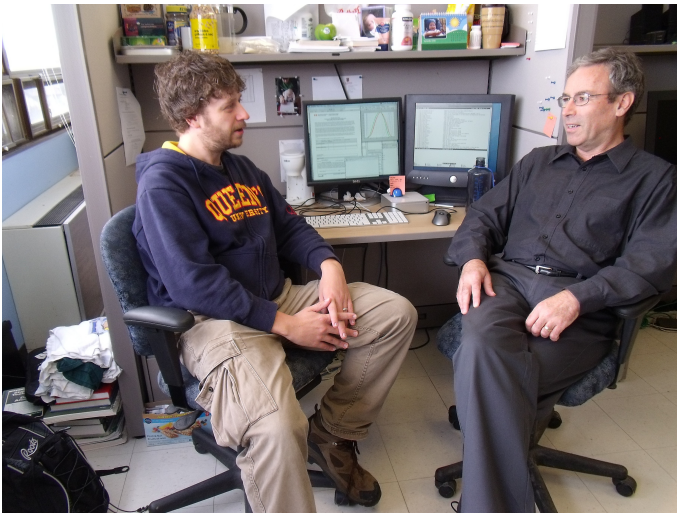




Health,  
Counselling &  
Disability Services

## How to Make the Most out of Your Supervisory Relationship: Advice from Supervisors & Graduate Students



## The Importance of the Graduate Supervisory Relationship

For you as a graduate student, a good supervisory relationship is pivotal to successful completion of your degree. If the relationship is not solid or turns sour, there can be serious consequences. A good supervisor provides expert guidance in your research. The support of a good supervisor after graduation can also provide you with good connections and references to bootstrap your career.

### Why this booklet?

In the spring of 2010 we interviewed a number of graduate supervisors and students to ask them what makes a good quality supervisory relationship. Our goal was to build a profile of 'best practice' in order to give direction to new students and students experiencing difficulties.

We hope the information in this booklet will provide you with some tips and strategies that may help you in your relationship with your supervisor.

*For more information please consult the School of Graduate Studies Guide to Graduate Supervision. Available in print at the SGS or online at:*

<http://www.queensu.ca/academicsupportgraduate/supervisionguide.html>

## **What makes an effective supervisory relationship?**

According to graduate students, the #1 factor affecting a good quality relationship is:

### **ENCOURAGEMENT & PRAISE**

Other important factors are:

- Trust, support, and understanding
- Clear direction and expectations
- Consistency – in direction and feedback
- Communication
- Constructive and timely feedback on your work
- Belief in the supervisor's judgment
- Flexibility
- Respect for your unique personal circumstances

## What is expected of YOU?

### **Get the job done – independently.**

Your responsibility is to carry out your work. Especially at the PhD level, you are seen as a junior colleague and therefore should not expect a lot of direct management. Although there should be opportunities for processing ideas, your supervisor will expect outcomes. *Don't try to hide if you haven't been working.*

### **Communicate.**

Talk to your supervisor. Express your needs, roadblocks, and intentions in writing. On a regular basis write out what you are doing and any difficulties you are encountering. Writing assists you to process and clarify your intentions which, in turn, allows your supervisor to give more thorough feedback. Also consider writing up a summary after each meeting.

### **Show initiative and create interest.**

Supervisors are very busy so the onus is on you to initiate contact, schedule meetings, seek input, etc. Show enthusiasm.

### **Be sensitive to the supervisor's schedule.**

Give your supervisor time to process your work. Some supervisors might prefer to receive many short bits of writing on a regular basis while others prefer a complete draft. Find out what works best for you and your supervisor.

## What should you expect from your supervisor?

*One PhD student said: "Start by expecting nothing!" 😊*

Unclear or incorrect expectations about the supervisor's role and responsibilities often lead to frustration. Although supervision styles and time availability vary widely, you can reasonably expect the following from your supervisor:

### **For all graduate students**

- Regular communication (meeting, email)
- Assistance with planning your project (e.g., goal setting, tools and resources)
- Someone who is invested in your success
- Support — someone who stands by you
- Room to make mistakes
- Advice and general guidance
- Someone who recognizes your abilities and boundaries with respect to work/life balance

### **For PhD students**

- Opportunity to work autonomously
- Mutual learning experience
- Assistance with networking and future career

### **What you should NOT expect**

- Explicit instruction on direction and day-to-day research activity
- An editor for your writing
- Instant turnaround and feedback on your writing
- Your supervisor to be your friend
- Your supervisor to always be available when you want

**If you perceive existing or looming issues that may result in conflict, raise them with your supervisor.**

Other people you can consult if your supervisory relationship has run into problems:

- Department Head, Department Graduate Coordinator
- SGPS Peer Advisors
- Associate Deans, School of Graduate Studies (meetings are confidential)
- Counsellors at Counselling Services
- Your committee members
- Colleagues and friends

## Intercultural Communication Notes

We recognize that one's cultural background or country of origin plays a role in how you contribute to and perceive the supervisory relationship. Here are a few points to consider:

For students coming from different cultures, Queen's supervisor-student relationships may seem quite informal or casual. However, the friendliness that your supervisor displays does not necessarily translate into being your friend in a social setting or going easy on you during performance appraisals. It's being collegial.

Supervisors will expect YOU to communicate your needs quite directly. If this is a challenge for you, seek support from your supervisor or the cross-cultural counsellor at Counselling Services. To make an appointment, call 613 533 6000 extension 78264.

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