

Special Academic Chat

Managing Up Under COVID-19

How do you manage your relationship with your PIs/advisors while working remotely or under the current COVID-19 climate? Navigating the power differential between graduate students/postdocs and their supervisors is always challenging, but even more so in this fraught time, when faculty are also incredibly stressed. What are some of the immediate issues that need to be addressed and what are the resources available on campus that can help you in this unique situation?

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#1 Managing up: An Industry Skill You Can Learn in Academia

By [David G. Jensen](#) A writer and speaker on career issues worldwide, David Jensen is the founder of [CareerTrax Inc.](#)

June 8, 2016

There are many differences between a career in academia and one in industry. Although there are some common elements in the way that the science proceeds, there are many more areas of great differentiation. And yet, there are a few areas of career advice that apply just as well in academia as in industry. I have one of those for you this month.

Recently I was on a long flight, from one coast of the United States to the other, which gave me time to get acquainted with a new book: [*Think Like an Entrepreneur, Act Like a CEO*](#). The author, [career coach Beverly E. Jones](#), brought forward an important concept related to the boss-subordinate relationship: “managing up,” referring to building a relationship with your boss that allows for mutual benefit.

This idea turns out to be one of those rare areas of concordance between industry and academia because the boss-subordinate relationship is so important in both contexts. After discussing this topic with postdocs and principal investigators at a recent Career Day I attended, I came to believe that, if you composed a list of the toughest bosses in the world, at least half of them would be in academia. That makes the university just the place to start sharpening your managing up skills.

Kissing up or good career strategy?

In the book, Jones describes managing up as a series of behaviors that are much like any other form of leadership, but instead of leading subordinates, you are doing your best to eliminate obstacles placed in front of you by those who are higher up. By helping them move their agendas forward, benefits accrue that have the downstream effect of making your own goals more accessible.

But wait a minute—is this starting to sound a bit too much like that obnoxious character you knew as the brown-noser from your first lab, the one who would do anything to ensure that he was in the boss’s good graces? No, that’s not what Jones would suggest, nor would I. Often it’s a matter of subtlety, and it all boils down to intention. If your intent is to have praise showered on you, then you’ll be crossing that brown-nosing line and quickly earn the wrong kind of reputation. But when managed correctly, your actions to help those higher up will very directly influence your own progress in a positive way.

Here are five of Jones’s suggestions for managing up, adapted to a scientific career.

1. *Set unselfish goals.* Managing up does not mean trying to manipulate people or creating situations that put a win in your corner. Focus on the greater good—what’s good for the lab as a whole—not what’s best for you. Managing up could include offering proposals that will increase the lab’s visibility or bring benefits to the entire team. Achieving this mindset requires, as Jones writes, a sense of “authentic humility.” And remember that, by helping your boss and the team, you will ultimately be helping yourself as well, for example, by improving the culture of your working environment.

2. *Understand what your boss, department, and institution need.* Look closely at your institution's plans and biggest investments, and think about how your boss and your department fit into those plans. Look for every opportunity to develop ideas that will contribute to those larger departmental and institutional strategies and share them with your boss. Again, the goal is to help the team so that you can reap the trickle-down benefits.
3. *Maintain and enhance your area of expertise.* While working toward plans that benefit the general good of the lab or department, you'll find opportunities to develop an area where you are *the* authority by gaining expertise in an area that complements your boss's strengths. For example, she may not feel comfortable with how to counsel others on finding an industry job. If you learn about it, you can bring back valuable insight that can help your boss expand her knowledge. It can also help your labmates who may be looking for industry jobs, and yourself. One friend of mine became the in-house expert on networking and career guidance while he was a postdoc. He became recognized across the department and his institution as the go-to person for anything related to career development training. A year or two later, he was offered a job at a major Japanese university doing exactly that!
4. *Be gracious in managing credit and blame.* As Jones writes, "credit is a vast resource to be spread around, not hoarded." Share the credit wisely and you'll avoid a reputation as a kiss-up. Similarly, take more than your share of the blame when it goes around. Be the one who accepts blame and quickly turns toward solutions and you will earn respect and trust.
5. *Report without drama.* There's already lots of drama in the average laboratory—avoid doing anything to add to it. Be the one who can bring the boss solutions without inserting any unnecessary intensity. Avoid exaggeration, gossip, and negativity. Instead, gain the reputation of being direct yet tactful. Don't be the one who tells the boss what she wants to hear, but aim to be the one who brings accurate portrayals of problems along with positive recommendations for moving forward.

