

Communicating Effectively with Principal Investigators

(It Can Be Done!)

RAC Forum

June 17, 2015

The single biggest problem in communication is the illusion that it has taken place.

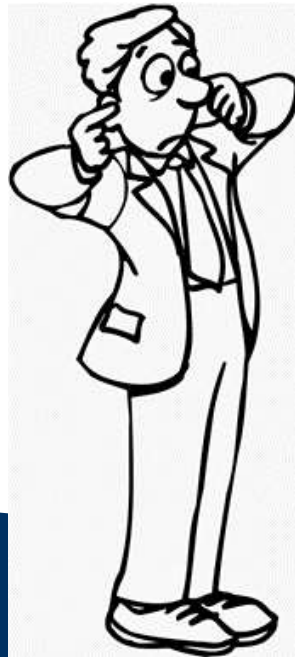
- George Bernard Shaw

USS Abraham Lincoln





How can I promote better communication with my PIs?



First: Consider Your Audience



Nature of PIs

- Independent thinkers
- Want to know the “why” of things
- Want to be able to predict “when” and “how”
- Driven by academic achievement





Strapped Scientists Abandon Research

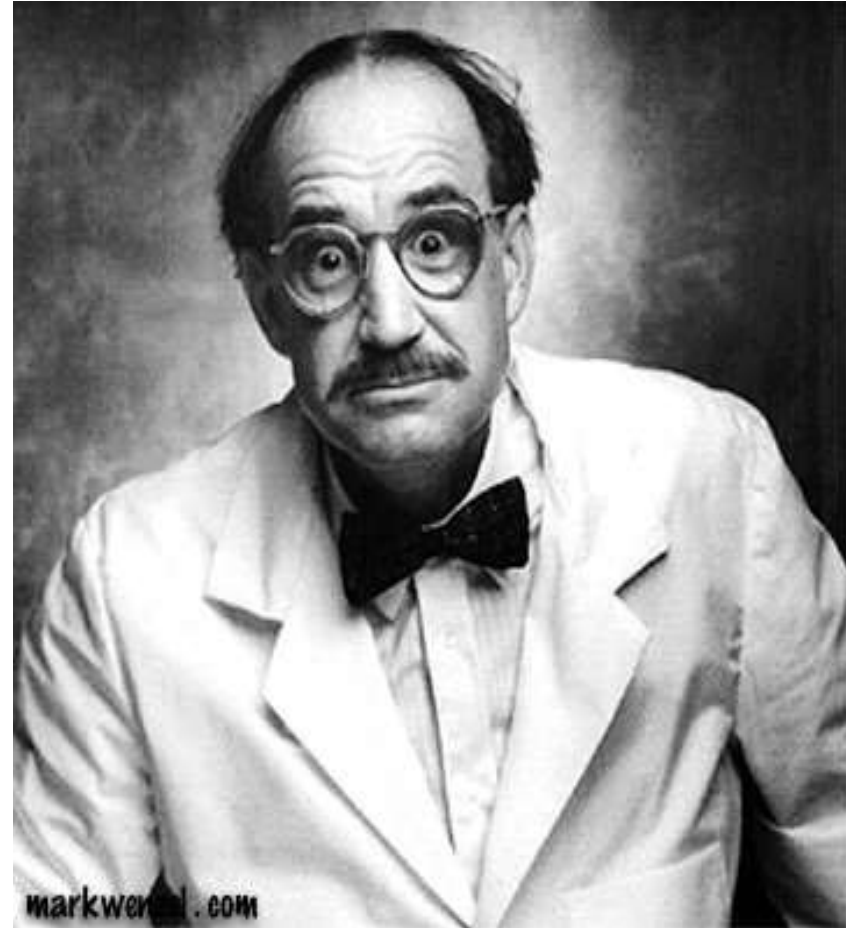
Chronicle of Higher Education, February 24 2014

“In response to financial pressures, have you done the following?”

- Reduced lab staff – 62.4%
- Reduced recruitment of grad students and fellows – 78.1%
- Reduced travel – 67.2%
- Abandoned an area of planned investigation that you considered central to your lab’s mission – 47%
- Advised students to pursue careers outside academe – 41.6%
- Advised students to pursue careers outside the US – 20.8%

Pressures on PIs

- Publish or perish, up or out
- No grants – no summer salary, cuts in grad students and postdocs
- Advancement to tenure
- Committee service
- Daily life



Nature of RAs

- Team players/shared goals
- Focus is on policy/procedures
- Scheduled work day
- Value management & administration
- Fluent in jargon



Questions RAs Ask PIs

- “Where is your Form 700U?”
- “Are you adding voluntary committed cost share or voluntary uncommitted cost share?”
- “Can you provide a better major project justification?”



