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– Dr. Lisa Rodenburg

To Succeed in Scholarly Writing, Build Relationships and Think Like a Warrior

To navigate the peer-review process, think like a warrior, advises Dr. Lisa Rodenburg. Success does not hinge on the quality of the writing or the research alone, and sometimes the most difficult challenge stems from a conflict with a senior collaborator.

Rodenburg, a Rutgers environmental scientist who has written more than 50 peer-reviewed papers, offered strategic advice for faculty during our December 2020 Writing Retreat. In doing so, she often cited military strategy and urged faculty members to engineer the process as much as possible.

Evaluating and managing the psychology behind the work – understanding the goals of your review team and knowing how to overcome conflict in a collaboration – are specific keys to success.

Know Your Audience

One vital tactic is to know your audience. Indeed, according to Rodenburg, this research – vetting the team that will review your work – just may be the most important research you do. It’s never a good idea to submit work blind, she says.

This is especially true if you are pursuing funding. It’s important to be aware in advance of the mission and philosophy of the grant review team. “Every proposal is funded before it’s ever written,” says Rodenburg, paraphrasing Chinese military strategist Sun Tzu, author of “The Art of War.”

In evaluating your review team, seek to understand their pressure points, their pet peeves, their stance on issues big and small (from scientific theory to whether they prefer a first person or third person narrative).

When suggesting potential reviewers, choose people you know and who work well with you, Rodenburg says. If you don’t know the members of your review team, ask around; review their reputations, read their papers and be aware of what they’ve done in the past. Seek someone who will give you a fair hearing.

Additional Advice

- Provide a comprehensive list, beyond the minimum required, of suggested reviewers; this will increase the chances of a friendly review team.
- Make a pre-emptive move when dealing with a reviewer who may challenge your work. Send your work to this reviewer in advance, asking for comments. This tactic may seem Machiavellian, says Rodenburg, but it works.

“Managing Up” During a Challenging Collaboration

Collaborations, noted Rodenburg, often are necessary. One researcher may benefit from the reputation of another, and some funding organizations view collaborations more favorably than individual work. Yet navigating the collaborative process is not always easy.

Researchers often resort to begging and flattery when dealing with a challenging collaborator, especially one who is higher on the food chain and who may not share the same sense of urgency for the work. What to do when those efforts fail? Rodenburg walked the group through a few strategies that have led to success.

- When sending emails, put the materials necessary for review in the body of the email rather than as an attachment. Sometimes that extra step, the opening of an attachment, can be a bridge too far.
- Pursue another method of communication. Schedule a time to discuss the work over coffee, for example.
- If your collaborator is still stalling following your conversation, write his/her synopsis yourself and email it for review. This tactic can prompt action.

Building Relationships

If you don't have relationships with peers in your field, begin building them, advises Rodenburg.

“Go to conferences to build relationships that can be helpful for you. Go out to dinner, go out to happy hour, have drinks with people. That's an important part of being a scientist.”