

MANAGING CHALLENGES IN THE SUPERVISORY RELATIONSHIP



UNIVERSITY OF
TORONTO

CENTRE FOR GRADUATE MENTORSHIP & SUPERVISION (CGMS)

AZIZA KAJAN (SHE/HER)
DIRECTOR, CGMS

LAUREN PAIS (SHE/HER)
CASE COORDINATOR, CGMS



UNIVERSITY OF
TORONTO

LEARNING OBJECTIVES FOR TODAY

- Learn about the CGMS service and how we can support you
- Common challenges within the supervisory relationship
- Defining and understanding conflict resolution
- Approaches to navigating challenges
- Identify University of Toronto resources

CGMS MANDATE

TO SUPPORT **SUCCESSFUL** MENTORSHIP AND SUPERVISORY RELATIONSHIPS.

CGMS VISION STATEMENT

To ensure graduate students and supervisors experience a mentorship and supervisory relationship that is characterized by:

- Respect, inclusion, and support of the whole person
- Continued learning and collaboration by both the supervisor and the graduate student
- Shared responsibility and commitment to advancing academic and professional goals

OUR SERVICES INCLUDE:

Coaching: We can support you to develop your interpersonal communication skills and conflict management strategies. If you are a faculty member, we can assist you to address your supervision practice(s) and develop supervisory approaches which are aligned with best practices.

System Navigation: We can assess your concerns and help you determine who might be other appropriate partners and related policies/jurisdictions, assist in identifying all the potential resources and facilitate the connections/referrals.

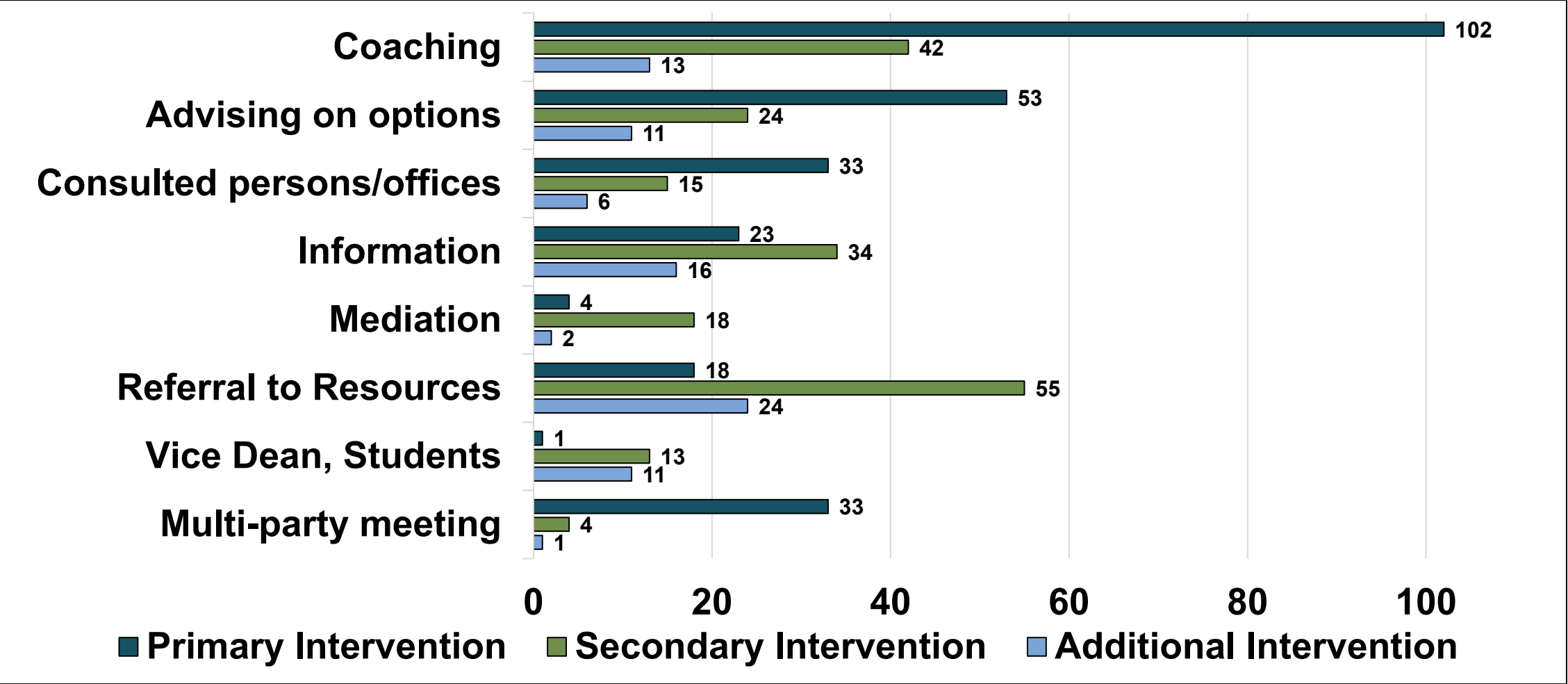
Case Management: We can assist you in ensuring appropriate follow-up and key stakeholders are working collaboratively to address your concerns.

Mediation: During a mediated conversation, we can help a graduate student, their supervisor and any other involved parties discuss their interests and needs, identify their desired outcomes, and negotiate a mutually agreeable plan with clear and documented outcomes that resolves the conflict and that each person is willing to follow.

Facilitation: During a facilitated conversation, we offer a confidential space for a graduate student, their supervisor and any other involved parties to share their experiences with each other, to work toward mutual understanding, to identify common ground and to make decisions about how differences of opinion can be managed. The goal of a facilitated conversation is to repair the supervisory relationship.

Workshops: We offer student and faculty workshops on understanding and resolving conflict and on having difficult conversations.

HOW WE HELP: CGMS CONSULTATIONS BY INTERVENTIONS JULY 2023 – MAR 2024



OUR SERVICES START WITH A CONFIDENTIAL CONSULTATION

You can reach out to CGMS via email, phone, or through our online referral form (TBA).

During the consultation we will support you to unpack, debrief your situation, and begin the process of identifying the unique factors of your case. We will support you to identify your desired outcomes and we will assist you in developing a strategy for a path forward.

