**Thoughts on “personnel management” and running a research group**

**Joel Meyer, November 2015**

**Introduction, disclaimer, and acknowledgements: This is non-expert opinion, based on an “n” of 1 (me!), and not especially carefully written—it is a work in progress. I hope it is useful; if nothing else, it may be useful to those of you who work in my lab, or are considering joining the lab, to understand my thinking on this, and facilitate communication! Special thanks to Marie Lynn Miranda, Theodore Slotkin, Lisa Reiter-Lavery, and Susan Lozier, who gave me good advice on some of these ideas.**

Personnel management is an interesting thing to think about intentionally even before you actually start having personnel (eg as a student and postdoc), from the perspective of noticing what your mentor or other mentors are doing. I have stolen some of my ideas from my own previous bosses (academic and nonacademic—I worked several jobs prior to going to grad school)...and also figured out some things I did not want to do. That said, I am not too impressed with what I’ve written--so take it for what it's worth and feel free to offer feedback!

The first thing that occurs to me is just how ill-prepared we (academics) are for personnel management (people that have worked a nonacademic job often have some advantage here, depending on what that job was like). Zero training, usually, I think, except for what we've observed. Of course, we're not prepared much for grant writing either, or teaching, or management tasks of other sorts (running meetings, etc.). It's ironic--we end up highly trained at benchwork (or whatever our research form is), but most of us end up spending very little time there. Anyhow. Following are some fairly randomly organized topics that I think are relevant to personnel management, concentrating on the ones where I think I have something useful to say.

0. Hiring the right person. “90% of hiring is based on skills, but 90% of firing is based on fit.” Fine, but how do we identify fit? That is hard, and is part of why recommendations carry a lot of weight. Interviews too—prepare well for them! There is some good advice out there on how to interview effectively, although I think it is a hard thing to do well (one piece of advice I liked: figure out what you are really looking for, and ask open-ended questions that allow the person to show whether they are that person). Fit is a two-way street—eg, people who want to join my lab will have an idea after reading this what my thoughts on how to run a lab are, and whether or not they are likely to like it. This applies to students as well as technicians, although they are not technically employees.

1. Directing activities. Psychologically, it is odd to suddenly be telling people what to do. Of course much of what my lab does is highly interactive—more on that below—but in some cases I am directive. I personally don't like telling people what to do, and I make an effort to minimize how often I have to do this (and how explicit my “orders” are), try to make sure there is a good amount of communication in both directions, and to try to be careful with tone. I've gotten to where I do enjoy aspects of the efficiency of a more directive process though, and so I try to avoid slipping on the potentially slippery slope of learning to like giving orders too much.

The degree to which I insist on my own ideas varies by position (employee, undergrad researcher, PhD researcher, postdoc, etc.), each individual’s degree of independence and personal preference regarding amount of independence, and stage of career/level of experience. Clear communication (#3) helps here if it lets me get feedback about whether a person wants more or less oversight, etc. The degree of independence also depends on funding—if someone is carrying out research that I am committed to doing because it corresponds to grants that I received, the work needs to include what the grant proposed. I know of some researchers who are moving more towards a tech-based lab, or simply being more dictatorial with their students and postdocs, believing that this makes things more efficient. Possibly, especially in the short term, that may be right...but a great student with independent ideas can come up with fantastic and original ideas that I didn’t, so I suspect there is a long-term cost to that approach. I also don't like that approach for students because it largely reduces student training to learning techniques—which is not in my opinion what earning research education should entail. I think it is important to make mistakes along the way (but not everyone agrees with that--this is a really interesting discussion in its own right). So--I tend to value independence, teamwork, and initiative both for better long-term laboratory productivity, and personal development reasons, but there is not a simple answer to how to find a good balance between my responsibility to make space for lab members' independence of thought and responsibility to contribute to the lab environment, and completing ongoing projects and commitments.

2. Trust. Related to the last point. To the extent possible without overly endangering the lab’s productivity, others in the lab, or myself, I begin by trusting. Trusting both in my interactions with others in my lab, and in collaborations with others. I am usually explicit about this, because in my experience I work much better when I sense that I am trusted. If trust is broken, though, I am pretty quick to draw very strict boundaries, and slow to ease them.

3. Communication. I prefer direct communication. This does not work well with everyone, as some people are uncomfortable with it. I try to accommodate to some extent in those cases because I don’t in general think that all people should be managed in the same way (we are all different!). But there are some things that I don’t know how to accommodate effectively, and indirect communication is one of them—I don’t know how to respond if I don’t know what you are really thinking! And, vice versa.

4. Conflict management. I actually draw on things I learned years ago in college courses on conflict resolution at times. I can't summarize this briefly, but spending some time learning about conflict resolution is a good idea I think.

5. Evaluations. I disliked these at first, now like them (most of the time! no fun in the rare occasions that they're really negative...). They are actually very useful in my experience. We do formal written evaluations once a year and I take people out to lunch (one at a time) to discuss. An interesting idea from the book First break all the rules: when trying to address a behavior that I don’t like, I try to begin by asking why it happens. E.g., “Why are you late so often?” I also do more frequent and informal evaluations in the course of biweekly(ish) one-on-one meetings in which the people in the lab talk about 1) what they’ve been doing for the last two weeks; 2) what they plan on for the next two weeks; 3) what they plan on for the next two months. In addition to keeping me up to date in a way that (I hope!) does not feel micro-managey, I think this helps people in the lab in their own planning and strategic thinking. But where does the PI get evaluations? I get some from higher up—this is typically pretty minimally though (academia!). I solicit from below, but that's inherently hard.

