

By Akshata Naik

Choose your adviser wisely

The clock read 11 p.m. and I was still in the lab, staring at my poster abstract for what felt like the millionth time. I couldn't focus. But going home wasn't an option. My adviser had required me, and the rest of my labmates, to stay in the lab until she had time to read all of our abstracts. The submission deadline wasn't for a few days, but she had decided she wanted to meet early with each of us to discuss the single-paragraph descriptions of our work. We waited dutifully as each lab member took their turn. None of us dared to leave—or to challenge our boss. I didn't get home until 1:30 a.m.

It was one more reminder that I should have been more careful when selecting a graduate adviser. Unfortunately, I was foolish enough not to give mentoring style a second thought. I was simply happy to have received an offer.

Part of the problem was that I had limited options. I had moved to the United States with my husband, who had a good job in a particular city. It had only one university, with only one department that really interested me. So I started to volunteer in a research lab there.

I was a regular attendee at departmental seminars, and that's where I met my future adviser. After she presented a seminar, I approached her and we set up a time to chat. We had a productive discussion about her research. Later, I went to dinner with her lab group.

I didn't pick up any signs of trouble, although one person who worked in a lab that shared space with hers did tell me about coming across one of her lab members crying in the breakroom. Naïvely, I ignored that warning sign. Within a few weeks, the faculty member offered me a position in her lab as a master's student. The opportunity seemed too good to pass up. I hoped it would work out.

It wasn't long before reality set in. Group meetings were dreadful. Our adviser was often angry and verbally abusive. She persistently micromanaged her lab members and pitted us against one another. Once, she sent an irate email on a federal holiday, asking us why we weren't working. "The only lab that is empty is ours," she wrote. "How is this possible? Don't you have experiments or data to analyze?"

The situation wore me down, and I lost motivation to do my work. I wondered whether I should quit, but as an international student, I felt trapped. If I dropped out



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was amazed how friendly everyone was. His students had great regard for him, and I immediately sensed that his lab was an environment where I could thrive.

He took me on as a Ph.D. student, rescuing me from the misery I'd felt in graduate school up to that point. In my new lab, I arrived eager to work each day, and I didn't go home mentally exhausted by interpersonal disputes. That helped me be much more determined and efficient with my work.

Grad school is a tough, long road that requires patience and perseverance. Finding a lab that is a good match for you is critical. I encourage prospective students to learn from my mistakes and to do your due diligence before joining a lab. Ask a lot of questions and seek a lot of diverse opinions—because the last thing you want is an adviser who brings you down. ■

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Science

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