Choosing the right approach

Managing up is a highly customized process which requires that you know something about your boss. You can't start managing up from the first day in the lab as a new postdoc; you'll have to watch, listen, and learn before knowing anything at all about that person's style.

One area that illustrates this principle is communication, which is a crucial component of managing up effectively. Ordinarily, communication is an exchange that requires both parties to participate toward a successful outcome. If you and I sat down to talk over a cup of coffee, it would be my responsibility as much as yours to ensure that our exchange works out well. Unfortunately, it doesn't always work this way when you are dealing with bosses. Simply because of their status on the prestige totem pole, they don't have to follow the same rules.

In communicating with everyone else, you lay out your message and—hopefully—listen well to theirs. But with the boss, you'll need to pay close attention to her preferred communication style and adapt as needed. Does she prefer direct communication, where you come right to the point and spit it all out in 1 minute or less, or does she prefer an ice-breaking exchange before getting down to business? Everyone is different, and your input will be better received if you fine-tune your communication to match your boss's preferred mode.

Regardless of the boss's style, Jones suggests that you be brief. "Be succinct," she writes. "Assume your boss is busy and won't want to waste time. If you ask for three minutes to discuss something important but then talk for 10 before reaching your point, the boss could be feeling impatient or annoyed by the time you make your case." To avoid this uncomfortable situation, she continues, "[p]lan ahead. Before your conversation, be clear in your mind about your points, and be prepared to state them simply and directly."

From my own past experience, I know that it can be a real temptation to overload a conversation with too many topics. In most cases, you don't get a meeting with the boss all that often, so you want to make it count and squeeze in every detail you've been thinking about. But the key is to prioritize. Do the best you can to limit the number of items in the conversation. If you try to discuss more than three or four points, you run the risk of wearing out your welcome. Nothing strikes more fear in my heart

than a boss who is looking at his watch when I am trying to make an important point!

Lastly, there's one thing almost universally true about managing up. Bosses don't like it when you come in and rattle off problems without having a suggested course of action to go along with them. "Bring me solutions, not just problems," is the way my first boss described it. That's right—you may be in front of the boss to get her to resolve an important question, but you'll still need to suggest your own course of action. She may not take your suggestion—don't be offended if that's the case—but with time you'll gain respect for being proactive and creative in addressing issues that arise. And that first time the boss agrees with you, it will feel mighty good.

Some bosses will lap up the compliments and eager coffee runs of those who intend to follow a kissing-up strategy. That's not you. Regardless the size of your boss's ego, she or he will have a genuine need for a person on their team who thinks about wins on a grander scale than the selfish view of a brown-noser!

2. 'Publish and perish': Despite 'shelter-in-place,' grad students cite pressure to continue lab work

As California "shelters in place," graduate students have reported feeling pressure to continue in-lab activity due to the power dynamic with their PIs and widely varying interpretations of "essential research."

By [Alex Tsai](#) on March 25, 2020

As California "[shelters in place](#)," graduate students at Stanford have reported feeling pressure to continue in-lab activity due to the power dynamic with their labs' principal investigators (PIs) and widely varying interpretations of "essential research."

Officially, Stanford [maintains](#) that "graduate students and postdocs should continue attending to their research activities," but "all non-essential personnel should be working from home."

"Research is an essential function of the University so research can be preserved or, in some cases, continue, especially certain medical

research,” wrote Vice President and General Counsel Debra Zumwalt in the University’s most recent guidance regarding on-campus work.

For those conducting research in laboratories, the University announced on Tuesday that non-essential laboratory research functions should be discontinued.

Those working in laboratories ought to “stay away from [their] on-campus workspace, with rare exceptions to perform essential research functions,” wrote Vice Provosts Kam Moler and Stacey Bent and Chair of Faculty Senate Tim Stearns.