EXAMPLES FOR WHEN WE CAN ASSIST

- Graduate student who is expressing concerns regarding the lack of availability and contact with their supervisor which is impacting their academic progress.
- Graduate student or faculty member seeking coaching on interpersonal communication skills and strategies.
- Faculty member expressing concerns regarding a student's progress which they attribute to either interpersonal and/or wellness issues.
- Graduate Chair seeking support/assistance in addressing concerns raised by a student about their supervisor.

SGS SUPERVISION GUIDELINES FOR FACULTY

Available at: <https://www.sgs.utoronto.ca/resources-supports/supervision/supervision-guidelines/>

- Section 1: [Introduction](#)
- Section 2: [Supervision and Mentoring](#)
- Section 3: [Supervisory Styles](#)
- Section 4: [Effective Supervision in Practice: From the Initial Stage to Finishing Up](#)
- Section 5: [Supporting Students to Completion and Beyond](#)
- Section 6: [Creating Equality and Equity When Working with Students](#)
- Section 7: [When a Student May Need Accommodations](#)
- Section 8: [When Problems Arise](#)
- Section 9: [Appendix 1 – Resources](#)
- Section 10: [Appendix 2 – Checklist for Supervisors](#)



The screenshot shows the School of Graduate Studies website. The header includes the School of Graduate Studies name and the University of Toronto logo. A navigation menu contains links for ABOUT SGS, PROGRAMS, FUTURE STUDENTS, CURRENT STUDENTS, AWARDS & FUNDING, RESOURCES & SUPPORTS, and INTERNATIONAL. The main content area is titled "Supervision Guidelines" and includes a breadcrumb trail: Home / Resources & Supports / Supervision Support / Supervision Guidelines. A paragraph of text explains the purpose of the guidelines, and a note suggests contacting the School of Graduate Studies for questions. Two images are displayed: one showing a student and a supervisor in a lab setting, and another showing two women in an office setting.

Students

- [Graduate Supervision Guidelines – Student Edition](#)
- [Reference Guide for Students \(PDF\)](#)

Faculty

- [Best Practices for Supervisors & Instructors of Graduate Students with Family Responsibilities](#)
- [Graduate Supervision Guidelines – Faculty Edition](#)
- [Reference Guide for Faculty \(PDF\)](#)

SGS SUPERVISION GUIDELINES FOR STUDENTS

Available at: <https://www.sgs.utoronto.ca/resources-supports/supervision/supervision-guidelines/>

- Section 1: [Introduction](#)
- Section 2: [General Characteristics of Graduate Supervision](#)
- Section 3: [Choosing a Supervisor](#)
- Section 4: [Responsibilities of the Student, Supervisor, and Supervisory Committee](#)
- Section 5: [If You Need Academic Accommodations](#)
- Section 6: [When Problems Arise](#)
- Section 7: [Finishing Up](#)
- Section 8: [Scenarios](#)
- Section 9: [Appendix 1 – Resources](#)
- Section 10: [Appendix 2 – Checklist for Students](#)



The screenshot shows the School of Graduate Studies website. The header includes the School of Graduate Studies name and the University of Toronto logo. A navigation menu contains links for ABOUT SGS, PROGRAMS, FUTURE STUDENTS, CURRENT STUDENTS, AWARDS & FUNDING, RESOURCES & SUPPORTS, and INTERNATIONAL. The main content area is titled "Supervision Guidelines" and includes a breadcrumb trail: Home / Resources & Supports / Supervision Support / Supervision Guidelines. Below this, there is introductory text about the student-supervisor relationship and a link to contact the School of Graduate Studies (SGS). Two images are displayed: one showing a student and a supervisor in a laboratory setting, and another showing a student and a supervisor in an office setting. To the right of the images, there are two sections: "Students" and "Faculty", each with a list of links to specific guides and PDFs.

Students

- [Graduate Supervision Guidelines – Student Edition](#)
- [Reference Guide for Students \(PDF\)](#)

Faculty

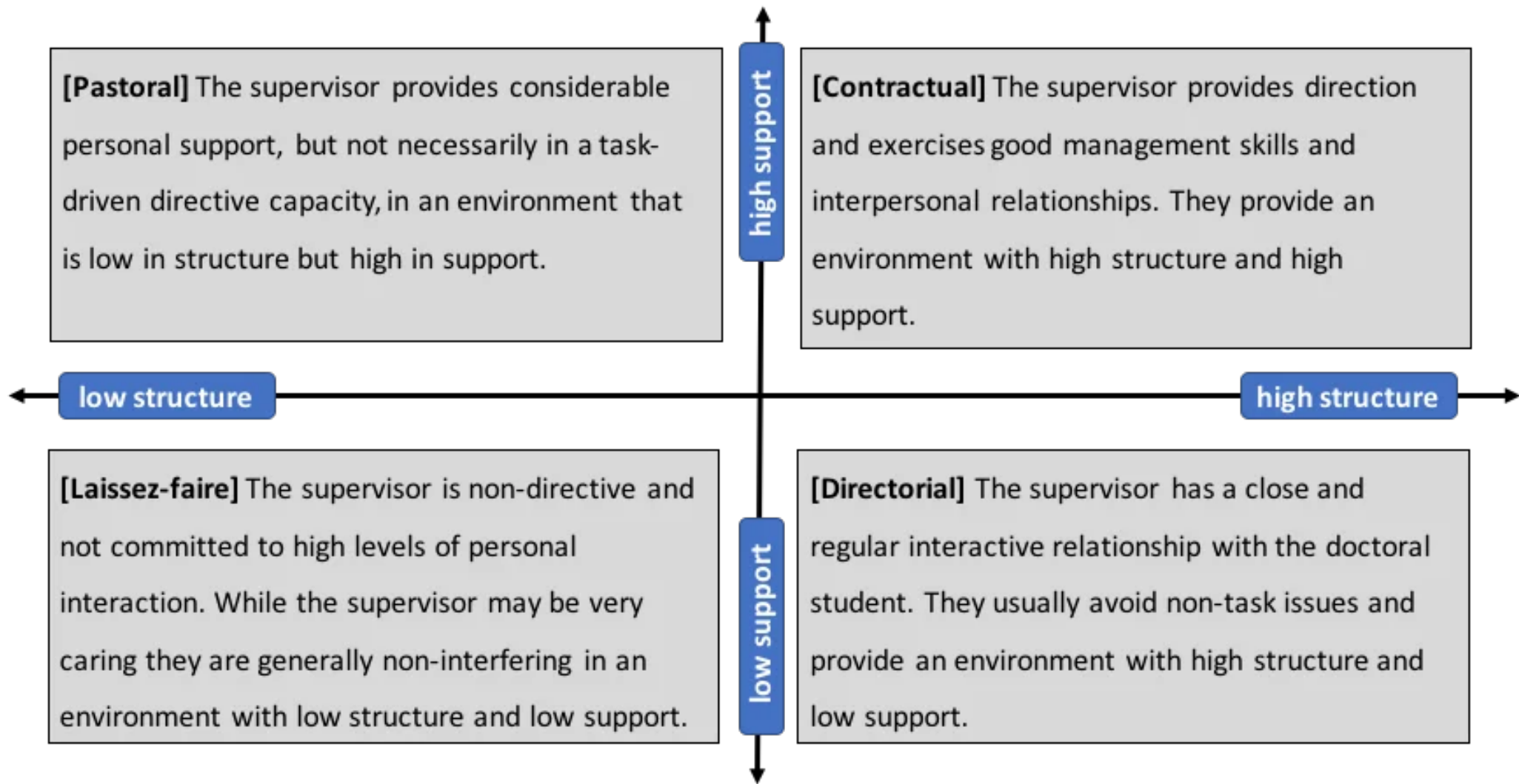
- [Best Practices for Supervisors & Instructors of Graduate Students with Family Responsibilities](#)
- [Graduate Supervision Guidelines – Faculty Edition](#)
- [Reference Guide for Faculty \(PDF\)](#)

