

Supervising Caroline

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Caroline had started at the laboratory before I arrived. She had done her final year project there and from what I could gather it had not been entirely easy, though this was hearsay. I did, however, think it a little odd that she had started her PhD with a completely new project and a new supervisor.

When I took up my position in the laboratory I was starting my first teaching appointment. I was two years on from the completion of my own PhD and had supervised before only in the sense of being a source of information on how to do something or on where that information might be found. I had not had the responsibility of looking after a student's project before.

For the first 9 months of my appointment I had few responsibilities beyond getting my research project started. As far as I was concerned, Caroline was one of nine or ten graduate students in the laboratory. I did, however, become generally aware of the gossip that things were not well with her project. In fact, it seemed to me to be an out-and-out disaster. The impression I got was that the original premise had not been thought through carefully enough. The result was that the whole project was falling apart because Caroline was not getting anywhere with her research. There did not seem to be any 'fall-back' and she had been left to flounder. Her previous supervisor seemed to have little to do with the project any more and could not deal with the problems that Caroline posed either at the scientific level or at the level of general support.

Caroline spent some months trying to find another project to work on, and, although the original impetus for the collaboration seemed unclear to me, she had developed a project between our laboratory and another at a nearby university. She had spent about 6 months working in the collaborator's laboratory learning the techniques she thought she would need to use in our laboratory. On her return the Chair of the Departmental Graduate Committee suggested that I was the most obvious person to supervise her work because I had some experience in the same area. Because I did not work on exactly the same theoretical model as Caroline, the link to the other laboratory was maintained with the head of that department acting as adviser.

Q. What advice would you offer to this supervisor to help in deciding whether to take on the responsibility of supervising Caroline?

In my first meeting with Caroline I discovered that Caroline had in fact been a graduate student for one and a half years. She was angry at the way she had been treated within our laboratory up to this point. Her anger was directed primarily towards Roger, the Head of my Department, with little comment on the role of her original supervisor. The relationship between myself and her original supervisor had not been particularly harmonious. We had clashed several months earlier over a separate issue and had little to do with each other since then. Additionally, at the point when Caroline became 'my student' he was little involved with her work. As a result, there was little active discussion between us about the situation. We had, however, briefly joined forces to get Caroline to tell us about her current work, though this had been prior to any official change over of supervisors.

Q1. What could have been done to facilitate the transition from one supervisor to another?

Q2. What would be helpful for the new supervisor and the student at this stage?

Caroline now gradually settled into working in our laboratory. She made a big effort to set-up the experiments since they were not already running in the laboratory. She worked hard and slowly the results began to build up. She tended to work in the laboratory on her own. As I was not working in exactly the same area, we never did any work together and our interactions occurred partly through some informal talks in the laboratory but mainly at more organised sessions in which she showed me her results. We discussed problems and decided the direction of her future work. As well as these meetings there were the regular sessions that all members of the laboratory attended.

The majority of my problems in supervising Caroline centred upon providing general support rather than specific scientific guidance. It was easy to know when her research was going well - she would be around the laboratory cheerfully interacting with other students and laboratory staff. When there were problems, she was hard to find - working odd hours, not being available for meetings and being generally negative about her results. During these difficult periods we would have meetings in which I had to work hard to convince her that her work was both interesting and leading to useful results. We agreed that we would incorporate her data in jointly authored papers.

Over the period of her laboratory work she did in fact produce some very interesting though complex work. Our relationship was never easy, however. I felt that I had to supply a considerable part of her motivation and had always to be enthusiastic about her work. This proved a strain over the long term, especially when I was working hard on my own research.

Q. Comment on the supervisor's contribution at this stage?

Our real problems started when she began to write up her project. About six months prior to this I had suggested that she get some of her results into the form of a paper to serve two purposes: first, to get something published and second, to get some writing practice. So began the crumbling of what had always been an uneasy relationship.

Her first draft was poor. I could not decide whether she had simply written something in a rush and not bothered to edit it, or whether she had poor written communication skills. Our interactions over this paper involved us in sitting down with the drafts while I made suggestions on how they could be improved. Following our discussions she would go away and produce a re-write which frankly seemed little different from the original. Gradually, the paper came close to a publishable draft.

Q. What advice would you now offer both Caroline and her supervisor?

Caroline then began to write up her thesis. The early drafts were, once again, poor and I began to worry whether her writing skills were up to it. At this time, I was beginning to get feedback from colleagues that she was behaving oddly. After a long session on writing skills she seemed better able to cope with things and worked harder on her approach and style. During this period we discussed how best her results could be presented as well as working on the drafts in detail. Although this approach worked well initially I felt by the end of what would be her last summer term with us that almost any comments I made would lead to hostility on her part. My feedback on her chapters was not sufficiently supportive in her view. She thought I was being too hard on her and was not providing enough guidance, while I felt that nothing short of my re-writing it would be good enough.

