Dear Frustrated,

You are in the enviable position of having succeeded in graduate school and are now in a top lab. Congratulations! It sounds like you have a great career trajectory. Learning about a PI’s expectations is a very useful and important form of communication that is critical for a productive relationship.

In Labby’s experience, being poorly organized, or keeping erratic hours, or being a night owl is not a recipe for success. Overall success in science is dependent not only on creativity and research ability, but equally on organization, self-discipline, and interaction with other scientists. It sounds like your new PI is trying to help you succeed. You should calmly examine his expectations and decide if you think they will help or hurt your progress and ultimate career.

Labby’s first and foremost goal as a PI is to ensure the research and career success of every person in the lab. For this reason, Labby discusses goals and expectations with new lab members and encourages/requires them to do the following:

- maintain a regular weekday work schedule, with weekend work as needed to keep the project on track;
- take an appropriate amount of vacation (see Dear Labby, October 2016);
- perform assigned small lab duties that help the lab function efficiently and also generate a sense of community;
- avoid wasting lab time perusing the Internet about matters unrelated to science (Those who feel this is a problem are encouraged to measure the time spent in such activities—we are scientists, after all!—and try to reduce it to 10% or restrict it to outside the lab);
- attend journal clubs and seminars, not just those that relate to the lab, but those in the whole general area as you never know what scientific gems you might pick up;
- attend and present at meetings;
- get involved in work-related outside activities, e.g., developing a science project for a high school or activities related to career goals.

Labby tries to engender a lab environment where people respect each other and enjoy coming to work with their “scientific family.” In weekly meetings with each lab member, Labby tries to help students and postdocs own and develop their projects, rather than simply telling them what to do, and this requires lab members to be familiar with the relevant literature. Weekly group meetings provide a broader forum for open discussion of everyone’s projects.

While other PIs will have different goals and expectations, Labby has found discussing these issues up-front to be liberating for new lab members. The bottom line is really that communication is key: If they know what is expected, lab members and the PI can act accordingly and discuss issues openly.

—Labby

Got Questions?

Labby has answers. ASCB’s popular columnist will select career-related questions for publication and thoughtful response in the ASCB Newsletter. Confidentiality guaranteed if requested. Write us at labby@ascb.org.

—Labby