Self-Empowerment during your PhD and Postdoc Training

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What does a good day in school/lab/your research group feel like?
What It Sometimes Feels Like

Leaping Into the Void
Yves Klein, 1960
Things That Many (All?) of Us Worry About At Times

- Competitive nature of our work –
- A changing career landscape –
- Concerns regarding work-life balance –
- Stress in workplace relationships –
Things That Many (All?) of Us Worry About At Times

- Competitive nature of our work – am I good enough?
- A changing career landscape – will I get what I want?
- Concerns regarding work-life balance – Can I have it all?
- Stress in workplace relationships – Do I fit in?
We Have A Lot to Keep In Mind
A Question To Start With

- In thinking about your graduate school/postdoc experience, is there…
  - Something(s) holding you back or bothering you enough to be a major distraction?
  - Something(s) getting in the way of your success?
  - Someone(s) you need to talk with?
  - Something(s) you need to change?

- Write -- 3 minutes, uninterrupted
  - write through blocks and don’t worry about flow, grammar, or punctuation
  - You will not have to share what you write, so be honest
Important To Remember

- It is likely that some of the things holding us back are:
  - things we need to work on to change about and for ourselves
  - things we need to express to others so we can work together to improve a situation

- Both are hard – just hard in different ways…. and both start with developing your self-awareness skills
Tools For Building Self-Awareness

- Journaling
- Mindfulness
- Talking honestly with peers, mentors, family and friends
- Therapy

- Beyond self-awareness, we need information and opportunities to practice
Some Near Universal Truths

- To some degree we all struggle
  - to appropriately voice our wants, needs, concerns, and opinions
  - with when to say “no” and how to say “no”
  - to hear and respond appropriately to feedback we receive

- Different communication, conflict and work styles, coupled with a significant power differential, can greatly complicate workplace interactions

- THEREFORE: We need to be proactive and assertive to get what we want from our educational or work experience
Defining Assertiveness

- The ability to express one’s feelings and assert one’s rights and needs while respecting the feelings, rights and needs of others
- Communication that is direct, open and honest to address situations that concern you
Journaling Prompt For Later

What did you learn about assertiveness and difficult conversations from your families and cultures?

Which messages are generally helpful to you now and which are not?
Two Constructs of Self Derived From our Culture(s)

- Independent self
  - Values and emphasizes being unique, making a clearly defined contribution, being heard and influencing others
  - Primary focus is on our own needs, opinions, and goals

- Interdependent self
  - Values and emphasizes relationships, adjusting to others, shared responsibilities, and respect for authority
  - Primary focus is on supporting the group/collective and maintaining tradition

Clash! How to Thrive in a Multicultural World; Hazel Rose Markus and Alana Conner; See http://www.cultureclashes.org/ for information
# How This Might Impact Communication

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>INDEPENDENT</th>
<th>INTERDEPENDENT</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Relationship with boss</td>
<td>More equal and fluid</td>
<td>Unequal and fixed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>and other colleagues</td>
<td>More equal and fluid</td>
<td>Unequal and fixed</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Unequal and fixed</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Willingness to be</td>
<td>High</td>
<td>More difficult given power difference</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>assertive</td>
<td>High</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Focus of exchange</td>
<td>Clarity in the message, getting work done and</td>
<td>Group needs, saving face and preventing embarrassment;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>meeting individual needs</td>
<td>harmony and agreement</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Clarity in the message, getting work done and</td>
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<td>meeting individual needs</td>
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<td>Getting work done and meeting individual needs</td>
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<td>Getting work done and meeting individual needs</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Getting work done</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Style of communication</td>
<td>Direct</td>
<td>Indirect</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Direct</td>
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Important Range of Styles/Approaches

- **Passive** (indirect): accepting or allowing what happens or what others do without active response or resistance

- **Aggressive** (direct): pursuing one's aims and interests forcefully, and without care about the long-term consequences to the other or the relationship

- **Assertive** (direct): having or showing a confident and clear approach to meeting your needs

- **Passive-Aggressive** (direct/indirect): Indirectly pursuing one’s aims by saying one thing and doing another
And Presented Another Way

- What I need/want
  - Assertive
  - Aggressive
- What you need/want
  - Assertive
  - Passive
# What They Look and Sound Like

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Passive</th>
<th>Assertive</th>
<th>Aggressive</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>General</td>
<td>Vague, submissive, unclear message</td>
<td>Firm but polite; clear message</td>
<td>Forceful and unkind; clear message but often missed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eyes</td>
<td>Averted, looking down</td>
<td>Eye contact</td>
<td>Narrow, emotionless</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Posture</td>
<td>Stooped, tense, closed; makes body smaller</td>
<td>Relaxed, open, welcoming</td>
<td>Leaning forward; body made bigger</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hands</td>
<td>Clenched, together, rigid</td>
<td>Open, friendly gestures</td>
<td>Pointing, hands on hips, clenched fists</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Outcome</td>
<td>May not get what you want since it may not be easily understood through your message</td>
<td>Better chance of getting what you want and feeling heard</td>
<td>May alienate people even if you get what you want</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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http://www.getselfhelp.co.uk/communication.htm
Why We Are Not Assertive At Times