Matters finally came to a head after I returned from a month's visit to another laboratory in pursuit of my own research project. I was expecting a large pile of work from Caroline and was surprised when I found nothing from her. In the course of a discussion with Roger about another matter I was told that I needn't worry about Caroline's thesis any more as he was now dealing with it. To be honest, this felt like a relief, but I was irritated by the lack of communication from Caroline and by the abrupt way I had been relieved of the supervisory responsibility. I eventually confronted Caroline with the fact that she should have let me know what was going on. She informed me that she felt I could no longer be of any help to her.

Q1. If the relationship between supervisor and student begins to break down what can be done?

Q2. Comment on the role of the Head of Department in this context.

Caroline's viva did not go well. She had not wanted me to attend the viva so I didn't know the detail of it but it was obvious that it had been a deeply distressing experience for her. The examiners (the internal had been the new Chair of the Departmental Committee) had recommended that she should do some more work to validate some of the results she had presented in her thesis which, it appeared, contradicted some findings in the external examiner's own research work. Caroline returned to the laboratory extremely unhappy with her experience and demoralised because she had been asked to do more work and also because of the trauma she had experienced in undergoing her viva. Despite our past difficulties I felt sympathetic to her position and, as a colleague, I encouraged her to take a few days holiday.

A few days later, after a brief informal exchange of information Roger showed me a full examiners' report which outlined their thoughts on the thesis. It was ambiguous. On the whole they praised Caroline's work and were interested in the data she had presented. They then, however, went on to demand that she carried out a series of experiments that seemed to have little relevance to the thesis as a whole. I thought at first Roger was just keeping me informed as a matter of courtesy, but he ended the meeting with a fairly stern reminder that I was still formally registered as her supervisor and that he wanted me to 'pick up the pieces' and remotivate her to carry out the extra experiments..I was quite shocked when Roger reminded me that when the Faculty Committee came to consider making my appointment permanent a successful supervisory record would help.

Q. Comment on the assessment process in this case.

Against my better judgement I decided to accept the challenge and arranged a meeting with Caroline to see if we could work together again to salvage the thesis. She agreed and we established a plan for the work she had to do.

She settled down to the experiments as required by the examiners. The results she obtained were no different from those she had originally presented in her thesis. She re-wrote the relevant parts of her thesis to incorporate this new data and went back over some of her old data which the examiners had asked her to recalculate and showed it all to me. We had some discussion and I advised her how to integrate it all in the final thesis. As Caroline was working on these corrections our relationship became more and more tense.

In re-calculating some of her results she phoned to say that she had mislaid some of the data and to ask if I had copies of some of the original data on my computer or in my files. I did have some material that she had given me, but it did not seem to be what she needed. I was subsequently surprised to discover that her new graphs were completely different from the originals. At that time I was working on the final draft of a paper which contained the data. Working to a deadline, I intended to submit the paper before attending a conference in the US. I heard through other members of the laboratory that there was some problem with the data but received no information directly from Caroline.

Q. What should the supervisor do now?

Roger passed on the information which I then went and verified for myself by breaking rules of personal space and checking on Caroline's files on the computer. I felt that it was easier to check for myself since Caroline at this time tended to get hysterical at any problem around her thesis. Having seen the new data I realised that the two papers I had just finished working on were now invalid. When I discussed this with Roger he only became interested when I pointed out that these papers had almost been submitted and that could have been an embarrassment to us all. When I told him that Caroline had not informed me of this problem he seemed to think I was making a fuss about nothing. A few days later I received a memo from him stating that Caroline had found the data she had originally lost and that after all there was no problem with the original graphs and so the submission of the papers could go ahead.

So, by her final discussions with Roger communication between us has effectively ceased and her final discussion of the draft were with Roger. She apparently had been very tense after a car crash earlier that week. I did not see the submitted version.

I saw and heard nothing from Caroline after this. Though I did hear through various colleagues that she held myself, Roger and the examiners directly responsible for all of the problems. It was a difficult situation to be in, to find that Caroline had spoken to many members of the lab whilst I had no channel through which to answer criticisms.

When Caroline's examiners finally reported back they asked for further changes. Roger and I discussed these requests. As before they were minor issues. In one case they were in fact incorrect in their statements. However, we decided that the best course of action was to comply with their requests so that the thesis could pass with as little difficulty as possible. Caroline had a second viva and now has a Ph.D. I have put my papers in Roger's tray.

TEAM TASK

On the acetate provided, list the main guidelines suggested by your consideration of Caroline's case:

- 1. guidelines for postgraduate research students**
- 2. guidelines for supervisors**
- 3. guidelines for departments/schools/institutions**