6. Group Professional Development (lots of individual development happens easily as part of academia, of course). I am not as good at this as I'd like to be. Some colleagues do a great job of working specific skills development "modules" (often just a lab meeting) into their group activities, and I am trying to learn from them and incorporate some of those ideas. Eg, sessions on how to interview or be interviewed; elevator speeches; how to communicate with the press; how to present a poster; how to review a manuscript; etc. The point being it is really easy to forget this, but doing it is a huge value-add.

7. Authority. I’ve had some really interesting conversations with a couple of people about this over the years. My approach is very much to assume that if I earn it I will very rarely need to "exert" it. If I haven't earned it then no amount of posturing, hard-assedness, etc. will provide a long-term and useful fix here. Clearly not everyone agrees with me on this, but it has largely worked for me. But I'm also aware that I have the advantage of working against essentially none of the typical prejudices (woman, person of color, etc.).

8. Leadership and inspiration. This is really interesting. I am not by nature a leader most of the time. I am often an introvert, but now and then have bursts of extroversion. I think the leadership thing is similar--I can turn it on for a while, but not constantly. And to a significant extent I don't think I should--I think that most of the people (especially students) in the lab should be self-motivated (a little nudge now and then seems OK and is in fact sometimes something we all can benefit from). But here again--what about the career (or short-term) technician? Although not everyone would agree with me, I think the same is true for career (and even shorter-term) technicians/employees, so I try hard to facilitate their intellectual investment by encouraging them to go to seminars, attend classes when the material is relevant, go to meetings, etc.

9. Team-building. I think that a strong lab environment is exceptionally important, and try to support this in a variety of ways. I say “support” in part because I myself am not in the lab much. I'm not great at this, but think that regular, low-key lab interactions that are social in nature (eg., our weekly come-as-you-can lab lunches) plus less frequent social activities (lab parties, potlucks, etc.) are pretty helpful. I have also tried to be explicit with everyone in the lab that a good lab environment is very important to me, and that if there are serious difficulties, I do not consider it a waste of my time to hear about them and deal with them—just the opposite.

10. Hierarchy. I dislike hierarchy. This is related to the orders, authority, and leadership points above and overlaps them, but is not identical. The overlapping parts I won't repeat. But the additional point that is interesting is simply how to structure your group ("organizational chart" is a term people use for this). I've thought about this a fair amount and talked to a number of people, because I feel like my group is about as large as it can be, without various sorts of diminishing returns, using my current organizational style. Here's my current way of thinking about this:
Option 1: Everyone reports to you directly. Fine unless the group is too large. At some point you do a poor job of supervising and mentoring because you just don’t have time.
Option 2: Use “lieutenants.” Many really large labs have them (e.g. high-level research scientists who essentially run the different grants/projects in the lab). Clearly can be effective, but personally I don't really like this model because it would separate me from the people I am most supposed to be (and enjoy) mentoring. I also have some doubts about whether this is really cost-effective on a per-dollar basis—ie big labs of course produce more research, but do they do so proportionally—or ideally super-proportionally? Of course it can be a hybrid--for example I meet with all the undergrads in the lab every other week one-on-one (just like I do all the other lab members), but my lab manager handles most of the day-to-day supervision. Taking that idea a bit further brings me to
Option 3: "Matrix Management." Under this approach, different people play different roles in different projects--eg you (as a group member) may lead one project and have people reporting to you, but play a supporting role in a couple of other projects. You still (as PI) have to figure out how much time to spend with each person, but I do think this has the virtue of both making that time more efficient and diversifying the roles for many of the lab members.
Note: an important corollary of all of this is that making responsibilities and organization explicit to everyone in the lab is also important!

11. The last point relates to an interesting point also made in First break all the rules: that different people have different “talents” (roughly, the book draws a distinction between talents that are more or less inherent, and skills that can be learned—I don’t really agree with that distinction but find the rest of the idea valid nonetheless). The book recommends focusing on improving and doing the things we are good at, rather than trying to fix things we aren’t. The part of that I agree with is letting—encouraging!—people to take things they are good at and run with them, and with a good number of people in the lab, that leads naturally to the matrix management idea—because no one will be the best at everything. I don’t fully agree with the idea of not trying to fix things that we aren’t good at.

12. Finally, yet another nugget from the same book. In a very large dataset, they asked what the most important elements for attracting, focusing, and keeping the most talented employees were (note—NOT the thing that everyone agreed on, like a good salary and free front-row tickets at Cameron Indoor Stadium—the stuff that really mattered to the BEST employees, not all of them):

 1. Do I know what is expected of me at work?

 2. Do I have the materials and equipment I need to do my work right?

 3. At work, do I have the opportunity to do what I do best, every day?

 4. In the last seven days, have I recognition or praise for doing good work? (Yikes!--Joel)

 5. Does my supervisor, or someone at work, seem to care about me as a person?

 6. Is there someone at work who encourages my development?

 7. At work, do my opinions seem to count?

 8. Does the mission/purpose of my company make me feel my job is important?

 9. Are my co-workers committed to doing quality work?

 10. Do I have a best friend at work?

 11. In the last six months, has someone at work talked to me about my progress?

 12. This last year, have I had opportunities at work to learn and grow?