UNDERSTANDING CHALLENGES IN THE SUPERVISORY RELATIONSHIP

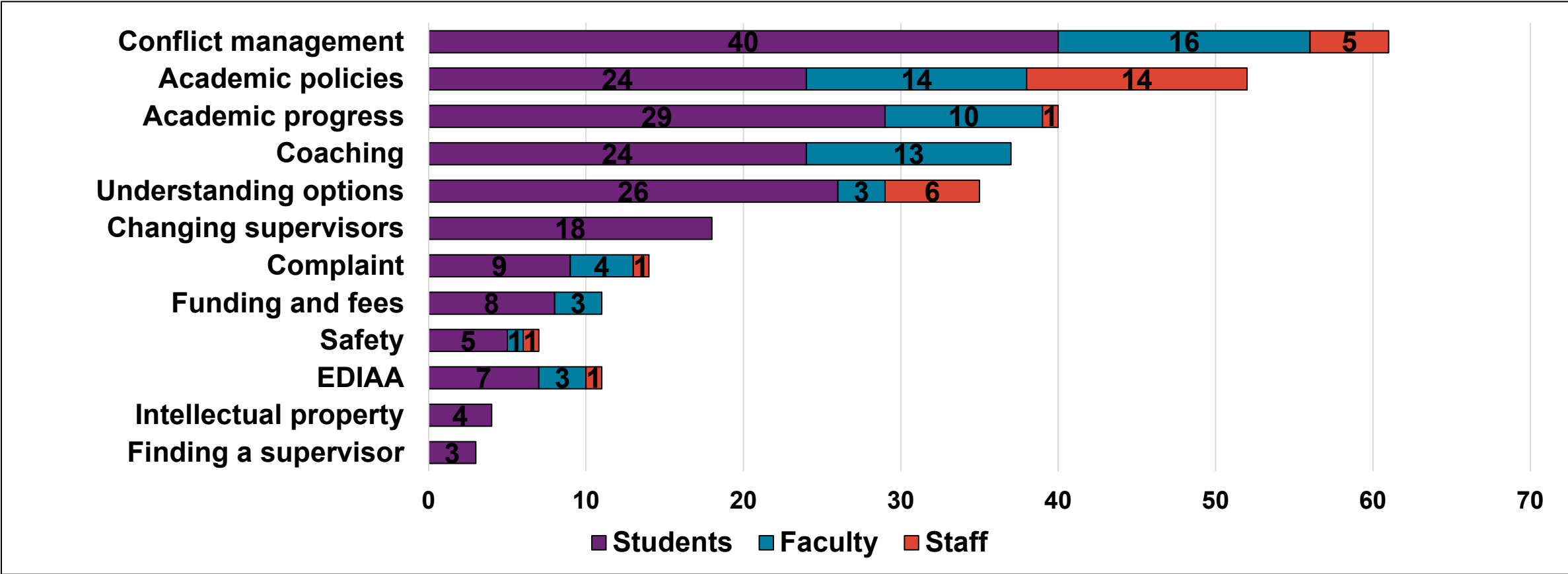


UNIVERSITY OF
TORONTO

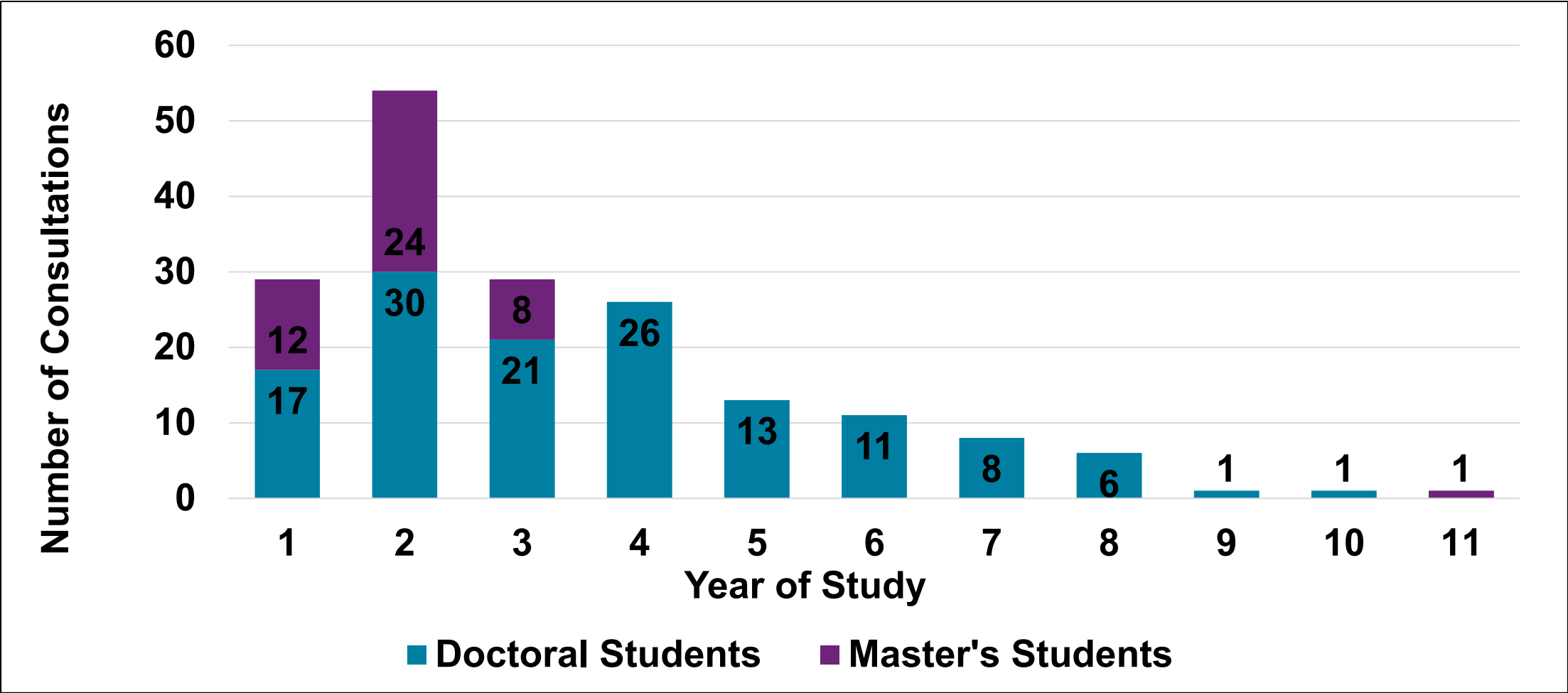
