

Self-Help Options for Dealing with Problems in Supervision

Sometimes in supervision we may feel confused, irritated, angry or helpless and there seems no constructive way ahead. The problem may be situational or interpersonal. Sometimes the problem is new and unexpected, at other times it is a repeating one and you hear yourself saying, "This always happens to me" or "I never know how to deal with this".

It can be helpful to write down what is happening. Write in the first person using "I" statements, since you are thinking about yourself. Helpful questions include:

- How is this impacting on me?
- What does this mean for me?
- How am I interpreting this?
- What am I feeling?
- Who else is involved?
- What might s/he be feeling or thinking about the situation?
- Is anything else going on that might be contributing?
- On a scale of 1-10, how much impact is this having on me and my ability to function normally?
- Are there any patterns here?
- What else might be important?

Remember, there are no right or wrong answers; this is a private exploration of the situation and the intention is to simply clarify things for yourself. When your own thoughts are clearer, it is likely to be easier to decide what you might do next.

Deciding on a strategy

Once you have a clear idea of how you perceive the problem, the next step is to consider what you might want to do about it. There are three main strategies to choose from, depending on the circumstances:

- Decide to do nothing at the moment, but to monitor yourself in terms of how you are feeling. The problem may resolve itself. However, if it seems to increase in intensity, then its negative impact on you will likely increase.
- Decide to raise the matter with the other person/people involved and to have a discussion with them.
- Decide to seek help about what you would like to do next.

Acting on your decision

If you decide to raise the matter with the other/s, it's a good idea to prepare for a discussion, rather than a confrontation. Recognise your preferred outcome before planning how you might best achieve it. While you cannot script a 'perfect' conversation, you can consider what it is you primarily want to change or know. So, for example:

- Do you want to inform the other person of your experience of the situation and ask them to do, or stop doing, something?
- Do you want to ask questions of them and/or check something out?
- Do you want to 'step up' to another level and state what the consequences might be if things don't change?

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The following steps are designed as a guide to raising an issue and can be followed in all or any of the kinds of conversations described above:

- It's a good idea to begin by *asking the other person if this is a good time to have a discussion*. Although this sounds very formal, it's important to remember that this may not be a good time. Indicate (accurately) the amount of time you think the conversation might take and its importance to you.
- If the other person can't give the time when you ask for it, *ask for an alternative time to meet with them*. If they won't commit to a time, then you may have to rethink your strategy and consider asking someone else to assist you to have the conversation.
- Once the other person is engaging with you in the discussion, it's a good idea to put a context around what you want to say and *to give a clear statement about why you want to have the discussion*. For example, "I have been feeling uncomfortable about an issue recently and since it involves you, and I would like us to work together better, I'd like to talk about it with you." *Showing a positive intent for the outcome*, e.g. "I would like us to work together better", is a good motivating statement for this type of discussion and will likely put the other person more at ease.
- *Accurately describe the problem that you are experiencing*, e.g. "In the last two months I have tried to see you four times to talk about x and on each occasion the meetings have been cancelled by you at very short notice. I'm feeling really anxious about x and frustrated by the cancellations. I'd appreciate it if we could have regular meetings which were a real priority so that I would be more confident about meeting the deadlines we agreed."
- *Ask the other person to comment*, e.g. "I'm wondering if there is a problem for you about the meetings."
- *Listen to what they have to say in return*. Try not to interrupt or act defensively.
- If the other person seems willing to engage in the discussion but is unsure of why this may be important, it can be helpful to *restate the outcome and your emotional response* e.g., "As a result of the cancelled meetings, I've become less focussed and am feeling anxious about ...". *Add what would be helpful for you and why*, e.g. "I'd like to be able to ... and that would mean that I could ...which would help us to move the project on."
- It can then be helpful to *state what benefits there might be for the other person*, e.g. "this would mean that you would be able to..."
- If the other person has raised issues about a problem from their perspective that has contributed to your problem, then try *restating the problem from their perspective and asking them what they might like you to do differently*.
- If you agree to do things differently and the outcome of the discussion is successful, *follow this up with an email, thanking them for their time and recording your understanding/s of what was agreed and how things will be different in the future*.
- At some future time, it can also be helpful to *evaluate the change* in another discussion and to check that things are now ok.

If this process is new to you, then there are people you can approach to coach you on the things you want to say. You might ask a friend whom you admire for being able to do this or someone who is employed in your department or the University Mediator. Ask these people to keep what you say in confidence and to give you feedback about your style and tone.

If self-help strategies do not seem feasible to you, or have not worked, consult the *More Options for Dealing with Supervision Problems* on the Supervision Tools webpage.