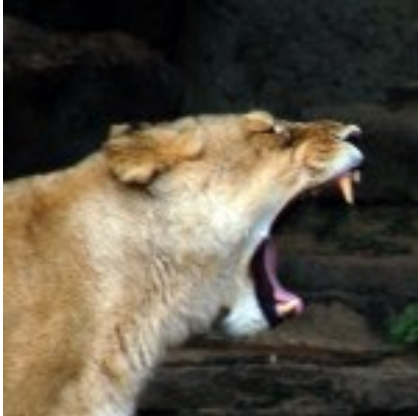


Instruction



We don't have bosses, team leaders or managers at university. Universities are a place where everyone pursues wisdom independently, and preferably with great freedom. We do have supervisors, professors and deans in our working lives, and often on a daily basis, but they rarely exhibit stereotypical boss behaviour such as issuing demands or commanding 'from above'.

In our training courses, we see that PhD supervisors are not fond of giving instructions, either. Instructing can be like ordering, which is also part of stereotypical boss behaviour. 'No one wants to take a motivated, smart PhD

student by the hand,' the thinking goes. 'It's best if they find their own way first.'

Ben Tiggelaar calls this 'neglect'. He states that the favourite supervision style of 83% of managers is delegation, yet this style is typically appropriate for only 15% of employees, those being self-managing professionals. Often, therefore, employees find themselves stuck with a delegating manager who isn't the best fit for their needs.

Supervisors of PhD students also enjoy delegating. This approach is usually not the most suitable supervision style for even an advanced PhD candidate, let alone a novice. Especially in the beginning, PhD students require guidance, support—and, yes, instruction.

Suppose you have just graduated, and the PhD position is your first serious job. In this situation, you need clarity and agreements at three levels. In terms of content, you want to know what is expected of you. What is the research about and what are the requirements for a dissertation? Also, you would also like to know more about the research process, when something needs to be completed and how much room there is for errors and detours. When and where is the best time to take a writing course? With whom do you hold an annual review? Finally, everyone would work more efficiently and effectively if supervisors take time at the beginning of the process to discuss with you their respective roles and responsibilities. Who can you expect what from, not only in terms of content but also in terms of time spent?

For supervisors, giving good instruction means investing a considerable amount of time. Oftentimes, supervisors were allowed to 'roam free' in their own PhD program and therefore have no prescribed set of instructions at hand. They have to imagine not understanding, and then having to explain, things that they automatically do well by now. Moreover, naturally, a supervisor would first want to know exactly how the process is going before giving instructions about it, something particularly difficult to determine during the process itself.

What could certainly help is if supervisors no longer associate instructing young PhD students with aggressive or 'bossy' behaviour. After all, it's just a matter of helping a beginner 'get wise'. And, we all want to pursue wisdom at university.