What is the Formula for Communication Success?

$$\left(\frac{x_1 + x_2}{2}, \frac{y_1 + y_2}{2} \right)$$



“The” RA Formula for Success

E3

- **Empathize**
 - Human interaction, not just bureaucracy
- **Explain**
 - Tell the PI why
 - Summarize the action needed
- **Expedite**
 - Facilitate
 - Include the resources if possible (links, forms)

Use language appropriate for PIs

- Avoid acronyms (NSF) (RCCR) (OMB)
- Avoid jargon—don't assume PI knowledge
- Avoid technical terms (general ledger)
- Avoid internal reference numbers

Other RA Communication Tips

- Write short email messages
- Don't bury the lead
- Opt for bulleted points, numbering
- Don't cram multiple requests into one email.
- End conversation/email with options that will lead to action.

Tips (cont.)

- Confirm your understanding of what the PI has told you.
- Don't be afraid to ask questions to get clarification.
- Confirm the agreed upon timeline for each activity
- Confirm what takes priority if the PI has made multiple requests

Tips (cont.)

- Confirm who does what/who will do what going forward.
- Avoid playing “gotcha”—explain the options and the pros and cons before asking the PI to make a decision.
- Don’t over promise.
- Don’t fail to communicate.



Communication Glitches

What went wrong here?



Example #1:

Message to a Senior Campus Administrator:

This is a subaward from X University with a ABC Foundation prime. ABC Foundation is unwilling to change the indemnification clause and we cannot accept it (per guidance from Ethics, Risk & Compliance Svcs) since it violates 100.4.dd.9. The CGO told me that the PI has been involved in the entire process.

Example #2:

Q:

I am a graduate student funded by an NSF award. Six out of the last 13 paychecks I was supposed to receive were not delivered to me on-time. Starting in May of last year, I missed FOUR paychecks in a row. I am having to live like a pauper so as to be able to pay essential bills. Can you help me?

A:

Please refer to the Collective Bargaining Agreement:

<http://grad.berkeley.edu/financial/graduate-student-employment/guide/>

and how to find a graduate student appointment:

<http://grad.berkeley.edu/financial/graduate-student-employment/guide/#ii-how-to-find-a-graduate-student-academic-appointment>

I will be back next Thursday if you have additional questions.

Example 3

RA: Here is a link to Berkeley's current indirect cost rate agreement:

<http://spo.berkeley.edu/policy/fa2013.pdf>

Please use the DHHS rate of 50.5% for on campus instruction for your training proposal to the XYZ foundation.

PI: This is very confusing. First I am told that we need to follow the DHHS rate. I offered to follow the DHHS rate of 8% for an NIH training grant. Please note, NIH is part of DHHS. It is an allowable rate.

When do you bring the PI in?



Communicating with Principal Investigators

Bridging the Bay – September 12, 2014
Theresa Tom, Senior Contract and Grant Officer

