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## Fostering Strong Supervisory Relationships: How Can Supervisors Assist?



## **Why this brochure?**

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

*"We try and we constantly keep trying."  
"We pay a lot of attention to our students..."*

We learned that certain components are integral to building a good supervisory relationship. However, at the core there must be a *continuous commitment* to fostering this atmosphere.

## **Why should supervisors care about the quality of the supervisory relationship?**

BECAUSE...a good supervisory relationship

- boosts student motivation, productivity and performance outcomes
- creates sense of self-worth, confidence, connectedness, calmness
- enhances collaborative projects
- is a reflection of your skills as a 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 can supervisors do to ensure a good supervisor-student relationship?**

## **TOP PREDICTORS of Strong Supervisory Relationships** [according to students and supervisors]

### **#1 Encourage, Praise & Celebrate**

*“When I was a young supervisor, I thought I had to be hard on my students.”*

*“We celebrate all student accomplishment, big and small, and we publicize these achievements widely.”*

Supervisors have great influence over students’ academic and emotional well-being. Senior supervisors report having learned to offer as much positive feedback as constructive criticism.

Encouragement and praise go a long way to keeping motivation high, building confidence, and reducing stress. Furthermore, not only is it cost free, it should make you feel good, too.

Even when your student is not working to your expectations, an empathic approach works best, e.g., “I see you’re struggling to get your proposal in. What can I do to assist you...?”

## #2 Effective Communication

*"I'm still learning how to communicate." A veteran supervisor*

Relationships depend on good communication. Nevertheless, expertise in communication skills can be a moving target. With an increasingly diverse student body, developing competency in intercultural communication may pose additional challenges. Students may expect that your years of supervisory experience will translate into strong communication skills, and they may not anticipate a potential misunderstanding.

**Ask yourself, "Am I a good communicator?"**

If you're not sure, take this online self-assessment [www.mindtools.com/pages/article/newCS\\_99.htm](http://www.mindtools.com/pages/article/newCS_99.htm)  
For an extensive list of communication skills resources [www.mindtools.com/page8.html](http://www.mindtools.com/page8.html)

### **Feedback/ Turnaround Time**

*"I always give quick feedback."*

A big concern of students is getting timely feedback on their written work. Students left waiting for too long may lose momentum and motivation. Early in the relationship, discuss your general practice for feedback and turnaround time, and together you may wish to explore various approaches, such as having the student hand in smaller pieces of work more frequently.

### #3 Respect, Trust & Fairness

*"Saying 'I have a new colleague' is a statement of respect."*

*A supervisor*

*"There is an air of respect here." A PhD student*

Students who are treated like "junior colleagues" exhibit increased **intrinsic motivation**. They

- work harder to gain mastery
- act more autonomously
- feel more connected to the project

Confident and motivated students have a direct and positive effect on your success as a scholar.

### #4 Clear & Reasonable Direction

*"My supervisor knows the appropriate distance. He lets me own my moments of success and failure." A PhD student*

**Master's students need more direction.**

Generally, Master's students require clear project/thesis parameters, support, and guidance.

Specifically they need help:

- setting up the problem/experiment
- organizing a timeline
- finding resources and on-campus support
- developing skills, e.g., time management, writing, presentation skills

## **PhD students benefit from an apprenticeship approach.**

PhD students need to learn to manage their own projects. Students are often unprepared for independence, so discuss your approach upfront.

Areas of support PhD students find helpful:

- Writing—clarifying ideas
- Focusing and narrowing topic
- Checking in to ensure deadlines are met

Some PhD students might need more direction in the earlier stages of their program, especially information on resources.

## **Regardless of degree program, more attention is needed when you notice your student...**

- is not producing enough work; procrastinates a lot; is stuck
- has not contacted you for a while; avoids you
- cannot seem to retain information
- appears emotionally taxed or overly stressed
- is absent a lot

You may wish to refer students to personal and learning strategies counsellors at Queen's Counselling Services. For appointments call 613 533 6000 extension 78264. Also refer to the Graduate Student tab at [www.queensu.ca/learningstrategies](http://www.queensu.ca/learningstrategies).

## **Here are a few suggestions from your fellow supervisors to share with students**

*"Make good use of your supervisor!"*

**Put your needs, intentions, research questions in writing.** Writing helps you process and organize ideas. It also means I can give you more thorough feedback as I'll have time to think about your work before our next meeting.

### **Get my attention.**

Get me interested in your work. Be passionate.

**Communicate with me regularly.** You don't have to report weekly; however, if it helps you stay on track, consider using this simple layout:

1. What I accomplished last week
2. My goals for this week
3. Concerns/Bottlenecks

### **Do your work.**

Deliverables are very important, regardless of progress. Remember I have to answer to my funding bodies.

### **Don't try to hide if you're not doing the required tasks.**

Tell me if you are struggling so we can solve problems together.

**We are colleagues:** both parties are responsible for making the relationship work.

Feel free to print this list and hand it to your new graduate students.

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