

Magazine

My word

Decisions, decisions Cori Bargmann

Throughout our careers, we make decisions about the people that we choose to work with. The student chooses a graduate advisor and lab; the postdoc does so again; the new faculty member chooses an institution based in part on her colleagues, then hires technicians, students, postdocs; the search committee chooses more faculty members. These choices are usually mutual, not one-sided, and in most situations both parties have more than one option.

How are we supposed to make this kind of decision? As with so many of the things we do that are not strictly scientific, we are given no training at all. The assumption is that we are all so smart, we will naturally make smart decisions in this arena too. Unfortunately, this belief is as wrong as the idea that scientists make unusually smart decisions in their personal lives. Would that it were so.

To state the obvious, the first factor and the most important one in matching two scientific colleagues is a shared scientific interest. After all, the desire to understand a problem is what really brings you into the lab. Sometimes, but not often, that interest is so compelling that it thrusts all other concerns aside. The rest of the time, you have to make choices.

One common way to negotiate those choices is to ask other people what they would do in your situation, but this approach has some pitfalls. One of these has to do with human nature. In general, happy people tell

you to do what they have done, and unhappy people tell you not to do what they've done. Ask the head of a successful big lab how to set up a group, and you will hear about the joys of productivity; ask the head of a successful small lab, and you will be told to think hard and pay a lot of attention to everyone. A student in a large lab will like the excitement and variety if he's happy, but bemoan the crowd if he's having a hard time.

A second pitfall of asking for advice is the gossip factor. Word-of-mouth is attached to scientists amazingly early in their careers, sometimes unfairly. Don't always believe it. Is the apparent star of the first-year graduate class really someone you communicate well with? Is the distinguished lab head really an ogre? People can be sheep. They can also be lemmings.

A third pitfall is that it's easy for someone to tell you what to do, but you're the one who has to live with your decisions (I'm horrified by the idea that my advice might influence someone else's life, as I rarely think the same thing two days in a row). It's unwise to make a major decision based on someone else's goals. Sometimes you don't even realize what your own interests are until you've made a mistake and realize what they are not.

Every person will have their own formula for choosing colleagues. The trick is to listen for the values that inform the formula, then decide which ones you share. One goal might be to associate with the smartest people possible, to gain the constant pleasure of being with people who are challenging and interesting. Or you might prefer colleagues who are particularly knowledgeable, or creative, or original. Another ideal might be to work with people who complement you — to have creative colleagues if

you are detail-oriented, or vice versa. Other ideals might be a group with a particular commitment to its educational environment, or a lab with a great team spirit.

How do you make these scientific relationships work once they're established? I don't know a general answer to this question, but I recently read some books about management and working relationships. Their relevance to the scientific environment was limited, but every now and then they made sense. For example: the employer/employee (read advisor/student or postdoc) relationship is not an easy one, even under the best of circumstances. Do not enter into it lightly. Wait until you find someone that you genuinely like and respect. The best interests of both people are actually quite similar, namely, for the student/postdoc/technician to do very, very well. But there are rough patches in relationships that last as long as our professional liaisons do. If you have doubts, things will only get worse.

The second lesson I learned from these books, somewhat ruefully in retrospect, is that you should act professionally in a professional relationship. Scientists bring such intensity to their work, and spend such long hours there, that they tend to lose perspective. There are limits that should not be crossed, and family relationships are best reserved for the personal sphere. The advisor is not a father, and the postdoc is not a rebellious adolescent, and the graduate students are not rival siblings, but it seems as though they are if you watch the dynamics in many laboratories. The more reasonable and focused your expectations of each other are, the more likely they are to be met.

Address: Department of Anatomy, University of California, San Francisco, California 94143-0452, USA.