

An occasional column, in which Mole and other characters share their views on various aspects of life-science research. Correspondence for Mole and his friends can be sent to [mole@biologists.com](mailto:mole@biologists.com), and may be published in forthcoming issues.

...OH SCIENCE IS BEAUTIFUL,  
WITH ITS CLIQUES AND TRIBES,  
ITS NATURE-TROPHY-HEADS, ITS  
SLACKERS, THE BIG-SHOTS, THE  
WANNA-BEES, THE HECKLERS,  
THE GIRL WHO ALWAYS MAKES  
THE COFFEE, AND THAT GUY WHO  
KEEPS A COPY OF "LEAVES OF  
GRASS" ON HIS BENCH...



## The interactome

My mother always used to say that learning to play nice with my classmates, no matter how annoying or boring, was the most important life skill I could ever acquire at school. Draw no distinctions, she advised, between the athletes and the geeks, the glue-sniffers and the class clowns, the straight-A students and the posh fashionistas. Get along with everyone, because you never know when you might need support or a favor from an unexpected quarter.

Over the years I've had the chance to appreciate the wisdom of this sentiment, and no more so than at conferences. An exhibition hall full of scientist delegates is really no more than your school days writ large. You have your cliques and tribes – the earnest, hardworking quiet folk; the big shots who collect *Nature* papers like trophy heads; the slackers, the wanna-bes, the embittered failures. People who are ten times better than they think they are, and those who are ten times worse. The naughty miscreants, heckling the teacher from the back row. Egos and despots; slaves and saints, celebrities and pariahs, all crammed into a dark auditorium being lulled to sleep by a barely audible mumbler, or thrilled to the edge of their seats by a seasoned show-stopper.

I've recently returned from a four-day symposium run by my favorite society and had the chance to witness, in action, this interesting anthropological scenario with all of its highs and lows. Thus inspired, I've come up with X-Gal's Essential List of Conference Do's and Don'ts:

## Don't keep solely to your own group

I've seen it time and time again: people travel all the way to the other side of the world only to spend most of their time huddled together with their labmates – drinking coffee together, eating together, sitting together at the talks, moving in a posse through the poster sessions. These herding instincts are an entirely natural reaction to being adrift in a strange new world, but I cannot emphasize enough how inherently wrong it is. Of course socializing with your colleagues outside of the normal work setting is good for lab bonding, and you should spend a little bit of conference time in your cohort, but you've come to the conference to have new experiences and this means hanging out with new people. Evening drink sessions are a good time to compare notes with your lab mates, but as a rule, I think it's more fruitful to try to sit with people you don't know at meals, and to chat to new people at coffee breaks. It's equally important to meet your peers – other scientists at the same level as you – as it is to get to know the lab heads in your field. But be gentle to the youngest newbies in your lab: help them out by introducing them to everyone you know, and resist the temptation to abandon them to their fates.

## Do strike up conversations with random strangers

We've all been there – arrived too early to the coffee session, looked around and seen not a single familiar face. It's an uncomfortable scenario that can suddenly make you feel like a lonely school kid all

over again. But I have found that there is a ready solution: grab your coffee, approach a cluster of chatting people and ease yourself into the conversation. If that seems too bold, single out someone else on their own, give them a big smile and ask them how they're enjoying the talks so far. Most people are flattered to be approached and enjoy meeting people – so kill two birds with one stone: stop looking like Johnny-No-Mates and make some new contacts all at the same time.

### Don't get trapped

Admittedly, one of the perils of socializing in a crowd is getting saddled with someone you really don't want to be talking to. It may simply be that you've exhausted the conversational vein and it's time to move on – or it might be the case that you've been pinned down by a crashing bore. Either way, there is no shame in cutting yourself loose. But how? Some people employ subterfuge: for example, Vesicle Vera has been known to pretend that her mobile phone has gone off in vibration mode, giving her the opportunity to excuse herself to take the "call". Personally, I prefer the direct approach. When a pause comes up in conversation, I tell the person I've really enjoyed chatting, but I'd like to meet a few more people before the next session.

### Do meet your heroes

This is the advice that takes the most courage. There's a big-shot whose papers you've admired for years, whose podium talks set you afire. You've decided that you just might want to try to do your next post-doc in her lab. Whenever you see her at the breaks, she's surrounded by admirers – other big shots, in particular – but also brash younger people trying to make an impression, maybe even editors from the high-profile journals attempting to court her next paper. *Be* that brash younger person yourself: push into the circle, try to work out what everyone is talking about and, when appropriate, make a contribution to the discussion. At a convenient pause, introduce yourself: say your name, who you work for – ask her something about her current research. Later, when you email her and feel her out about a job, she just might remember that enthusiastic person who accosted her at the conference. She might not give you the job, but she might select your abstract to give a talk at the next meeting – or come

up and say hi at the drinks session. And how cool would that be?