SUPERVISORY STYLES



CGMS CONSULTATIONS BY CONTENT JULY 2023 – MAR 2024



WHO WE SEE

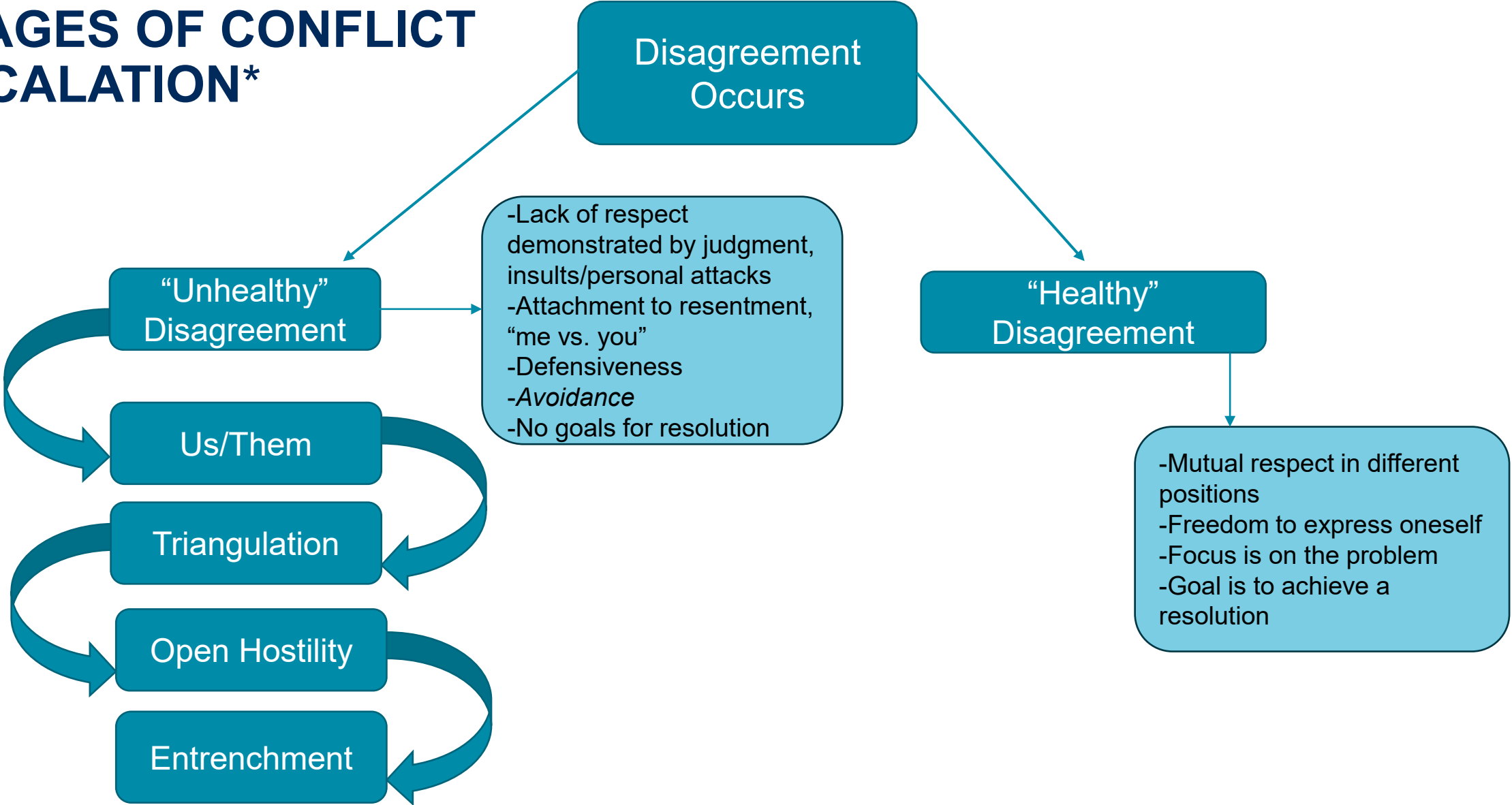


WHY SET EXPECTATIONS?