According to updated guidance issued on March 17 for researchers in laboratories, “essential research” includes lab shutdown procedures, conducting critical regular maintenance procedures to maintain lab viability (such as providing animal support or maintaining equipment) or research related to COVID-19.

“Essential” research

Despite Stanford’s request for most personnel to stay away from their workspaces, graduate students are still continuing non-essential lab research, according to several graduate students currently conducting research in on-campus labs.

“After the ‘shelter-in-place’ order went in, [principal investigators] (PIs) are still pressuring trainees to come into labs to do non-essential research,” said Kat Gonzales, a fifth-year earth systems Ph.D. candidate. “I have friends who feel really pressured and really vulnerable, and they can’t speak up.”

Gonzales referred to a “culture of overwork” in the research community, as well as a power dynamic between PIs and graduate students who work in their labs. Gonzales said that the “toxic workaholism” is a pervasive issue among members of academia at many institutions, not just at Stanford.

A sixth-year Ph.D. candidate at the School of Medicine and researcher at an on-campus medical lab agreed that they felt pressure from their PI to continue research as normal, even though their lab is not conducting research considered essential by the University guidelines. The Daily granted anonymity to this student and others quoted in this article due to students’ fears of repercussion for speaking out against their PIs.

Given that Stanford's guidance considers research an essential function of the University, several grad students said that their PI deemed the lab's research as essential.

“One of the biggest issues in the last week or so has been Stanford's definitions of research,” said a sixth-year Ph.D. candidate researching in a biomedical lab. “They've been using very broad terms for things like ‘essential research’ — every PI thinks their research is essential.”

“There has been a lot of unclear language from Stanford and some loopholes that [my PI] used to take advantage of the situation,” the medical research student said. The PI instructed their researchers to continue ongoing research, but not start new experiments, according to the student.

Similarly, a fifth-year Ph.D. candidate conducting research in a biology lab said that their PI “does not agree that we've received guidance to stop all [non-essential] experiments.”

PJ Utz, professor of medicine and associate dean for medical student research, told The Daily he was aware of the concerns regarding the continuation of non-essential research within the School of Medicine.

In response to those concerns, Utz sent an email on Monday evening to all Stanford medical students and their faculty mentors reiterating the University's definition of “essential research” and urging students and faculty to shelter in place.

“We ask that Faculty comply with these guidelines and that they not ask medical students to violate the guidance,” Utz wrote in the email, which was forwarded to The Daily by a grad student.

Utz also said that — in a Tuesday morning walk-through of the Center for Clinical Sciences Research (CCSR) building where his lab is located — he did not observe any personnel conducting non-essential research in any lab.

Utz asked students who are conducting essential research to contact him directly.

“[Students conducting essential research] made it very clear that they're doing it voluntarily and not being coerced to do it,” Utz said.

On Tuesday evening, Bent and Vice Provost for Student Affairs Susie Brubaker-Cole released additional guidance to graduate students reiterating the county's shelter-in-place orders, saying that "failure to comply with these orders constitutes a violation of the law and will be considered a violation of the Fundamental Standard." According to University guidance, a violation of shelter-in-place may also result in immediate removal from housing, yet students will remain responsible for paying rent.

"I think this is just grossly off-base and tone deaf for what is going on," the medical research student said. "It puts the burden on students to risk their housing and standing with the University, or risk their relationship and standing with their advisor."

The PI power dynamic

The graduate student researchers attributed much of the pressure to the balance of power between a lab's PI and its researchers. Because PIs have substantial influence over a student's future career, students are fearful of disappointing their PIs.

"Grad students and postdocs are 100% at the mercy of their PIs," the biomedical research student said.

Several grad students said Stanford's shelter-in-place guidelines for research have varying interpretations among PIs.

"There's this really unfair power dynamic where [my PI] has interpreted guidance from the University in a certain way, and we can't really have a discussion about it and raise our concerns," the medical research student said. "Every PI is going to say that their research is essential, and the problem is all of the power is in their hands."

The biology research student said that many faculty are well-intentioned, but are unaware of the unspoken pressure that they place on their grad student researchers.

"I think that the faculty don't all realize that if you tell graduate students, 'It's your decision whether you come into lab or not,' that because of the power differential, most grad students will interpret that as 'I really want you to be coming to lab,'" the biology research student said.

