

Conflict Consultation - Dealing with crises and conflicts

The Problem

Each staff member of a doctoral school knows at least one doctoral candidate who is or has been in conflict with his/her supervisor and/or his/her working group in the lab. Cases like these do not seem to be unusual, although the total number is certainly unknown to the universities. Some universities and/or doctoral schools provide their own system to solve this type of conflict. They name contact persons (confidant/e/s) and ombudspersons whom doctoral candidates who need help can address.

The problem with these persons (confidant/e/s) is that they are either part of the administration or member of the faculty of the doctoral program. Wherever they are affiliated, they are not impartial. Furthermore, usually they are not experts in conflict management.

The Instrument

To face this problem Humboldt Graduate School has developed a format called *conflict consultation* based on independent thus neutral mediators. The mediators are highly trained and have an academic background respectively their professional work is closely linked to academia and to the support of young researchers. However, they are not associated with the university at all. The *conflict consultation* is open to all doctoral candidates at Humboldt-Universität and – if requested – anonymous. The sessions take place outside the daily workplace and are kept strictly confidential.

The range of support covers counselling, coaching or mediation for strained relationships concerning the doctoral studies. Constructively dealing with stress and problematic relationships can improve the general atmosphere, strengthen the work relationship and promote productive academic work that stimulates discussion. Professional conflict consultancy can be helpful in situations where communication has broken down and important issues can no longer be addressed openly. It helps the doctoral candidate to take a step back in order to analyse the situation and to develop potential courses of action. Coaching can significantly improve the participants' way of dealing with difficult situations with an alleviating effect. If all parties involved in the conflict are willing to participate in a mediation process this may also be initiated as a further means. Mediation provides a framework for all parties to find beneficial solutions.

The *conflict consultation* is open to doctoral candidates as well as supervisors. The consultation is offered only via appointment and the first contact can be made by mail or phone. Humboldt Graduate School usually arranges the first meeting within a few days and the first interview lasts approximately one hour. The offer is free of charge and the participant can chose if the mediator should be male or female.

Experience

Humboldt Graduate School established this instrument in 2012. Since then the number of cases has increased yearly. It took some time to promote the format in a university like ours. Thoroughly it was

very important to cooperate not only with the faculty administrations and coordinators of structured programs but also with other institutions like the women's representative office and the public relations office.

After a short period of hesitation we now can see that the supervisors also understand the importance of this instrument. Either they themselves ask for a mediation session with their doctoral candidate or strongly advise their doctoral candidates to ask for support if conflicts arise among the group, which seem impossible to be resolved by him- or herself.

There is no pattern to predict at what time of the year conflicts emerge. We had periods lasting a few months without any activities and then all of a sudden five or six conflicts arose within one month. Therefore we cooperate with a team of mediators that is very flexible.

Résumé

All in all it seems to be an instrument which proved to be highly effective and meets very positive feedback from the concerned parties. Moreover the costs for the university are rather low.