- Students generally report the main sources of conflict being:
 - Lack of guidance: inadequate structure
 - Feedback: vague, not addressing their concerns
 - Communication: infrequent/delayed, inconsistent
 - Leads to feelings of: supervisor not fulfilling the role as expected

- Supervisors generally report the main sources of conflict being:
 - Personal characteristics: research skills, writing style, work ethic
 - Student misinterpreting feedback
 - Lack of respect for agreements
 - Leads to feelings of: student not meeting obligations

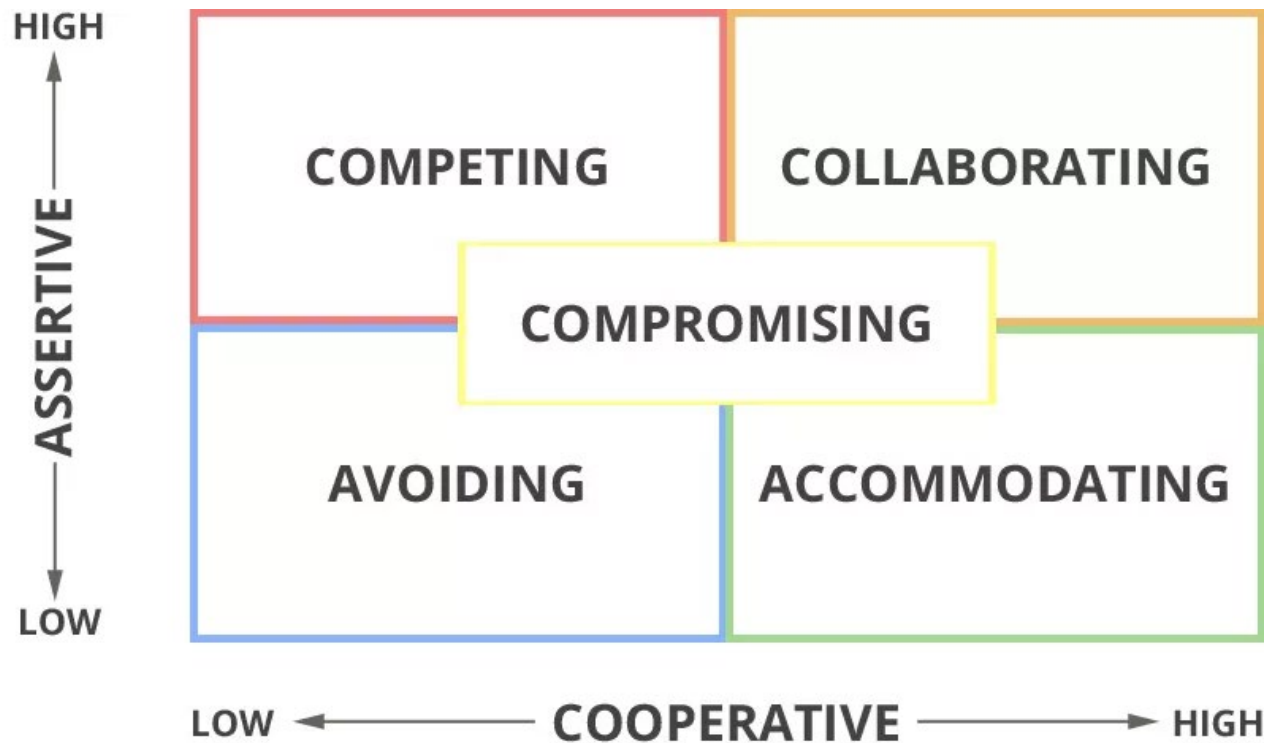
STAGES OF CONFLICT ESCALATION*



DEFINING CONFLICT RESOLUTION

- “The reduction of discord and friction between individuals or groups, usually through the use of active strategies, such as **conciliation**, **negotiation**, and **bargaining**” *(APA Dictionary of Psychology)*
- “The informal or formal process that two or more parties use to find a peaceful solution to their dispute” *(Shonk, 2022)*
- Themes:
 - Not a process of determining who is “right” or “wrong” – values, interests, needs
 - Can be formal or informal
 - Solution focused, goal oriented, person centered
 - Can be positive

APPROACHES TO RESOLVING CONFLICT



- **Avoiding:** “no way”, no action
- **Competing:** “my way”, win-lose
- **Accommodating:** “your way”, cooperative but not assertive
- **Compromising:** “halfway”, no winning or losing
- **Collaborating:** “our way”, cooperative AND assertive

APPROACHES TO RESOLVING CONFLICT

Conflict Management Style	Use when...	Drawbacks
Avoid: When you choose not to engage	It is an unsafe situation, or emotions are too high to talk rationally	It can cause disengagement, no one's needs are met and the problem remains
Compete: When you use whatever power needed to win an argument	It's more important to you than to the other person	The relationship may be strained
Accommodate: When you self-sacrifice	It is more important to the other person	Your needs are not met, and it may cause resentment
Compromise: When you meet in the middle	There isn't much time, the issue isn't of much importance, or there is a clear middle ground	No one wins and everyone gives up something
Collaborate: When you work to find a creative solution for everyone involved	There is established trust and clear communication	It takes time

(Brockman et al., 2010; Michigan State University, 2020)

APPROACHES TO CONSIDER

- Having early conversations to clarify expectations:
 - What are the preferences around communication?
 - What should be expected for turnarounds: editing, email responding, etc.
 - How often do they typically meet with students? Does this work for you and your needs?
 - What supervisory style is being practiced?
 - Does this style work for you?
 - What challenges do you think could arise given the supervisor's described style, and your preferences in learning, supervision, and mentorship?
 - Given their supervisory style, what expectations do they have for students?
 - How much initiative/independence do they expect?
 - How much time does the supervisor expect students to dedicate to their research? Is this feasible for you?
 - What are the expectations for addressing disagreements in research?
 - What is the expected role of the committee?

