

# Can you play the peacemaker?

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ISEH Headquarters

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## Maintaining a Productive Lab: Can you play the peacemaker?

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You finally got hired as an assistant professor/group leader! Congratulations are in order. You feel like you achieved a great accomplishment and rightly so. We can assume that you are a wonderful scientist, with a solid CV and interesting ideas. You also managed to convince other colleagues that this is the case. Once more: well done... However, it is at this time point that the biggest challenge begins. And probably you are not adequately prepared. From now on, you don't need to be only a good scientist, but also a genial manager. Most likely you are not prepared for all these skills that you are assumed to possess, although you were never trained to be a combo of manager, psychologist, negotiator. In addition, you have to be successful enough quickly enough, because the clock for your tenure or contract is ticking...

Breathe! You are not the only one who faces this challenge. The good news is that more and more places have recognized this shortcoming in the education of a new PI and they offer management and behavioral courses to provide you with an armor needed for managing a lab. The bad news is that you still have to excel in most skills in a relatively short time.

One of the most important aspects of your new life as a manager is to manage conflict. And there are so many sources of conflict in a lab! Here, I will just try to enumerate the reasons issues arise and discuss some possible courses of action. Remember: in the end, you need to be the peacemaker, so it's best to be ready.

***Internal competition for projects and results.*** This usually happens in a lab strictly focused on a narrow field of research. In my opinion, it rarely happens without the knowledge of the PI. It is a managerial style that has been successful for some people, but can destroy all the joy of being part of a team. It can work for highly competitive and ambitious people, but it can easily disrupt your lab. In such cases, it helps to define projects early on and be alert in case two projects come very close together as respective postdocs or students may not notice. Try to deal with the problem before it becomes gigantic with a clear plan forward.

***Competition for PI's attention and time.*** We are all busy and that can easily translate into ignoring the more shy and timid people and pay all our attention to the louder ones. This problem is easily solved if you keep it in mind. Just be an equal opportunity employer and divide your attention according to needs. Try to remember that some people may not seek your attention but they definitely need it. Setting up consistent meetings with each member of the lab is one way to ensure all voices, regardless of assertiveness, are heard frequently.

**Cultural and language differences.** This can turn into a big issue and it is usually a matter of great sensitivity. It is really astonishing how much people differ among one another in regard to their educational style and training, as well as cultural norms and behavioral expectations. This diversity can be a source of multi-functionality and inspiration, but it can also cause miscommunication and hard feelings. The important thing is to be aware that these differences exist and are important. It is helpful to directly educate your lab about it; this is especially true if some of the people in your laboratory are native to the country and feel comfortable in their environment and language, but may not be sensitive enough to understand the cultural impact on others. Simple, honest explanations with the whole lab as a team could easily solve these issues. Explain to your people that actions, including jokes and social interplay, are sometimes perceived differently. Similarly, acknowledge that responsibility, willingness to help or collaborate and work/life balance are also sensitive matters that can differ among cultures. Incentivize your people to this matter and make them aware of their behavior and how it can be perceived.

**Hiring the wrong people.** It can happen and it will happen. Especially at the beginning of your career it is easy to make mistakes. You don't even know what kind of people would be good for your lab. There are few rules that can help you minimize the problem. Be honest about your expectations. Many people prioritize their work and life totally differently than you. You cannot expect them to follow your work style, if you haven't explicitly told them what it is. Sometimes personal preference does not help in hiring the right people, although I always tend to go for a person that I like and would easily interact with. Hiring somebody just for their technical expertise is not always a wise choice either, especially if you need them to work in a team or adapt as projects mature. In brief, decide the kind of person you want to hire and explain clearly what you expect. If for some reason it doesn't work, in either the short or long-term, be honest with them and yourself and be mentally prepared to let someone go to avoid permanently disrupting your lab culture.

**Always criticizing.** Don't forget to praise good efforts instead of criticizing all the time. It is understandable that you are a new PI, you need to succeed, you are anxious and everything seems to be going so slow. Get over it, have realistic expectations and don't forget to encourage your students and postdocs. Praise their knowledge and skill, and listen to their opinions. Congratulate determined efforts and good results. Give your lab members some responsibilities and make them feel part of the team and it will help ensure collaborative interactions.

There are many more reasons for conflict, and you will eventually have to face all of them. Don't expect that the problem will be solved by itself, because it probably won't and will eventually become much bigger. That being said, leave some responsibilities to other people and don't try to micro-manipulate everything and everybody. Be fair; ask your people about your new hires and create all together a lab culture with a vision statement. What exactly do you want to achieve in this lab as a team? Make some rules together and stick to them, and

then familiarize newcomers to your lab rules and culture. It may sound hard, but it is well worth some time investment to make your lab a productive place of joy and inspiration instead of a simple workplace.



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