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 your 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