APPROACHES TO CONSIDER

- Checking in to assess the condition of the relationship
 - Are all parties engaging in ways that are *mostly* helpful?
 - Are mutually agreed upon responsibilities being met?
 - Does anything need to be changed? Be maintained? Have more of?
 - What has changed for both individuals – do expectations need to be reassessed?
- Being reflective of yourself in the relationship
 - Are there things you are responsible for that can be changed?
 - Identity (how you perceive yourself within the relationship, how you perceive your supervisor, identities that may impact the relationship)
 - Biases
 - Communication
 - Where you struggle vs. what has worked well

APPROACHES TO CONSIDER

Section 10: Checklist for Supervisors

- To establish a collegial environment, I will:
 - Create a positive work and learning environment free from [discrimination](#) and [harassment](#).
 - Provide advice on professional development and both academic and non-academic career opportunities.
 - Be available to my student as the first point of contact for conflict resolution or during moments of transition.
- I will undertake the following academic mentoring activities:
 - Assist the student in navigating their program of study and the University community.
 - Assist the student where needed about the requirements for their degree, policies of the University (such as the [Policy on Ethical Conduct in Research and Code of Behaviour on Academic Matters](#)) and [School of Graduate Studies Intellectual Property Guidelines for Graduate Students & Supervisors](#) as well as resources and referrals to campus services.
 - Advise and approve, if appropriate, all aspects of the student's academic program including courses, comprehensive/qualifying/field examinations, language, seminars, internship/practicum, thesis proposal requirements, etc.
 - Help the student formulate an appropriate research project. Discuss the required knowledge and skills to undertake the desired research program, the expected time to completion as well as the level of independence that is expected.
 - Meet regularly to provide constructive input into the student's research project and provide an assessment of the student's progress.

Section 10: Appendix 2 - Checklist for Students

- I chose my supervisor (or agreed to the choice) after appropriate review of supervisor options.

During my initial meetings with my supervisor, I have discussed the following topics:

- Potential or actual thesis topic
- Funding
- Applying for scholarships and awards
- Teaching assistantships
- Availability of space
- Expected hours of work
- Timelines and major milestones including anticipated program completion time
- When and how a supervisory committee will be chosen
- Nature of guidance
- Frequency and style of meetings

CASE STUDY #1

You have completed your coursework, and you are working on submitting a research ethics proposal, but you don't understand the process. You meet with your supervisor and have asked repeatedly for their help to understand and start the research ethics process. Your supervisor agrees to help you; however, there is no follow through, and you feel frustrated by the lack of structure and support and that you can't trust your supervisor's word.

HAVING DIFFICULT CONVERSATIONS



UNIVERSITY OF
TORONTO



DIFFICULT CONVERSATIONS

- Characterized by strong emotions such as fear, anger, frustration, and other divisive emotions
- Examples:
 - Addressing unwanted or unwelcome behaviour
 - Providing/receiving difficult academic/professional feedback
 - Raising concerns for someone's wellbeing

WHY WE CHOOSE NOT TO SAY ANYTHING

- Feels intrusive / not your place to address
- Aversion to conflict
- Concerns about negatively impacting the relationship
- Previous experiences where these conversations haven't gone well
- Worry about making things worse
- Feeling vulnerable
- Power dynamics
- Fear of repercussions or reprisals
- Feeling like nothing will change
- Feeling you don't have the skillset

WHY HAVE A DIFFICULT CONVERSATION?

- *“...supervisor’s supportive behavior develops the supervisee’s knowledge, understanding, research capabilities, encouragement, and engagement in conducting scientific research, enabling students to become professionals and accomplish innovative achievements during an academic tenure.” (Peng, 2015, as cited in Khuram, 2023)*

Having difficult or uncomfortable conversations ...

- Demonstrates care and respect
- Allows for earlier and easier interventions
- Can manage conflict escalation
- Gives the person a chance to make changes

APPROACHING A DIFFICULT CONVERSATION



1. Self-reflection



2. Inviting the conversation



3. Having the conversation



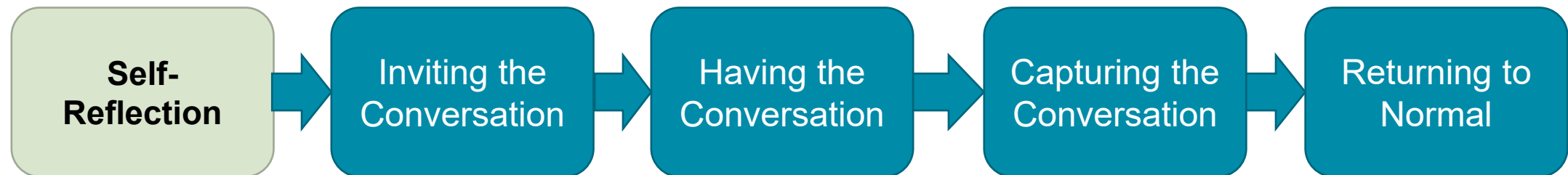
4. Capturing the conversation



5. Returning to normal

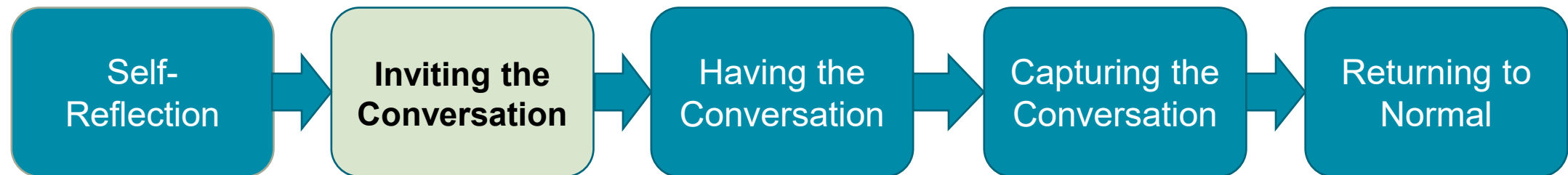
STEP ONE: SELF-REFLECTION

- Take time to reflect on the situation/issue
- Allow space for emotions to settle
- Talk through the situation with a good listener, trusted colleagues, mentor
- Be open to being challenged and to learn



STEP TWO: INVITE THE CONVERSATION

- Email or call the other person to invite them to the conversation
- Identify briefly (as well as neutrally, specifically, and objectively) what the conversation is about
- Choose an appropriate time – one that works for both parties
- **An invitation provides a choice to engage and allows the other party time to reflect and prepare**



INVITATION

Hello...

I hope this email finds you well.