- We don’t believe we have the right to be assertive, in general or in a specific situation
- We don’t always know what we want or need
- We are afraid of displeasing others or of not being liked
- We lack the skills we need to effectively be assertive

WHICH OF THESE APPLY TO YOU?
Self-Reflection – Journaling Exercise

- Think about an important relationship at work or at home. Consider a time when you struggled to be assertive and communicate your needs effectively. Focus on what happened, why it happened, how it made you feel and anything you wish had gone differently.

- Now focus on a time you were assertive and communicated your needs effectively. Focus on what happened, why it happened, how it made you feel and anything you wish had gone differently.
Factors to Consider

- **What we want to be assertive about**
  - a wide range of topics with a wide range of importance to us

- **Who we want to be assertive with**
  - intimates
  - friends and acquaintances
  - service workers or strangers
  - supervisors and authority figures

- **Why we want to be assertive**
  - To get our needs met
  - To express a concern
  - To make change
Strategies For Assertive Communication

- Self awareness
- A willingness to work hard to change
- An understanding of communication styles
- Communication tools for being assertive
- Tools for managing stress and for building resilience
Some Thoughts On Stress Around Being Assertive

- Comes from our concerns about personal safely and career safely
- We have to weigh the risks and rewards when deciding a way forward. Helpful to ask ourselves:
  - How important is this to me?
  - How important is this relationship to me?
  - Is this situation part of a pattern; if so, could choosing not to take action have unintended long-term consequences?
  - Is my fear of taking action fully warranted?
Assertiveness Toolkit

- Five prep questions:
  - What are the options available to me?
  - What is the **best** possible outcome for me?
  - What is the **worst** possible outcome for me?
  - Are there some **middle** outcomes I can be happy with?
  - Are there things I can offer to mitigate the concerns and address the needs of the other party?

- Who can help me prepare?
- And when necessary…. who can add to my safety?
Strategies for Assertive Communications

- **I statements**: Taking responsibility for your feelings, wants, and needs AND expressing them clearly

http://www.skillsyouneed.com/ps/assertiveness-techniques.html#ixzz4GAPdadCi
I Statement Structure

- I feel…..
- When…..
- Because……
- I would like…….

- You may not always use all four parts
I Statement Example

- Your co-author (PI) is not responding to you with comments about the paper draft you submitted last week. They also did not respond to an updated draft you emailed earlier in the week.

I feel anxious/frustrated/worried/ignored, when you don’t respond to my emails during the self-quarantine because I am trying hard to make progress on the paper since I can’t be in lab and really need your input. I wonder (would like) if you could give me a sense of when I can expect to hear from you once I send you a draft by email.
I Statement Example II

- You believe your PI’s expectations during the self-quarantine are unrealistic.

When you send such a long list of projects for me to work on each Monday morning, I feel overwhelmed and concerned because I want to make progress and contribute even under these difficult circumstances. I would like to Zoom with you to talk about priorities and a reasonable work plan given the current circumstances and my telework capabilities.
I Statement Example III

- Microaggressions from someone in your research group are making you/others feel unwelcome and upset.

I feel hurt/angry/disrespected/unwelcome when you make comments about _____.

I would like for you to stop making these comments.

I imagine that some of our colleagues feel hurt/angry/disrespected/unwelcome when you make comments about _____.

I would like for you to stop making these comments.
Strategies for Assertive Communications

- **I statements:** Taking responsibility for your feelings, wants, and needs AND expressing them clearly

- **Empathic listening:** periodically summarizing what we think the communicator thinks, feels, means and needs – without necessarily agreeing.

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Empathic Listening Example

Someone in your lab is pressuring you to give up the cell culture hood time you signed up for weeks in advance.

I hear you saying that you are worried about getting your paper published before your grant is due and that you want me to let you use the cell culture hood every day at 10.

If I understand correctly you want to use the cell culture hood during my time because you are worried about getting experiments done for your grant.
Strategies for Assertive Communication

- **I statements**: Taking responsibility for your feelings, wants, and needs AND expressing them clearly

- **Empathic listening**: Periodically summarizing what we think the communicator thinks, feels, means and needs – without necessarily agreeing.

- **Fogging**: Calmly responding with a minimal response focusing on any truth in the statement without being defensive or argumentative.

- **Stuck Record**: Repeating what you want, time and time again, without raising the tone of your voice, becoming angry, irritated, or distracted by side issues.

