As a faculty member, there are few things as rewarding as watching students and postdocs in your lab work collaboratively with one another—and with you—while they develop as scientists and push your lab’s research in exciting new directions. That's why it often comes as a surprise to learn that there is conflict within your research group.

You may learn that one student is frustrated with another lab member—or with you. Or you may become frustrated with someone in the lab. It might be tempting to wait and hope that things will blow over. But once conflict is in the air, you will often need to react sooner rather than later if you want to return to a more harmonious lab atmosphere.

Interpersonal disputes happen to nearly all faculty members at some time in their career. Unfortunately, as we've discussed in a previous column, principal investigators (PIs) receive little to no training in the managerial skills necessary for conflict resolution—a crucial part of the job.

Drawing on our own experiences and challenges, we offer four strategies for resolving conflict in the
Whenever conflict arrives, it is natural to question the motives of the people involved and try to determine whether someone is a "bad apple." It's also easy to get defensive when you’re a key player in the conflict. But try your best to avoid doing those things. In our experience, conflict frequently arises out of a misunderstanding, not ill-intentions of any party involved. For instance, in a competitive academic environment, students may understandably panic if they think they aren’t given proper credit on a project.

So, start by assuming good intentions. That way, you can be open to understanding the nature of the conflict and the underlying structural dynamics. When you fully understand what transpired, you'll be in a better position to not only figure out ways to make the current conflict better, but to also put new systems in place to prevent future conflicts. June’s research group did that a few years ago, drawing up a new set of lab agreements after encountering a series of miscommunications about work expectations.

**Listen Carefully**

Before you act, the most important strategy is to simply listen. This is particularly important if you are in a position of power. If you share your perspective first, it could make it more difficult for others to share their view of the situation. Create a space where students and other lab members feel safe voicing their concerns and perspectives. Do your best to understand where each person is coming from, realizing that it can sometimes be challenging to reconcile multiple perspectives that may all be true but discordant.

When Wil was having a small crisis in his lab, Jay—one of his former students—told him to meet with each student and just let them talk. Wil learned that the situation was far more nuanced than expected. There were a wide variety of opinions and varying degrees of concern. Using all that information, he was able to devise a response that wouldn’t alienate anyone in the lab, and the students were accepting of the changes because they could see how their input was used.
weekends. By voicing all these concerns collectively, the lab was able to hear those perspectives and develop a set of policies that aimed to meet everyone's needs. This might have been harder to accomplish with a series of one-on-one meetings.

It is important to remember that a culture of openness can be harder to cultivate than it seems—but it is essential for team success. Because of inherent power structures, it will almost always be easier for the PI to speak more freely than students. Whenever possible, make it clear that open conversation is welcome and be consistent in taking feedback seriously. If you react badly or criticize students for expressing different opinions, your trainees will eventually stop coming to you with issues or might lean on others to address their concerns. But if you act professionally, express empathy, and work with your students to resolve their concerns, they'll be more likely to trust you and be open and honest in the future.

Assess Severity

If there is a major conflict in the research group, intervention is obviously important. But sometimes small conflicts are natural and healthy, and it's important to be able to assess the severity of the situation and figure out when intervention is needed—and when it's not. Students can often work things out between themselves and might resent micromanagement. It's also OK at times to let your mentees rely on one another for emotional support.

Likewise, when a student is upset with their adviser there is a natural process of blowing off steam. In these cases, confronting them might backfire or make matters worse. You are not going to be seen as “the world's best boss” all the time. You will have to give honest feedback on occasion that will help your trainees in the long term, even if it may not feel good in the short term. If they don't react in the way you expect, try not to take it personally and don't overreact to every slight.

Once you are sure that an issue is worth acting on, take steps to immediately develop a plan to address the problem before it escalates. Structural conflicts rarely get resolved on their own, and a small conflict that stems from a real correctable problem can turn into a large one if unaddressed, especially if there is a perception that the PI doesn't care about the situation. If confidentiality can be maintained, it may be useful to speak with other, more senior, faculty about the situation to get their perspective.

If the conflict is severe, you should make a point of documenting the issue (e.g., by collecting evidence of the problem, saving relevant emails). Then, find out who you need to contact at your university and what you need to report. In some cases, you may be ethically or legally required to report the issue to the relevant authorities (e.g., Title IX office, funding agency). Know your rights and responsibilities and act accordingly.
When you’re dealing with conflict, it’s important to be able to look inward—to critically evaluate yourself—and be open to change. You may have laid out a set of lab policies and procedures that work well for you. But, as Jay’s work-life balance example demonstrates, not everyone operates the same way. And a great lab is one that optimizes the conditions of success for everyone.

You may want to give autonomy to your students because that’s what you would have wanted, but some students may feel as though they’ve been abandoned. Conversely, if you opt to help guide students through the research process in a hands-on way, some of them may experience that as micromanagement. If you listen carefully and have an open dialogue with your students, you will understand their needs and preferences, and you will be able to customize your mentoring style accordingly.

You may only need to make small adjustments to prevent future conflicts around the same issue. But if problems are serious enough, you may need to generate a new set of lab norms and expectations. Ask your trainees and colleagues for advice to see if you can find a solution. We have all received indispensable advice from others just by opening up about the challenges we are facing.

Conflict is not necessarily a bad thing in the development of a lab; it often inspires a new and better way of working. Try to channel the feedback you get from trainees into building a stronger and better functioning research group. Lab members may come away feeling validated and understood, with a greater capacity for open dialogue and trust. You may still experience conflict in the future, but these strategies will hopefully serve as an opportunity for growth and a positive path forward.

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