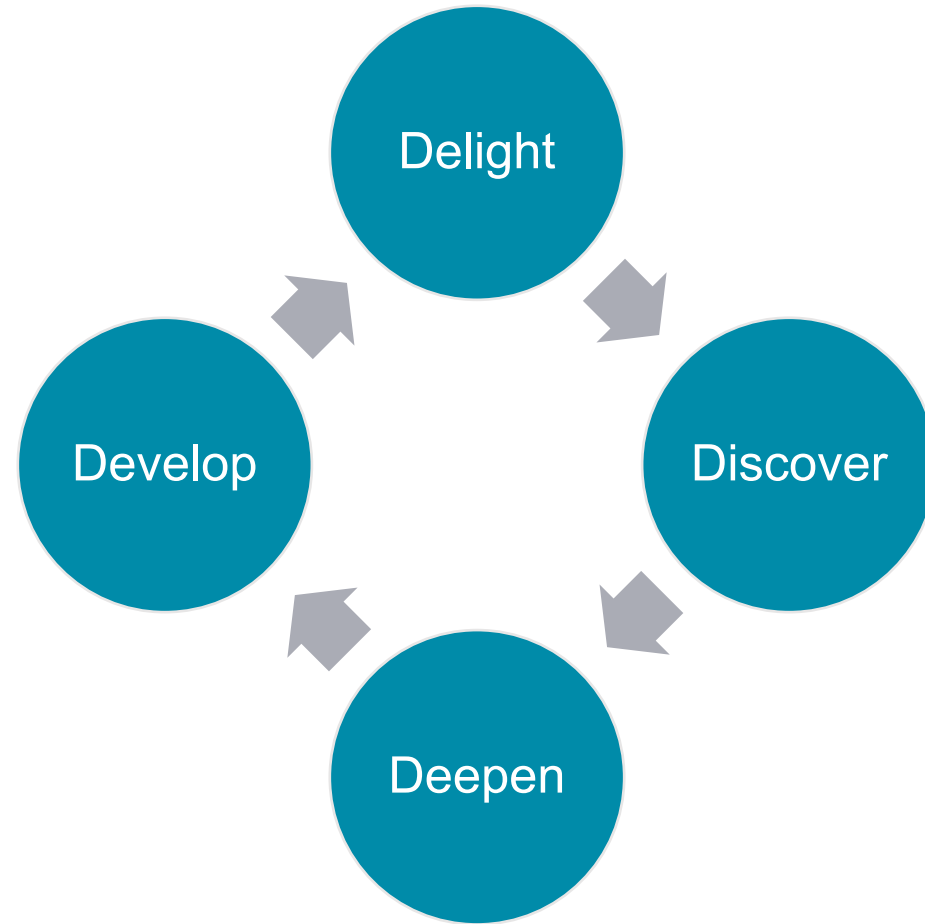
I'm hoping we can meet, or dedicate time in our weekly meeting, to discuss my progress. I've found that I am having difficulty incorporating some of the feedback I am receiving, and worry the timeline between drafts and editing will impact my time to completion. I value your thoughts and expertise on this process.

Please let me know when you have some time next week for us to meet, or if we can discuss this in our next weekly meeting.

Thanks,



STEP THREE: HAVING THE CONVERSATION



STEP THREE: HAVING THE CONVERSATION

Delight:

- Create a welcoming environment through gratitude, small talk, an apology (if appropriate)

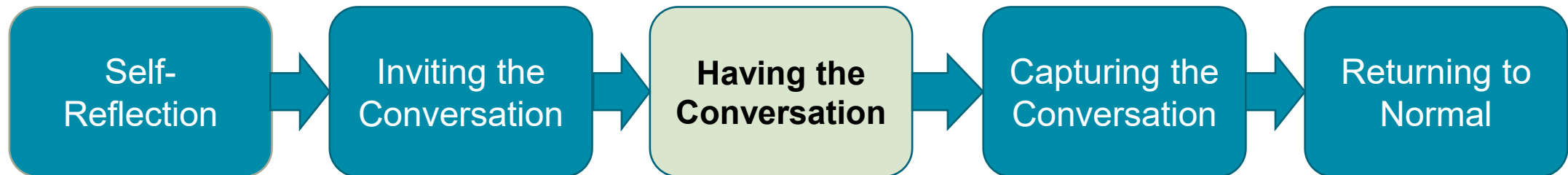
“Thank you for being willing to talk to me about _____. I know these conversations can be difficult so I’m very appreciative of your time.”

Discover:

- Be curious about the other person’s perspective/intent vs. approaching from judgement/defensiveness.
- Use a transparent and empathic approach

“I’m having difficulty incorporating this feedback, can you clarify what you mean by _____”,
vs.

“You give really inappropriate feedback, and you are very unhelpful”



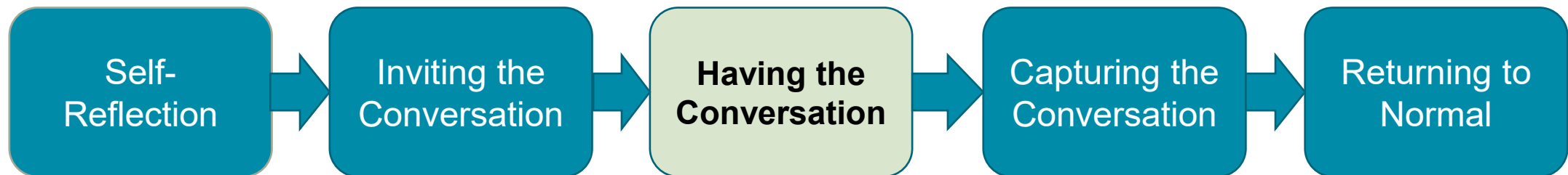
STEP THREE: HAVING THE CONVERSATION

Deepen:

- Share your perspective and/or the **impact** something had on you.
- If relevant, bring in other perspectives (e.g., institutional).
- Separate the problem from the person – focus on the behaviour.
- Offer feedback from your perspective (e.g., use "I" statements)

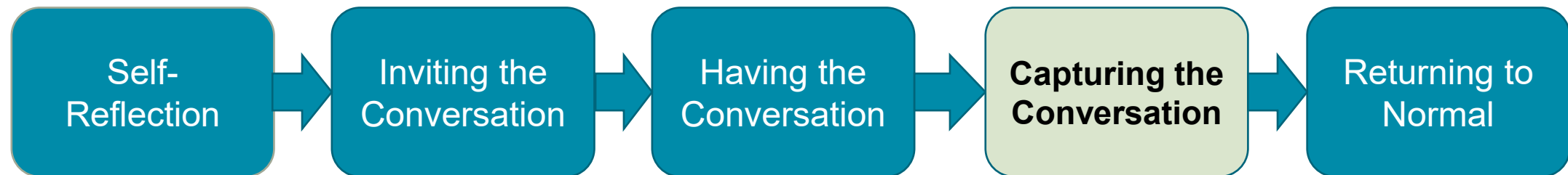
Develop:

- What solutions can you propose?
- Seek agreement on conclusions.
- Communicate clearly your expectations for the future.
- Offer to sum up the conversation via email



STEP FOUR: CAPTURE THE CONVERSATION

- Take time to follow up with a short email thanking the person for meeting with you
- Capture the conversation to ensure future clarity
- Outline actions and agreed upon timelines
- Refer to this email as needed



CAPTURING THE CONVERSATION

Hello...

