

How to Optimize the Mentoring Relationship with Your Advisor

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An *effective* mentoring relationship
with your advisor directly
determines the *quality* of your PhD

Wrong Views of the Mentoring Relationship

My advisor is the **Boss**



- I'm working ***for*** him/her
- Wait for boss to tell me what to do
- Follow all the instructions
- If the boss does not approach me, I will not disturb

Wrong Views of the Mentoring Relationship

My advisor is the Oracle



- My advisor is always right
- He/she always knows what I'm thinking, what my strengths are, whether I'm struggling, *etc.*
- He/she can always predict the next 10 steps of my project and my thesis directions

Correct Views of the Mentoring Relationship

My advisor is the **Coach + Helper**



- I'm working **with** him/her
- I own and drive the research project
 - Goal: become an expert in my sub-area
- My advisor gives guidance
- He/she is not always right and cannot always predict
- I need to frequently communicate and discuss

Tip #1: Mind the “Gaps”

- **Your advisor and you do not necessarily operate in the same frequency**
 - You two may not have the same understanding, expectations, background, etc.
 - Think in high level vs. low level
- **Example:** my first PhD student's project
- **Morale:**
 - Proactively communicate to make sure you two are on the same page
 - If you are struggling, you should let your advisor know

Tip #1: Mind the “Gaps” (Continued)

- **Be well prepared in project meetings**
 - Present “**raw**” materials, otherwise, it will be difficult for your advisor to give you feedback
 - Show your own analysis & thinking (“**processed**” materials)
 - Write down the specific questions you want to discuss
- **Spend time catching up the missing gaps**

Tip #2: Manage “Up”

- **Successful PhD students often “manage their advisors”**
- **Schedule regular meetings, prepare agenda**
 - Even if you feel you don’t have enough “progress” to talk about
- **Keep your emails succinct and to the point**
- **Ask for help on what you need**
 - Revise paper draft, practice talk, attend important event, get an equipment...
- **If your advisor hasn’t got back to you, send emails to follow up**
 - Sometimes, you’ll need to nag them :)

Tip #3: Dare to “Disagree”

- Your advisor could be wrong
- Speak up and discuss with your advisor
 - Critical thinking is a crucial skill for PhD students
- As you become more senior in your PhD, your intuitions/opinions might be more “correct” than your advisor’s
- I like it when my students “**prove me wrong**”
 - Do need to convince me with substantial evidence, data, papers, etc.
- **Example:** our LeaseOS project

Conclusion

- To optimize the mentoring relationship, you first need the right mindset
 - Your advisor is the coach+helper
- Mind the gaps
- Manage up
- Dare to disagree