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Interaction Between a Doctoral Student and Advisor: Making It Work!

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We've often heard that the key to having a successful dissertation process is for the PhD student to establish a good working relationship with his/her advisor. Unfortunately, this is sometimes easier said than done. Students might be at institutions that do not offer a wide choice in advisors or that allow them to "choose" one that matches their temperament and personality. Or the only person who has the same interest area as the student happens to be an egocentric individual. Or, in some cases, the best political solution is to select an advisor and committee that get along with each other. We just don't live in an ideal world. Most PhD advisors would ideally like to work on groundbreaking topics with bright and motivated students. Now if they are not working on groundbreaking topics and don't have the perfect student (as it often happens in the real world)—how are they going to react to the situation?

So here we are . . . a student stuck with an advisor who has a certain way of dealing with the dissertation process, and a student who may have objectives that do not match well with the advisor's style. It is important for the student to deal with the advisor and get through the dissertation process with the best thesis possible within a reasonable timeframe. To do that—managing the interaction with the advisor is crucial. While problems with the research might be frustrating, problems with the advisor could be fatal. Also, it is useful to keep in mind that there are no generally acceptable advising principles that a student can use to benchmark the quality of advising. Every advisory relationship is an idiosyncratic dyad. How the student copes with his/her end of the dyad is often instrumental to success.

Based on our own experiences of individually and cumulatively having worked with over two dozen students as their dissertation chairs, as well as those insights gleaned from being in our respective fields of information systems and operations management for several years, we offer some insights on how the interactions between a doctoral student and an advisor can be made to work well. In addition, we identify several advisor archetypes, quality of knowledge/advice provided by the advisors, and patterns of interaction that exist between the student and the advisor. Several prescriptive courses of actions are derived from our discussion. We hope that the resulting discourse will provide value to both the community of doctoral students and faculty advisors alike.

Advisor Archetypes

Figure 1 shows a simple grid that captures some aspects of the interaction issues and advisor archetypes, which can be captured by the interaction style of the advisor on one dimension, ranging from domineering/egocentric to more inclusive/participative; while on the other dimension we have the interaction incidence, ranging from a hands-on advisor who prefers frequent meetings and constant interaction to one that is hands-off by choice or lack thereof. As indicated in the figure, these dimensions yield some interesting situations in the quadrants that might require recognition of different coping mechanisms and critical success factors on the part of the student.

Some advisors are very prominent in their field and exert influence in their institution through the formal (or informal) power structure. Unfortunately, in some cases this external validation gratifies the ego and results in arrogant and domineer-

Interaction Incidence	Interaction Style	
	Domineering/Ego-centric	Inclusive/Participative
Hands-on/Frequent meetings	<i>"We don't really discuss anything..."</i> CSF: Acquiescence (Quadrant 1)	<i>"Now I have to go down this path...."</i> CSF: Passive Recognition of "Analysis Paralysis" Versus Proactive Closure (Quadrant 3)
Hands-off/No meetings	<i>"Please tell me he's in today..."</i> CSF: Process Management (Quadrant 2)	<i>"We didn't get much accomplished..."</i> CSF: Time Management (Quadrant 4)

Figure 1: Coping mechanisms and critical success factors (CSF) for different interaction styles and incidences.

ing behavior (as represented by the first and second quadrants in Figure 1). The recipient of this behavior is often the powerless student who crumbles under the weight of the advisor's resume. Such advisors present a special challenge to students. On the one hand they can provide the student with good directed advice that can enhance the quality of the thesis and provide instant credibility in the marketplace. On the other hand, their idiosyncrasies are such that none of the benefits accrue without proper student management.

One student told us about his advisor who was an important and prominent person in the field. This individual displayed an arrogance that made students cower in his presence. In addition, he was also involved in micromanaging and controlling every nuance of the dissertation (quadrant 1). Students wanted to work with him because of the outcome, but they did not enjoy the process. He would hold weekly meetings on the thesis, criticize the progress made, and set an agenda for the next week. Students would generally sit meekly and take notes while he dominated the interaction. No debate was permitted, partly because students did not feel confident to take on his knowledge and personality. The interesting aspect of this was that the process worked, particularly for bright, motivated and demure students. They received frequent feedback, took the challenge and abuse, and made steady progress. The position of the

advisor enabled students to get resources for data collection that would have been difficult otherwise. Students who engaged the advisor in debate were often humiliated and forced to deal with the downside of getting under their egocentric advisor's skin.

In some cases, the advisor is not accessible—virtually or physically. He could be traveling a lot, engaged in "more important" activities than PhD dissertations, or simply holed up in a room working on his own book or paper. Now you have the case of a domineering/egocentric professor who has a reputation that students would like to be associated with, but provides no dissertation assistance (quadrant 2). We know of at least one such advisor who would be out of his office for months. Students would frequently call his secretary to learn of his schedule and when they could get a "quick minute." The quick minute came and went—it was just enough time to get a precious signature, or a "yes," or to get more confused about the advisor's position regarding an issue. Successful students figured out "process management" as the best way to deal with the situation. They figured that since it was impossible to expect significant time from the advisor to delve deep into theory, they would manage the process in snippets. Every snippet would be a short description of the issue or a simple question that would require very little advisor time, but would allow them to get approval to fol-

low a certain path. This approval would hold them in good stead until the next controversial decision point. In some cases implicit approval is obtained. For example, in obtaining feedback on a chapter, sent via e-mail, a student wrote: "I would like to revise this chapter by June 30 so please get your comments back to me by then if at all possible. If I haven't heard from you by then, I'll assume you have no major revisions to suggest." Here again, students who were bright and motivated could argue through many of the issues themselves, without advice. At critical points, however, snippets and process management is pivotal.