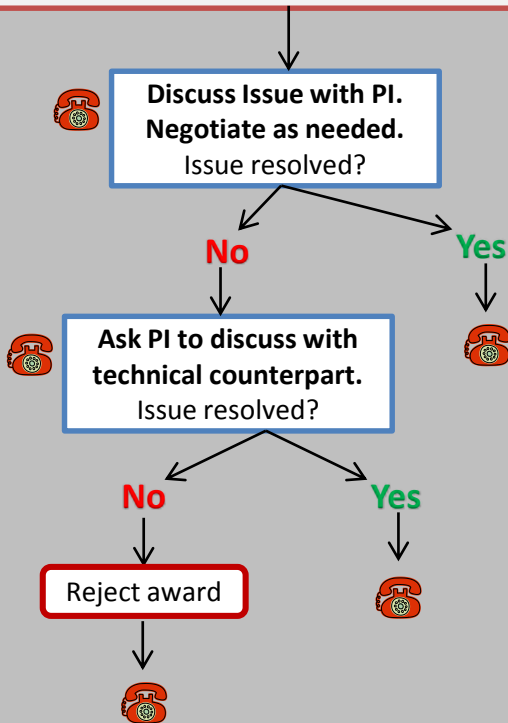


Award received... but there are issues

High

Technical Requirement Issue

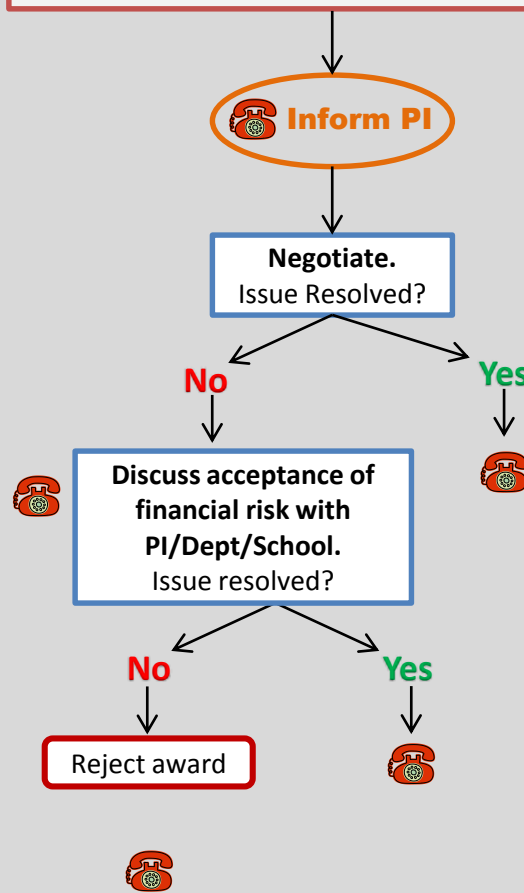
e.g. Special reporting requirements
Complex deliverable schedules
Work product owned by sponsor



Medium

Financial/Business Risk Issue

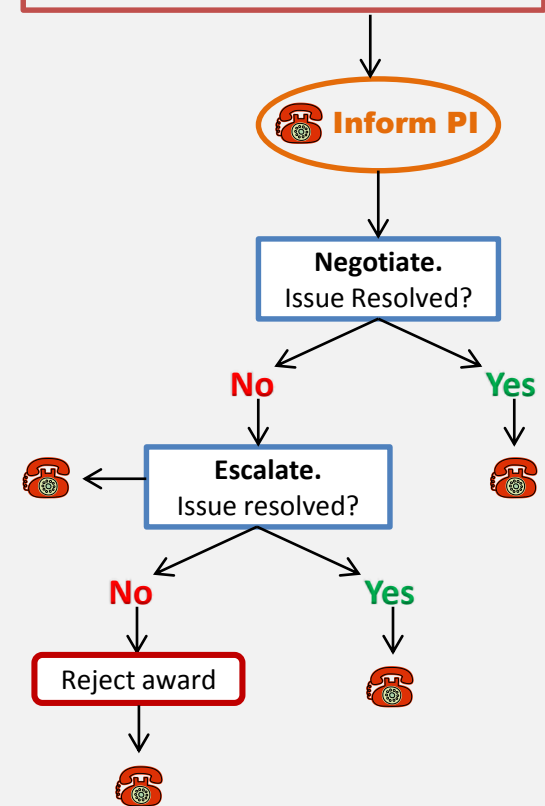
e.g. Payment tied to deliverables
Re-performance
One-way termination



Low

Institutional Policy/Legal Issue

e.g. Publication/Dissemination restriction
Foreign national restriction
Broad anti-terrorism language
IP or data ownership



Technical Requirement Issue

Does the issue affect the PI's ability to meet technical requirements or contractual obligations?

- Unique reporting requirements
- Weekly interim technical reports
- Final technical report due on the last day of the period of performance
- Unconventional financial report
- Reporting on labor hours/manpower
- Sponsor directs the work, has ability to unilaterally modify scope
- Complex deliverables schedule

Technical Requirement Issue

Interaction with PI

- Discuss issue with PI
 - Possible modification of scope of work, deliverables, schedule
 - Ask PI to confirm acceptance of term or propose changes
- Ask PI to address issues with technical counterpart

Financial/Business Risk Issue

Is there a potential financial burden associated with the issue?

- Payment based on sponsor acceptance of deliverable
- Stop work order
- Cost of re-performance
- Termination by sponsor at any time, for any reason

Financial/Business Risk Issue

Interaction with PI

- Inform PI of issue
- Discuss acceptance of financial risk with PI/Department/School

Institutional Policy/Legal Issue

Is the issue a deal breaker?

- Data/materials ownership
- Dissemination of information/publication restriction
- Sponsor for approval prior to dissemination (includes publication, presentation, teaching, etc.)
- Export control/ITAR
- Foreign national participation restriction
- Terrorism related activities
- Liability
- IT security requirements (FIPS and FISMA)
- Intellectual property
- Privacy/HIPAA
- Confidentiality

Institutional Policy/Legal Issue

Interaction with PI

- Inform PI, explain potential impact of issue and negotiation plan/escalation process
- Provide updates on status

How do you keep the PI informed?

- Methods?
- Dilemma of waiting to deliver good news
- Cost/benefit analysis of constant contact
- Record of negotiations



*The two words **information** and **communication** are often used interchangeably, but they signify quite different things. Information is giving out; communication is getting through.*

- Sydney Harris

Questions/Discussion?