### Don't lose heart in the face of failure

Despite your best efforts, sometimes attempts to productively network simply fail – even spectacularly so. I was once at a conference when I spotted a certain Nobel laureate. Now, this particular man had worked in the same institute as I had many years before – long before the August prize had propelled him from highly respected scientist to God-like Being. Still, I was certain he would remember me, as we'd had quite a few departmental interactions back in the day, and I recalled him as an affable person. He was standing at the base of a staircase, chatting to a former PhD student who I also knew vaguely from that same period in the past. When I saw that the two had reached a natural pause in conversation, I strode right up to the pair of them and tendered a big hearty hello. And then, in a moment that I will never forget – an almost cinematic, slow-mo slice in time – the great man raised his head, looked me in the eye with a particular look-half boredom, half disdain – and then very deliberately turned back to the student and started a new conversational turn with him.

It was probably the single most mortifying moment of my professional life, and I slunk away with a blush that took hours to fully fade. I was angry, as well: I don't think any amount of fame can excuse that sort of rude behavior. One of the things I cherish about science is that the majority of its celebrities remain accessible and friendly even to the freshest of newbies. In most cases, an eminent professor will be sociable to a youngster – it's part of the ethos of our profession. It took me a good talking-down in the bar afterwards with a labmate to convince me (a) that the guy wasn't worth knowing and, (b) that I shouldn't be put off, but should go right back out and keep working the room.

### Don't drink too much

*Question:* What's pale, puffy and listing dangerously to starboard? *Answer:* A hung-over thirty-something post-doc clinging to the podium at 9 am the morning after the gala conference dinner.

No, I've not been there, but Golgi Girl has. It was her very first invited podium talk at this particular symposium – a chance for all her peers, and prospective future employers, to see her shine. But very unfortunately, she stayed out until 3 am the night before, helping to empty the

minibar in one of the PhD student room parties. I think sometimes post-docs forget that they're not as young as they used to be – and while there is nothing more enticing than young people enjoying themselves and reminding you of your own lost youth, you have to remember that a conference is a professional setting, and the first impression you make might be long-lasting.

### Do visit the posters

Sometimes after a long day of endless talks, the last thing you want to do is trawl through an interminable row of posters. You might be thinking longingly of your hotel room and the chance to grab a nap or check your email. And a poster session can be pretty overwhelming if you haven't done your homework, especially those megalithic American conferences with over 20,000 participants. But in my view, it's easy to be complacent about posters – and to do so is dangerous. With the current trend of playing your cards close to your chest, you're unlikely to hear much new on the podium – it's the posters where most of the valuable information can be extracted. Even if the author hasn't dared to print the fine details, you can often coax things out of them with a friendly chat. I once went to spy on a competitor's work, terrified that I was about to be scooped, only to end up agreeing to a collaboration that turned out to be unexpectedly productive. But that never would have happened if we hadn't had that excuse to meet in person and discuss our common ground. So take some time to read through the abstract book in advance of the sessions and work out a plan for visiting all the ones that most matter to you – and follow through. I confess that I often use boring talks for this very purpose – for which I am completely unapologetic: if you can't at least try to make your work exciting and intelligible, you can't blame the audience for multitasking!

### Do ask questions

There is nothing more intimidating than hearing your own voice, possibly squeaking in animal terror, being amplified in a hushed room of five-hundred people. But you know what? It gets easier the more you do it, and the more you interact with people in your field in this very public arena, the more respect you will win. I am definitely not recommending that you ask questions just to put yourself on show (as Endosome Eddie is fond of doing) – but if you have an honest question, force yourself to put that hand up. Making your way up the food

chain in the scientific profession is all about getting your name and face known. And asking an intelligent question is a great way to start.

### **Don't skip the social events**

There is a small faction of people in my department who turn up their noses at the gala dinner and the evening social sessions, opting instead to explore the local nightlife on their own. In my view, this is a big mistake. Although I've been going on

about how important it is to attend posters and ask questions at talks, the meat of scientific interaction often occurs when we're officially off-duty. Lubricated by food and drink, people become more relaxed, more forthcoming about their work. I'm not saying you have to fling your limbs around at the disco, but making an effort to meet people in these settings can be well worth the effort. Besides, it's free food and drink. It's in our scientific genes to want to grab what we can, to

bolster our stores for when times are lean and we're running that all-night time course fuelled solely by a packet of dry roasted peanuts.

Have I missed any tips? If so, I'd love to hear yours!

### **X-Gal**

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