Utz agreed that faculty PIs have paramount influence in establishing a culture of lab safety, and that they are responsible for promoting such a culture.

In an email to The Daily, Moler reiterated that no researcher should be physically present in campus laboratories or research spaces except for essential research functions. While Moler did not address a question about the unspoken pressure grad students say they face due to PI expectations, she wrote, “no student or postdoctoral scholar should be required to go into the laboratory.”

Moler encouraged students with concerns to contact their department chair, student services staff or the associate dean for student affairs in their school.

Continuity planning

To mitigate the number of personnel continuing research, the University required all PIs to submit a lab-level continuity plan: a list of essential functions, staff, tasks and equipment necessary for critical lab maintenance.

So far, the continuity plans have not been activated, and card access has not been restricted, according to Stanford’s FAQ for lab researchers and grad students. The University plans to notify each PI should enacting the plan become necessary: “In extreme circumstances, which are not currently foreseen, access may be restricted to critical personnel,” the FAQ reads. Currently, Stanford remains open as normal for research and researchers.

However, the medical research student said that their PI’s continuity plan was not an accurate reflection of essential procedures or personnel.

“I know that my PI falsified that plan and said that we need to come in more frequently than we really do, and said that a lot more people are essential than really are,” the student said.

The biomedical research student agreed that PIs have not adhered to the University’s definition of “essential” personnel and research. The student said that most PIs had listed every member of the research group as essential personnel.

The number of personnel who continue to come into the lab make it impossible to maintain social distancing, the medical research student added.

In an email to The Daily, Bent wrote that Stanford has implemented a plan review process. Department chairs and faculty directors in all schools are responsible for validating that the tasks listed are truly essential.

“That work is underway,” Bent wrote.

Bent did not respond to The Daily’s question about whether the University was aware of PIs creating lab-level continuity plans that extend beyond the scope of essential research.

However, Utz said that he had not heard concerns regarding lab-level continuity plan inaccuracies.

Utz said he has elected to perform critical lab maintenance personally to reduce the risk of his lab personnel’s exposure to the virus. He said he hopes other faculty members will consider doing the same.

According to the medical research student, while potentially removing keycard access will reduce the number of non-essential personnel conducting research, it will not protect those with access from being pressured to perform research beyond maintenance.

The medical research student said they hope that the University recognizes that researchers are entering labs to conduct non-essential work, and for the University to clearly state that this behavior is not authorized.

The medical research student suggested that the University employ security to monitor the entry and exit of essential personnel, but acknowledged that it might put security personnel at risk of being exposed to COVID-19. The student also proposed that the University monitor timestamps indicating when a researcher has swiped in or out of buildings to monitor the frequency with which they are attending to lab activities.

Next steps

Students said they hope Stanford acknowledges the widespread attitude toward continuing on-campus laboratory research. They also urged the University to maintain clearer communication with PIs, create a more definitive expectation for continuing research in labs and enforce those expectations more strictly.

“I think it would be great if the research deans could send out additional communications to faculty reiterating what the policy is, and maybe include an explanation of what types of conversations are often viewed by graduate students as pressuring,” the biology research student said. “Faculty often apply pressure in ways that they don’t understand, and I think that more awareness of what constitutes pressure could be helpful in changing behavior.”

Utz also said that he would monitor lab activity in the CCSR building for non-essential research activity. Should he observe any research that violates Stanford’s guidance, Utz said he plans to report such behavior to University or School of Medicine leadership.

“Your contribution to our teaching and research community is central to the University’s mission,” Bent wrote in a letter addressed to graduate students and postdoctoral scholars on March 10. “We are taking prudent precautions to protect our community and communities beyond our campus, while continuing our daily education and research activities in ways that are appropriate under the circumstances.”

Utz echoed Stanford’s commitment to protect students during the COVID-19 pandemic, urging students to adhere to University guidance.

“We want everyone in the country to be safe, and we want everyone on Stanford’s campus to be safe,” Utz added. “The University has put out guidance and the expectation we have of our medical students is that they’re going to follow that guidance.”

