional success, since faculty mentors teach, train, provide resources, and open professional doors.
- It is a *relationship*, so postdoc plays an active role in shaping it.
Where Are You?

- Competing
- Collaborating
- Avoiding
- Accommodating

- High Importance of Outcome
- Low Importance of Outcome
- High Importance of Relationship
- Low Importance of Relationship

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Identify the Issue

- An issue is the **immediate** question for which you need an answer (it may not be the only basis of conflict but it is the question needing attention *now*).
  - *When can I have that letter of recommendation?*
  - *What are research priorities for the lab?*

- Both parties must agree on what the issue is.
Inconvenient Timing

Watch and identify the issue
Strategies to Resolve Conflict

• Avoidance Strategy
• Accommodating Strategy

• Positional Strategy
  vs.
• Interest-based Strategy
Options Over Time

- Time

- Then

- Now

- Options

- A
- B
- C
- D
- E
- F

- B
- C
- D
- E
- F

- C
- D
- E
- D
- E

- D
- E
- E
- E
Positional Approach

• A position is a want or need that one claims to answer the immediate question (the issue).
  – “I need a letter of recommendation from you now.”
  – “I cannot write a letter of recommendation for you until we get that patent.”
The Positional Approach to Resolving a Conflict

- **ISSUE**
- **A**
  - What I Want
- **B**
  - What I Want
- **C**
  - Compromise
- **Position**

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Limits of Positional Approach

- Reduces options in the beginning to two positions; neither one may be the optimal answer to the issue.
- May produce a winner and a loser or 2 losers
- Risks harming the relationship
Interest-Based Approach

• What are interests?
  – Interests are needs that must be satisfied and values that must be preserved.
  – Interests are the underlying rationale (why) for our positions (what).

• The Interest-Based approach strives to optimize the solution to meet shared interests
The Interest-Based Approach

- • A
- • B

- • Issue

- • Interests
  - • 1
  - • 2
  - • 3
  - • 4
  - • 5
  - • 6
  - • 7

- • Options
  - • A
  - • B
  - • C
  - • D
  - • E
  - • F
  - • G
• The Interest-Based Approach

- Issue
  • Is it relevant to the issue?
  • Does it meet shared interests?
  • What is optimal?

- Interests
  • 1
  • 2
  • 3
  • 4
  • 5
  • 6
  • 7

- Options
  • A
  • B
  • C
  • D
  • E
  • F
  • G
• Conflicts

• are resolved by examining, in this order:

• Issue

• Stakeholders

• Interests

• Options

• Solution
Easy to Understand, Hard to Do

Strong emotions are triggered with conflict

- Avoidance/Accommodation
- Anger
- Action

The trigger event
Strong Emotions

• Predispose one to use a positional strategy.
• Impair one’s ability to identify own or others’ interests.
• Compromise one’s rational decision-making abilities.

Sleep on it
A Graceful Retreat

• What can you say?
  – “I need to think more about this.”
  – “Can we continue this conversation later?”
Easy to Understand, Hard to Do

- Trained to be solution-oriented
- Rewarded for defending our solutions well
- Strong emotions are triggered with conflict
- Slower than positional approach
- Power imbalance

BUT, you can learn this, and it will help you
Two kinds of Expectations

Implicit Expectations:
• Not stated and rarely understood.
• Unilaterally set

Explicit Expectations:
• Clearly stated (verbally or in written form)
• Checked for understanding
• Unilaterally or jointly set
Window of “Discussable” Expectations

- Explicit
- Joint
- Implicit

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Basic styles of communication

- Passive
- Assertive
- Aggressive
Assertiveness

• When trying to be assertive, ask yourself “Am I being ... ”

  Honest
  Empathic
  Appropriate
  Respectful
  Direct

• If you do these, you are being assertive, rather than aggressive or passive.
Three Stages of a Meeting

1. Preparation
2. Engagement
3. Reflection & Follow up
Meeting with Your PI

1. Preparation
   - Set a meeting
   - Plan your talking points. Have a friend look at it first.
   - Let the PI know the purpose of the meeting in advance
   - Think about how to start the conversation
   - Consider the PI’s interests
   - Anticipate his/her reactions and how you might respond
   - Practice with friends
Meeting with Your PI

1. Preparation
2. Engagement

Here we are going to role play a difficult conversation.
Meeting with Your PI

1. Preparation
2. Engagement
3. Reflection & Follow up
   – How well did the conversation meet your shared interests?
   – Summarize and confirm the conclusions
     • What are next steps?
Summary

• Bumpy spots are normal
• Interest-based strategies can help people work together better
  – Practice, practice, practice
  – There are many shared interests
  – Deploy the appropriate strategy to the situation
  – Interest-based approaches can work well in circumstances where the power distance can inhibit reaching an acceptable resolution to the parties involved
Back to Mentoring

• Training-based framework to identify values (interests), set expectations, and manage conflict effectively

• Process-based approach to the relationship with the PI
  – **Initial Meeting**: self-assess; gap identification; clarify values, goals and short term objectives; minimize window of implicit expectations
  – **Annual Progress Meeting**: recalibrate; discuss changes in direction; discuss wellbeing; plan new activities; objectives
  – **Exit Meeting**: differentiation strategies; departure
The Stanford workshops were developed from materials provided by Michigan State University. Development and implementation of their Conflict Resolution program was supported in part by grants from: The William and Flora Hewlett Foundation (1997-1999) and the U.S. Department of Education’s Fund for the Improvement of Post-Secondary Education (FIPSE) (1997-2000). Further adapted by the Offices of the Vice Provost for Graduate Education and of Postdoctoral Affairs at Stanford University.

QUESTIONS?