Please call me 'Jamie'

As the head of a lab, I make very few specific demands on its students and staff, because they are creative people who should be given the space to create. As long as they get the work done, I do not particularly care where or when they do it; as long as they wear safety gear in the lab itself, I do not care what clothing they wear in the office space; as long as they work diligently I would never dictate the exact topic of their work, though I will advise against obviously wrong turns. My requirements are very modest: everyone must turn up to at least one of the weekly lab meetings (the wet-lab or the database curation meetings: ideally both); all the wet-lab people must attend the weekly journal club; and, most importantly, nobody is to call me Professor Davies or even 'Prof' anywhere in our research building – I absolutely insist on being called Jamie.

I know that this demand can be stressful for some newcomers to the laboratory, especially those from the Indian sub-continent and from the Far East, who have usually come from a culture in which it is very important to show treat the Professor with great and very obvious respect, and even pronounce the word to somehow indicate a *very* capital 'P'. I know, therefore that, in this new-academic-year, welcome-to-Edinburgh, actually-this-is-an-unusually-warm-day-it-gets-a-lot-colder-than-this-later season, I will be spending some time giving versions of the following explanation. It is by no means unique to me and I am sure that all of my colleagues have similar conversations.

The problem with fancy titles, and with lab heads sitting at the head of a table in lab meetings, is that they create an impression that a lab head has some special authority about scientific truth. She does not: she may have authority about how to spend the money and where to hang the lab coats and whose turn it is to clean the autoclave, but lab heads have no mystical hotline to nature (even if they have one to *Nature*). The most critical thing a new PhD student has to learn about me - the supervisor they have chosen to trust with at least three years of their life - is that I can be wrong about scientific ideas at least as easily as they can. They have to take responsibility to read and to think, because they will need to become more expert in their specific area than I could hope to. I currently look after about 16 post-doctoral fellows and 6 graduate students, each working on their own projects, and the topics of the lab range from developmental biology, tissue engineering, synthetic biology, bioinformatics and clinical pharmacology. For much of the time, I rely on them to inform me of breaking news in the core literature of their subject, not the other way round. What

they get from me is more 'meta-level' knowledge, about good and bad ways of tackling a problem, and on a good day the useful connections I might can make because I have been reading papers for a long time so the knowledge base in my head is broader than theirs: broader but shallower. It can be hard to get across to new people that this is emphatically not false modesty but a simple statement of truth that they will find out for themselves when they are running a lab of their own.

It is not that I reject the idea of being treated with respect. Of course I expect to be treated with respect, just as the new student can be sure of being treated with respect by me in turn, and by all of their new colleagues. But the respect needs to be the real kind, of one human to another, not of one human to a title or a bunch of letters after a name. And it is not that I cannot guide them. I will have made far more mistakes than they will have yet made, and I will have learned enough from at least some of these mistakes to help them not fall into the same traps (so we we can go on and discover new traps together!). Many years ago, in connection with another side of my life, I was a pupil in a Yachtmatser course run by the Royal Yachting Association, of which I have now been a member for more than 30 years. The navigational theory instructor, whose name I have forgotten because we all just referred to him as *Captain Birdseye*, was a gentleman of a certain age whose white-bearded face looked as if it had been assaulted by a lot of salt spray, and probably quite a few fists. He had an interesting habit of grabbing a pupil's desk and rocking it violently when they were plotting a course, telling them with glee that this was a much more realistic simulation of navigation at sea. He had worked professionally as a yacht delivery skipper, mainly between the UK and the Mediterranean via Biscay, and to the Caribbean islands. Much of his teaching consisted to telling stories of the various ways he had nearly wrecked, or had actually wrecked, vessels by making a stupid mistake. His stories about mistaking cars behind trees on a headland for a quick-flashing light on a buoy, for example, or navigating a boat with pinpoint accuracy across a storm-racked sea into a tiny river without noticing that, since the chart had been printed, someone had spanned the river entrance with a 132kV power line at mast height, stay with me yet. His mistakes have probably kept many of his pupils out of trouble and are a testament to the proverb *Let the wrecks of other be your seamarks*.

What new students need to realize is that their supervisor is not an all-knowing master to be treated with reverence, but an experienced fellow-traveller who can hopefully make their intellectual journey more worthwhile and interesting. And to get this feeing of travelling together, not following, I insist right away on first name terms.

Fortunately, existing members of the lab are a tremendous help in dispelling any newcomer's lingering hopes of their supervisor's omniscience. Most lab meetings will include at least one phrase from an experienced student or forthright post doc, like *Jamie, that makes zero sense*, or even, from a certain post-doc discussing a new DNA assembly method recently, *I'll explain this slowly, for Jamie's sake*.... This rapidly sets the tone of life in the lab. New people soon get to know the scientific strengths and weaknesses of everyone, and adjust to being in a supportive community in which everyone is a mentor. Some of us have just been around a little longer, and have a few more tricks up our sleeves, that's all.

Jamie Davies,
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