Thank you for taking the time to meet with me yesterday. I appreciate you providing me with more detail around my writing and next steps to help me progress.

As we discussed, I will be submitting a draft to you on X date. You mentioned that in the event you are unable to edit my draft by the X date, I can reach out to my committee member, Professor X, for further support. I will also be sure to let you know what aspect of my draft I am hoping to receive feedback on, so it's more clear.

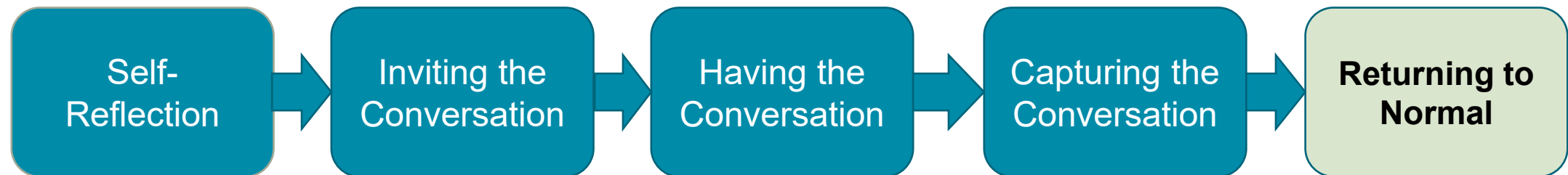
Please let me know if I missed anything.

Thanks,



STEP FIVE: RETURNING TO NORMAL

- Not always a necessary step
- Act as normally as possible until acting normal feels...normal
- Resist temptation to fall into “us vs. them” thinking



CASE STUDY #2

You are co-authoring a paper with your supervisor and other members of your lab. Your supervisor told you that after the first author, authorship order is determined by the number of figures contributed to the paper. You've noticed that you have contributed more figures than a colleague in your lab, yet in the most recent version of the manuscript, you are both listed as co-second authors. You are concerned about the fairness of the situation, you feel a lack of recognition by your supervisor, and you are losing motivation to work on your own research.

CASE STUDY #3

You submitted the final edits to the last chapter of your thesis a few months ago. Although your supervisor has verbally told you that the thesis is ready to go forward for a final defence, she has not talked about setting a date. In fact, you have not been able to reach her for a while. You are anxious about your future career and your finances if you have to stay registered for another term that is fast approaching.

CASE STUDY #4

A student in your lab has made you aware of some personal difficulties they are currently experiencing. As a result, they have apparently experienced a significant mental health concern, but have maintained their attendance in your lab, group meetings, and their progress appears unchanged. You nonetheless feel concerned as they visibly appear tired, disheveled, and at times you have seen them crying while working.

OTHER SGS AND CAMPUS RESOURCES

- Graduate Writing and Speaking: [Graduate Centre for Academic Communication](#)
- Graduate Professional Development: [Centre for Graduate Professional Development](#)
- Research Support: [Centre for Research & Innovation Support](#)
- Teaching Assistant Support: [Teaching Assistants' Training Program](#)
- Graduate Accessibility: [Accessibility Services](#)
- Graduate Wellness Counselling: [Health & Wellness](#)
- Graduate Academic Success: [Academic Success](#)
- Support for Responding to Distressed Students: [Student Crisis Response/Student Progress & Support](#)
- Students with Family Responsibilities: [Family Care Office](#)
- Sexual Violence and Sexual Harassment: [Sexual Violence Prevention & Support Centre](#)
- Personal Safety Concerns: [Community Safety Office](#)

YOUR SITUATION MATTERS. WE CAN HELP. CONTACT US.

Step 1: Are you a graduate student or faculty member experiencing a conflict in your supervisory relationship? Contact us at cgms@utoronto.ca.

Step 2: We will contact you as soon as possible to book a confidential consultation.

Step 3: Meet with us online or in-person! We will assist you in unpacking, debriefing, and identifying next steps forward.

Office hours: 9 AM – 5 PM
In-person and virtual consultations offered Mondays-Wednesdays
Virtual consultations only Thursdays and Fridays
We are located at 65/63 St. George Street
www.cgms.utoronto.ca
cgms@utoronto.ca
416-978-2379

REFERENCES

- American Psychological Association. (2020). Conflict resolution. In Dictionary of psychology. Retrieved March 4, 2022, from <https://dictionary.apa.org/>
- Khuram, W., Wang, Y., Ali, M., Khalid, A., & Han, H. (2023). Impact of Supportive Supervisor on Doctoral Students' Research Productivity: The Mediating Roles of Academic Engagement and Academic Psychological Capital. *SAGE Open*, 13(3). <https://doi.org/10.1177/21582440231185554>
- *Maintaining a positive supervisory relationship*. Graduate Studies and Postdoctoral Affairs. (2022, July 29). <https://uwaterloo.ca/graduate-studies-postdoctoral-affairs/current-students/gradventure/maintaining-positive-supervisory-relationship>
- Schaller MD, Gatesman-Ammer A. Introducing conflict resolution and negotiation training into a biomedical sciences graduate curriculum. *BMC Med Educ*. 2022 Jun 2;22(1):419. doi: 10.1186/s12909-022-03494-5. PMID: 35650575; PMCID: PMC9159771.
- Shonk, K. (2023, July 25). *What is conflict resolution, and how does it work?*. PON. <https://www.pon.harvard.edu/daily/conflict-resolution/what-is-conflict-resolution-and-how-does-it-work/>
- Wisker, Gina, *The Good Supervisor: Supervising Postgraduate and Undergraduate Research for Doctoral Theses and Dissertations*. London, U.K.: Palgrave, 2012, 107-108.