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Fogging and Stuck Record Example

- Your PI is giving you a hard time about taking some time off for a friend’s wedding because they have a grant due soon and they want you to finish up a paper. This discussion gets heated and intense.

YOU: I understand you are stressed and want the paper submitted. I do too. And being at the wedding is important to me so I will be away…

YOUR PI: Science does not stop for friendships and this is a terrible time for you to take off. If you cared…

YOU: I hear that the paper is a priority for you. It it for me too; and the timing is not great. Still, being at this wedding is important to me and I will be away….
Strategies for Assertive Communications

- **I statements:** Taking responsibility for your feelings, wants, and needs AND expressing them clearly

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- **Stuck Record:** Repeating what you want, time and time again, without raising the tone of your voice, becoming angry, irritated, or distracted by side issues.

- **Negative/Positive Inquiry:** Using questions to probe the meaning of feedback when you want/need more information to facilitate your learning.

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Negative and Positive Inquiry Examples

- You gave a talk and got the following feedback from a committee member – “good job; keep it up”. You wonder what part you should keep up.
  - Thanks; I am glad you liked it. So I can learn from this and continue to improve would you mind if I asked you about some specifics. What did you think about the introduction….?

- You gave a talk and got the following feedback from a committee member – “you might not be cut out for graduate school”. This is really not helpful to you.
  - Oh that is disappointing to hear; grad school is important to me and I would like to learn from the experience. Would you mind going over the slides with me so we can talk more detail?
Great Resource
Saying ‘No’ and Making Requests

I’ll feel guilty if I say “no”/make my request
It’s my boss so I can’t say “no”/make my request

Agree, say “yes”/ignore your own needs

Your own needs are not met
You feel resentful, tired, and used
Deciding Whether to Say ‘No’

Some questions to ask yourself:

- Will it help me reach one of my important goals?
- Will it advance my career?
- Will it provide some intangible benefit important to me right now?
- Does it have a deadline (do I need to do it now)?
- What else is going on? Where does this rank in my priorities?
- Is it a request from someone I can not ignore?
- Is it a request from someone I really care about?
- Will it matter a week/month/year from now?
- Will it matter if I don’t do it?
Effective Ways to Say No

- I am sorry, but I have a lot going on and really can’t take on anything new right now.
- I am sorry but my current situation makes it difficult (impossible) for me to ..... 
- I am sorry but I can’t participate in this. Perhaps another time?
- I would like to help you learn how to ____________, but this is a very busy time for me. Would you like to schedule a time to meet and talk about it?

KEY POINT: Do not over-apologize
Assertiveness Toolkit

- Five prep questions:
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- Who can help me prepare?
- And when necessary.... who can add to my safety?
An Example: Virtual Group Meeting and School Check-in

Your PI schedules a required group meeting for 9 am every Tuesday and your kid’s teacher also schedules a meeting for 9 am every Tuesday. The teacher says this is the only time available.

- What are the options available to me?
  - asking someone else to go to the school meeting instead of me
  - just miss the school meetings and hope my child is OK
  - just skip group meeting and hope my PI does not get angry,
  - talk with the PI and ask about another time for group meeting
  - talk to my PI and explain I will have to miss group meeting
An Example - Continued

- What is the **best** possible outcome for me?
  - I want my PI to move the group meeting each week so I can attend my kid’s school meeting AND the group meeting

- What is the **worst** possible outcome for me?
  - I miss all of the school meetings because of group meeting

- Are there some **middle** outcomes I can be happy with?
  - Attending a different meeting on alternating weeks; moving group meeting 30 minutes so I can attend some of the school meeting

- Are there things I can offer to mitigate the concerns and address the needs of the other party?
  - checking in later with my PI (or someone else) when I miss group meeting
  - emailing my PI an update in advance when I know I will miss group meeting
Journaling Prompt for You At the End?

- Having spent the time listening to this workshop, what do I want to learn more about, do next, consider, etc....
Things To Remember As We Wrap Up

- Self-awareness is the first step
- Personal growth is a part of life-long learning
- We have to put the $O_2$ mask on ourselves first
- Asking for help is nearly always hard (and nearly always part of the solution)
- We all have to identify and deal with old and maladaptive coping strategies
- Holistic self-care is the foundation of resilience
  - We cannot be resilient without a self-care practice!
Archived and Up-coming Workshops That Will be Helpful

- Archived:
  - https://attendee.gotowebinar.com/register/640637452789607693
  - https://attendee.gotowebinar.com/register/2300107262959484429

- Up-coming
  - Wellness for Scientists
    (https://attendee.gotowebinar.com/register/460492368472098571)
  - Building Feedback Resilience
    https://attendee.gotowebinar.com/register/5063381194366246157