

# PNN PhD Supervisor Conflict Roadmap:

**Which steps can I take in case of a conflict with my PhD supervisor?**

**How may I be able to change my PhD supervisor or university?**

**What if my PhD supervisor changes their affiliation?**

**The relationship with your supervisor can make or break your PhD project.**

A good relationship with your supervisor is therefore something you might need to put some effort in. A big share of conflicts and problems PhD candidates encounter are based on a conflict or disagreement with, or, in more extreme cases, an abuse of power by a PhD supervisor or the entire PhD supervision team.

In our experience, an **escalation of a conflict** between the supervision team on the one hand, and the PhD candidate on the other, can be **prevented** by taking the following steps:

1. Make **clear, written agreements** with your supervision team from the beginning by setting up a **detailed training and supervision plan** in which you agree on relevant things such as:
  - a. The number and nature of publications you are supposed to work on
  - b. Possible authorship orders between different members of your supervision team
  - c. How often and for how long you will meet with each other
  - d. In which format and with which program your dissertation will be written
2. **Update your training and supervision plan regularly!**
3. **Communicate early on in case of situations that you perceive as having a conflict potential or which you find undesirable or unacceptable!** Don't hesitate to talk about things you find undesirable because these situations will build up and may lead to an escalation later on. Ask other peers for advice if you're insecure about your situation. This usually helps to get a new perspective on your situation.
4. Follow a **course on communication and/or the work relationship with your supervisor** (if your university offers one)

## **Where can you go in case of a conflict?**

In the event of a true conflict, there are several steps you can take. They are listed below in order of escalation.

1. **First: INTERNAL SOLUTIONS**
  - a. **Try to first talk to your supervisor/supervision team.** Making your expectations towards each other clear and finding a basis for communication is essential.

However, there may be reasons why you don't feel safe to talk to your supervisors/supervision team by yourself, or doing so has not changed your situation. There are other internal entities you can turn to, and don't be afraid to do so – your well-being, and the success of your PhD project are worth the effort!

- b. Talk to your PhD mentor.** Many Dutch universities appoint or ask to choose an independent mentor that can help to mediate or just listen to you in case you feel there is a conflict.
- c. Faculty/graduate school confidential advisor ('vertrouwenspersoon'):** can refer you to the appropriate actor inside or outside university, they can mediate to find a solution between you and your supervisor/supervision team. As the name states, the confidential advisor is bound by official secrecy, and will be on your side when you reach out to them.
- d. Local PhD Council at your university:** Your local PhD Council is also a relevant internal source to turn to as they are interested in the well-being of their own PhD candidates and are in contact with the Executive Board, the deans, and other PhD candidates at the university. They can help you to assess your situation, and in how far you should seek for additional help.
- e. Arbitration committee:** you can reach a dispute settlement over the arbitration committee in case you think your labor rights were neglected. There is a condition: 'demonstrable consultation' between you and the conflict party has been taken first.
- f. Ombudsperson:** independent actor with a mandate to conduct inquiries. However, an ombudsperson is neutral per definition, and, therefore, won't necessarily act in your personal defense as a confidential advisor is supposed to do. An Ombudsperson is installed to detect undesirable, systematic patterns on a macro level. If initiatives to mediate a situation with a confidential advisor have not had the hoped success, you may consider stepping to the ombudsperson, maybe together with your confidential advisor.
- g. Employee representative committee ('Ondernemingsraad'):** they have the right of advice, right of consent, right of initiative (National Works Councils Act). It meets once a month with the Executive board.

## 2. EXTERNAL SOLUTIONS

- a. Promovendi Netwerk Nederland:** We are always open to support and direct PhD candidates – we are not able to give binding legal advice, but we can bring you in contact with the relevant entities that may be able to help you. We are interested in knowing what leads to conflict situations in order to bring the problems of PhDs to the attention on a national level where things can be changed from the top.
- b. Labor union:** all labor unions in the sector (e.g., AOb, CNV, FNV) employ specialized lawyers to help **members (!)** for free. Therefore, being a labor union member can be essential as they can provide you with the legal help you need. The labor unions are locally organized, which will also provide you with local help at your university.

- c. **Het Juridisch Loket:** They give assistance with legal questions. The consultation per phone costs an amount per minute, face-to-face assistance is usually free of charge.
- d. **Rechtswinkel (e.g., in Amsterdam, or Utrecht):** voluntary organization of advanced law students who give free legal advice.
- e. **Media:** LAST RESORT SOLUTION! If you feel you have been wronged **greatly**, and no other steps helped, and you think it's in the interest of the public to know about this. Be aware of the dangers of traceability if you go to the media, it can backfire.