Utz also said that faculty bear the onus of protecting the health of researchers: “Stanford faculty have an obligation to lead efforts to promote a culture of laboratory safety by following, and promoting, the University guidance released last week by Vice Provost Moler.”

The medical research student said that the University’s inaction regarding the continuation of on-campus research sends a worrisome message.

“Nothing matters more than your ability to publish for your PI, and the value that you can add to their portfolio,” the medical research student said. “Your quality of life, your wellness, your health doesn’t matter. It’s a huge problem at Stanford and in academia in general.”

“This takes publish or perish to a new level,” Gonzales said. “Now it’s about publish and perish.”

A previous headline of this article indicated that postdocs had also cited pressure to continue lab work, but no postdocs are quoted in the article. The Daily regrets this error.

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3. Empty Benches at Empty Lab Tables

An unprecedented shutdown of academic research underway on many campuses has implications for young investigators still building careers in their fields.

By **Elizabeth Redden**

Inside Higher Ed

March 30, 2020

Empty classrooms are a defining feature of the coronavirus crisis on college campuses. Empty research labs are another.

Many major research universities have halted all but essential research in what amounts to an unprecedented stoppage of academic science in modern memory. Among the universities that have shut down all nonessential research operations are [Harvard](#), [Johns Hopkins](#) and [Yale](#) Universities, as well as the Universities of [Michigan](#) and [Pennsylvania](#), among others. Suzanne Ortega, president of the Council of Graduate Schools, a national organization focused on graduate education and research, said universities appear to be converging on a set of agreed-upon practices for research during the public health crisis.

“Those practices really involve trying to minimize social interaction but maintain what are called essential research functions,” such as certain experiments involving animals and ongoing clinical trials, she said. “There may be other examples of research that’s deemed essential, but it appears that the practice is for campuses to evaluate those on a case-by-case basis and even for those that are deemed essential to try to minimize the number of individuals who are tending to the animals or caring for the experiments.”

Some have questioned the wisdom of the shutdowns.

"Social distancing is crucial. But do we really need to shut down research labs? For some postdocs/young PIs [principal investigators] this could be catastrophic," Jonathan Kipnis, a neuroscientist at the University of Virginia, [wrote on Twitter March 17](#). "Biomedical research isn't 'dispensable' and there are alternative measures. Wearing protective gear? Dividing lab into non-overlapping 'shifts'?"

Kipnis, who declined a request for an interview, subsequently asked in [a second tweet](#) what would happen if the shutdowns lasted for a year.

"Can you look in the eyes of all your trainees/staff and promise them that after a year of inactivity you can still fully pay their salary?" he asked. The original tweet by Kipnis garnered 191 responses, many from people arguing that yes, the shutdowns are essential not just for the safety of researchers but also for that of others.

"I am one of these young PIs, and I am admittedly terrified about the consequences to my research program ... but my research is NOT more important than protecting my community," wrote Melissa Kane, an assistant professor of pediatrics in the Division of Infection Diseases at the University of Pittsburgh School of Medicine.

Kane, who studies immune responses to viral infections, said in an interview that she has frozen all the cell lines she can and regularly goes to her lab to attend to the lab's mouse colony. An undergraduate research assistant has gone home for the semester, and her lab's two research technicians are working from home, though she said there isn't a lot of work they can do from there.

"It took me months and months to get the lab set up, and I'm now looking at the possibility of redoing that, which is really scary with a small staff in particular," Kane said. "It's going to be a lot harder for junior people to get back up and running. On the other hand, a lot of other people are in that boat so I also feel rather fortunate that I study immunity to viral infections. Not this type of virus [the coronavirus] -- I study retroviruses like HIV -- but it's something I don't see interest waning in in the future, to be honest." The financial cost of halting research is another concern for junior lead investigators like Kane.

"I'm paying my technicians right now, and they are not working," she said. "But again, I actually didn't find that choice all that difficult to make in the long run. I just think it's 100 percent the right thing to do."

The National Institutes of Health [has said](#) it will allow recipients of grants to charge for costs related to payment of salaries and benefits during periods in which research is not performed due to COVID-19 as long as the grantee's institution allows such payments. The National Science Foundation similarly [announced](#) this week that recipients of grants "are authorized to continue to charge salaries, stipends, and benefits to currently active NSF awards consistent with the recipients' policy of paying salaries (under unexpected or extraordinary circumstances) from all funding sources, Federal and non-Federal."

