

Managing your Supervisor

At the 2009 ICOC postgraduate workshop, Professor Robert Cribb gave an entertaining and informative talk on techniques for managing your supervisor. At its heart were the following 10 commandments:

1. Take notes during meetings with your supervisor.
2. Follow your supervisor's suggestions, even if you are in doubt. This applies to what to read, whom to see and especially to how to write (supervisors expect you to get things right after they have told you once).
3. Self-start in terms of topic, programme and argument. Many supervisors will respond much better to a student who shows ideas and possibilities than to one who waits to be told what to do.
4. Don't be the one to suggest cutting corners. All supervisors have ideas on what is absolutely essential and what you should do cursorily. Don't risk offending your supervisor's basic scholarly sensibility by suggesting that you might cut corners on empirical rigour, or interpretation, or hard work.
5. Ask the advice of other students on what your supervisor really cares about, so you can pay attention to those issues from the start.
6. Stay in touch with your supervisor. Contact may be irregular, but if you don't make contact at all you may slip out of your supervisor's consciousness.
7. Be understanding in your requests of your supervisor. The rhythm of supervision does not correspond to most of the other rhythms of academic life, so your requests may be inconvenient. This doesn't mean you shouldn't expect prompt attention, but it does mean that you should be a little flexible.
8. Give your supervisor your best possible work. Don't give half-done work and ask 'Am I on the right track?' It's very hard for supervisors to see through a mass of basic problems and to help you see the real issues that you might need help with.
9. Know the rules. Most supervisors have given up on knowing exactly what the university demands of you – the rules change constantly and the extent to which they are applied changes as well. By all means ask your supervisor, but for definitive advice on rules, ask an administrator.
10. If things start to go wrong, see help sooner rather than later. Start by talking to other students to see whether your experience is unusual (you might be unrealistic, or there might be something seriously wrong). Then ask another academic (often in general terms); then go to the administrators who will really be able to help. But bear in mind that things can often be salvaged. It's an intense relationship which can lead to short-term exasperation on either side; don't allow short-term problems to override long-term prospects.