Many advisors have a very participative and interactive style (quadrants 3 and 4). They like to engage in intellectual debate about issues and enjoy the stimulation of higher thought processes. This debate can be very healthy in nurturing and developing a topic. However, here again there is a danger in engaging in more debate than action. Advisors who have such a style and like to meet frequently in a hands-on approach to the topic give the student a readily accessible resource (quadrant 3). However, often a part of the challenge of an advisor is to keep a project reasonable in scope and doable with a reasonable timeframe. Advisors who provide the best guidance are the ones who ask students to pursue certain paths, realize the point of diminishing returns in going down certain avenues, then come to a resolution (or a compromise) and move forward. If a student feels that there is too much debate or too many dead-ends, with months passing without tangible progress or closure on issues, then the problem of paralysis of analysis creeps in. It is very difficult to optimize on every issue; reasonable choices have to be made. Active intervention by students to prevent such paralysis might be necessary. For instance, one advisor relayed an incident to one of the authors about a debate that had been going on with his student for months regarding the inclusion of a set of variables in an empirical model. Eventually, it was the student who pleaded closure of the issue by presenting the advisor with a document summarizing the "pros" and "cons" of inclusion of the variables, followed by a detailed compromise solution. This action did indeed bring the issue to a rapid closure and moved the dissertation to the next phase.

Interaction Incidence		Knowledge/Advice	
		Great	Poor
	Hands-on/Frequent meetings	Take advantage of a great situation!	Manage the intellectual content
	Hands-off/No meetings	Manage advisor's time and the dissertation process	Do it yourself dissertation!

Figure 2: Quality of advice and interaction incidence outcomes.

A tougher case involves the advisor who enjoys debate but just doesn't have the time or inclination to have frequent meetings (quadrant 4). A critical success factor in this case is time management. Since there are precious few meetings, careful organization of the issues to discuss and resolve should be prepared in written form and presented by the student. This upfront organization ensures that time will be managed better. Otherwise, the danger is having infrequent meetings where very little gets accomplished.

Advisor Knowledge and Advice Quality

Another issue concerns the knowledge possessed by the advisor and quality of advice provided. This could include granularity, consistency, and recency (up to date with the current literature) of the knowledge base. In terms of granularity, advisors differ in the level of detail in their feedback. Some are very precise—"use ROI to measure performance," "read Professor X's paper on mediation and follow his approach," or "get rid of this paragraph from the chapter." These kinds of instructions are easy to follow. In other cases, comments aren't specific and direct. "You might want to look at the economics literature for an alternative theoretical lens," "explore an alternative analysis for this design," or "how does chapter 2 tie into chapter 3," or "derive implications for practice." The reasons for such advice could be manifold. Some advisors are too lazy to direct students with specific advice (it's easier just to jot "why" in the margins). Others think that the student can figure out the specifics themselves and broad guidance forces students into higher and more productive thinking." A "precise" advisor might be easier on the student, but if overdone on every critical issue in the long run it might

be doing the student a disservice. In general, advisors who really guide tend to provide high quality advice that has bounded actionability, as contrasted with advice that is too broad to be useful or too specific to stimulate student thinking. Also, the level of granularity might appropriately vary from low to high as the thesis progresses, and could also depend upon the nature of topic and methodology selected to pursue the study objectives.

A second aspect of quality is consistency. Advisors who change their minds frequently, forget what they say from one time to the next, or revisit issues that had been resolved in the past could pose a challenge for students. In some cases, as the research topic evolves and new information is brought to bear, the changes are justified. In others, they could cause confusion and frustration for the student who has to chase alternative paths (e.g., literature streams). One student told us: "He just throws out this literature stream and tells me to check it out. I did. It took me two weeks in the library to try and understand that field. At the end when I did, I concluded it was irrelevant to my work."

Finally, and arguably the most important aspect of quality of advice is the knowledge base and experience of the advisor that can be brought to bear on the problem. Advisors who have a good understanding of the literature (both recent and past) and have experience in guiding on issues that seem to put the student at an impasse, are imparting the best quality advice. This experience often comes with time and the process of engaging in more than one dissertation as an advisor. Learning curves in gaining advising experience can be quite steep at times, but do tend to plateau after a few dissertations.

Figure 2 depicts the interaction incidence and the knowledge/quality of ad-

vice as the two dimensions of the grid. Action plans associated with these situations are also shown. Instances where the student has frequent access to an advisor who imparts good quality advice are clearly the best. Students should take advantage of these situations by recognizing them and working hard to nurture them effectively. The other extreme is when an advisor is inaccessible and provides poor advice. This is not a great situation, but there is a perverse "match" between the levels of interaction desired and obtained! This quadrant is akin to having no advisor, and students who find themselves here might have to complete the thesis themselves or solicit advice from other members of their committee or an informal network of professors. The other two quadrants represent a "mismatch." In one case, the advisor gives great advice but is not readily accessible. As described earlier, the onus here is on the student to manage both the process (as discussed) and the advisor's time. In the case where an advisor provides poor advice and requires constant interaction, the student needs to find ways to control the intellectual content of the dissertation. In cases where a student is not astute enough to recognize the poor quality of advice, the process will have a disastrous outcome. Given the power discrepancy between the advisor and the student, control of intellectual content might have to be done subtly, particularly if the advisor suffers from egocentricity.

Conclusion

The value of this article for PhD students may very well lie in recognizing the dynamics of their interaction with their advisors, as well as in understanding the knowledge content of their advisors and their willingness to invest time in their dissertation process. Some of the coping mechanisms and action plans suggested here might be useful for those PhD students involved in several situations that otherwise appear to be hopeless and untenable, and perhaps lead them towards more successful outcomes. ■

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