However, the funding agency noted, "Recipients must not assume that supplemental funding will be available should the charging of such costs or other fees result in a shortage of funds to eventually carry out the project." Four major higher education associations -- the Association of American Medical Colleges, the Association of American Universities, the Association of Public and Land-grant Universities, and the American Council on Education -- sent [a March 19 letter](#) to congressional leaders asking for supplemental funding for research in the stimulus bill. The stimulus bill, which was signed by President Trump on Friday, included additional funding for COVID-19 related research, but [did not include](#) money associations had requested to help with costs related to shutting down and restarting labs. The associations noted a number of areas where COVID-19 is likely to cause unanticipated costs, including in relation to costs associated with salaries and benefits for graduate students, postdoctoral researchers, principal investigators and other research personnel whose salaries are funded by federal grants, as well as unanticipated costs associated with ramping down and ramping back up research.

Such ramp-down and ramp-up costs, the groups wrote, could include things such as loss or destruction of biological samples, disposal of hazardous materials, the care or replacement of animal subjects, and "restarting experiments that could not be completed due to the closure of research facilities, inability of personnel to interact in the field, or missed seasonal opportunities such as plant or animal life cycles."

Sunny Shin, an associate professor of microbiology at the University of Pennsylvania, said that with new experiments suspended, her lab had to euthanize about 200 mice, more than three-quarters of her lab's colony. "We kept the minimum number of mice necessary to keep mouse lines going, as my lab has about 24 different transgenic and knockout mouse lines," said Shin, who studies immune responses to bacterial pathogens. "I estimate that this will set my lab's research back at least six months, if not more, as we don't know when we'll be able to go back into our labs again."

Shin said she has a manuscript out for review and submitted for a renewal of an NIH grant, "so this will definitely affect our ability to address reviewers' concerns," she said. "In addition, I have two senior postdocs who were planning on going on the academic job market, and they both need to do additional mouse experiments for manuscripts that they are preparing and were hoping to submit this spring. So I am very concerned that this will affect their careers."

Shin is holding virtual lab meetings with her postdocs and graduate students and trying to keep them engaged.

"I think it's really important for the research to continue even from home," she said. "Things like data analysis, writing papers or literature reviews, reading research papers. I have a student who's starting to write her dissertation. There's a lot of work that can still be done from home." She said the graduate students who work in her lab are "worried about the health of each other and their friends here in Philadelphia, and they're concerned about how this is going to affect their research and their timelines. Some of them are senior graduate students who are in years four and five. During a time when they should be most productive in terms of doing lab work to make their way towards graduation, for some of them, this is obviously a setback. I've been trying to reassure them that having this time to read and think about their projects can be productive, too, that they shouldn't worry about that too much.

"I'm trying to keep very positive and try to reassure everyone that obviously the health of our lab and our community is the more important thing," she added. "That's more important than any kind of lab shutdown."

Sara Sawyer, a professor of molecular, cell and developmental biology at the University of Colorado at Boulder, is keeping open a line of activity at her lab that is focused on COVID-19 diagnostic testing. But she shut down the

other areas of her lab, which focus on zoonosis -- the process by which viruses that typically infect animals jump to humans -- and studies other pathogens that haven't yet made similar jumps.

Sawyer's lab is now operating with a skeleton crew as researchers focus all their work on the COVID-19 diagnostic testing. She said college administrators have had to make high-stakes decisions about shutting down laboratory work quickly with little precedent to guide their decisions.

"For those of us who work in tissue culture, we can freeze our materials and come back to them in two months, but you can't freeze that mouse stock that you spent the last two years making," she said. "There's only one way to propagate that resource, and that's to take care of those animals and let them reproduce. Universities are having to make split-second decisions with very little history of experience in making such decisions. It's a slippery slope, too. If one lab gets to stay open or have a few people go in because they have animal research, what about the fruit fly lab? Does that count? You could go on and on just brainstorming the very complicated decisions that administrators have to make right now."