**What if the relationship between you, and your supervisor or supervision team is so broken, and, therefore, you can't imagine continuing to work with them, but you would like to continue with your PhD project?**

The advice below is given based on past experience of other PhD candidates. These solutions may sound unsatisfactory, however, they were often pragmatic solutions that helped to resolve conflicts in a timely manner. Remember that your focus should be the timely and successful termination of your PhD project.

Changing your supervision team is a process for which there are no official rules or guidelines. It's a trajectory that is handled on a **case-by-case basis**, and much depends on

- a. where the **funding** comes from, and
- b. who has the **rights to your data**

In order to find the best solution for your personal case, the first entity you should turn to is your **graduate school**. You may also want to involve your **confidential advisor**. Usually, you will need to find a solution together with your graduate school, and your managing director. In cases in which you move to a different department or institute, your HR department, and the financial department may need to be involved as well.

Here are different scenarios to solve your problem:

1. In **most cases**, the **funding and the rights of the data are held by your direct employer or funder of your scholarship** (i.e., your university, research institute, university hospital) - this means that you will need their **consent** if you would like to move your project to another university, research institute, or university hospital. In such a situation, you will have the most success by finding an **internal solution** (i.e., by remaining at your current employer/funder). You can try to receive their consent, and find a new employer/funder, and supervision team, elsewhere. You will have higher chances to reach that if you are very early on in your PhD trajectory. However, your current employer/funder most likely has a great interest in you finalizing your PhD

project with them as they already invested money in your project, and will receive a bonus once you finalize it.

An internal solution can look as follows:

- a. You **add an additional supervisor from within or outside your institute/department to your supervision team** – could be a swift solution in the case in which you feel there is not sufficient expertise in your current supervision team. Such a scenario implies that your current employer remains, and your former supervision team remains (possibly even only on paper – on paper your old supervisors have the same position, and they and the university will receive their bonus, while in reality you are supervised by a more suitable person). A downside of such a scenario could be that your previous supervisors will likely not be keen on giving the new supervisor a central position on publications, for example.
  - b. You **change your entire supervision team with a supervision team from within your employing university/research institute/university hospital**. Your chances of changing your entire team are much higher if you keep your current employer. If there is another suitable researcher or research group at your institute that is willing to take you on, that could also be a swift solution. A downside of such a scenario could be that someone within your department may not want to be on bad terms with your current supervision team (as they are colleagues and in related research fields), and, therefore, may not want to take you on.
  - c. You find an agreement with your current employer to make a **sandwich construction** with a new university/research institute/university hospital. In such a scenario, your old and new employer/funder share the rights on, and the funding of your project. This implies, however, that you need to find a new employer/funder that is willing to employ/fund you for a partial PhD project.
2. If your **current supervisor holds the rights and/or the funding of your PhD project** (because they received some kind of grant e.g., an NWO grant), then **continuing with your PhD project without their supervision is close to impossible**. One viable solution could be to remain under their supervision on paper (which will guarantee them also authorship on your publications), and find a new daily supervisor within or outside of your institute who is willing to co-supervise you, but actually functions then as daily supervisor (which may imply not getting a specific spot as author on publications).
  3. If you are a **self-funded external PhD**, changing your supervision team is probably the most straight-forward case as you likely won't need the consent of the institute at which you conducted your PhD research so far.

### **What if my supervisor or supervision team changes to a different institute?**

If your supervisor changes to a different institution, how you will be able to continue your PhD project depends on who holds the funding, and the rights to the data. In general, there are two scenarios:

1. **Your supervisor holds the funding and/or data rights**

- a. Then you most likely will need to switch institutions with them. This can be quite challenging for you, especially in case they will move abroad. Together with your supervisor, and your current or your new institution you may be able to find an agreement for you:
  - i. You may receive funding over your supervisor's new affiliation, but remain at your current institution by receiving **courtesy privileges**. This would imply that your current supervisor will have to agree on supervising you remotely, and you may want to add an additional local supervisor. Depending on the kind of research you do, and on the fact whether your entire research group will change to a different institution, this may not be a viable solution.
  - ii. You decide to switch to the new institution along with your supervisor. In case your salary should decrease, or in case you should have costs due to that (e.g., a longer commute, moving to a new house/apartment), negotiate with your supervisor and your new institute to reach a financial compensation. Don't hesitate to negotiate that and to speak about it.

## **2. Your supervisor doesn't hold the funding and/or data rights**

- a. Then your situation depends on how you and your supervisor would want to proceed. Possible scenarios are:
  - i. You remain at your current institute (if they are willing to further fund you), and your current supervisor supervises you remotely (you may want to add a local supervisor)
  - ii. You remain at your current institute (if they are willing to further fund you), and you search for a new supervisor at your current institute
  - iii. You change to the new affiliation of your current supervisor (you will need the consent of your current institute, and get funding at your supervisor's new institute)
  - iv. You change supervision and go to a new institute (you will need the consent of your current institute)