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Save Time, Money, and Stress with These 5 Lessons from My PhD

A practical guide for early-career coral restoration
researchers and practitioners

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When I first started my career in coral restoration as a graduate student, I underestimated the complexity of this field. Yes, the science was advancing rapidly, necessitating more elaborate, in-depth projects, but I also didn't realize the extent to which we were expected to manage teams, coordinate partnerships, and communicate effectively.

After that realization, I still believed that if I focused on my technical competence to produce quality science, that I would be successful in the field. To some degree, that was true. I wanted to conduct quality research because it was the right thing to do, and I needed it to finish my Ph.D.

However, coral restoration has become an increasingly collaborative environment, involving academic researchers, restoration practitioners, policymakers, and local communities. It wasn't until my fourth year of graduate school that I understood I needed more than scientific expertise to succeed here. I needed—and wanted—to develop other professional skills more intentionally, like project management, leadership, and effective communication. Initially, I started developing these skills to improve my own efficiency and reduce burnout. Now, I see these skills as vital to strengthening the people and systems that drive growth in our field and advance coral restoration outcomes.

I made plenty of mistakes when I first started in coral restoration, and I still make plenty today. However, I hope I can help other early-career coral restoration professionals (and even tenured members) learn from my mistakes. Here, I describe 5 lessons that I learned early in my career, explain how they hindered or helped my progress, and provide tips, so you can save time, money, and stress on your projects.

1. I tried to solve every problem on my own

2. I got stuck trying to create “perfect” plans

3. I avoided receiving feedback

4. I never celebrated my progress

5. A Win! I invested my time in my team

What these lessons cost me



1. I tried to solve every problem on my own

What I believed

I enjoy problem solving. I feel comfortable being utterly confused as I break a problem down, identify potential solutions, and attempt to implement them. I find this process helps me understand the nuances of the problem, the benefits and limitations of different tools and solutions, and even the greater purpose and impact of the work I'm doing.

What slowed me down

I knew it was important to spend time getting to know a problem because that's how you earn experience and credibility. However, I had a plethora of mentors and peers with both experience and credibility that were willing to help me (many even offered), and they already had the solutions to many of my problems. It turns out, what I believed was independence and commitment to my craft was actually a fear of sounding ignorant and burdening others.

In several instances, this fear led me to continue struggling through problems, which only hindered my progress. Because I refused to ask for and accept help:

- I reinvented solutions that already existed.
- I missed opportunities to connect with colleagues and have meaningful conversations.
- I added unnecessary stress to my work.

What I'd do differently

Coral restoration is a highly interdisciplinary field. It's impossible to know everything, which means we need support from others, and they need you too.

If reaching out for help scares you, here's a way that's less-intimidating:

- Create a network of colleagues that are invested in you.
- Maintain a friendly relationship with this network—invest in them too.
- Recognize when you hit a roadblock.
- Casually communicate your problem to your network sooner rather than later.

Building a community around you that shares your values and supports your vision makes asking for help feel less like an imposition or a confession of incompetence because you have people that are invested in you and understand that your need for assistance comes from passion and dedication.

Reflection

Who do you know that is invested in you beyond just your work?

2. I got stuck trying to create “perfect” plans

What I believed

I firmly believe that to be successful, you have to start with a clear goal and a detailed plan. This often leads people to believe that I am strictly a “Type A” personality: I like to plan ahead, stay organized, and dislike surprises. While that’s only half-true (my Type B, adaptable side is actually quite effective), that doesn’t mean my affinity for planning hasn’t gotten me into trouble.

What slowed me down

Similar to Lesson 1, planning gave me a false sense of control by anticipating every possible contingency. I also felt like I was making progress because I was actively thinking about the project I was working on. In reality, I was stalling because I was afraid of doing something new and potentially making mistakes that would hurt the project outcomes.

What I’d do differently

Regardless if you are a researcher or a practitioner, coral restoration work is dynamic, and you can’t predict the future. Just look at the 2023 marine heatwave!

If you get stuck in the planning stage or suffer from “analysis paralysis,” consider this:

- Understand that most problems or mistakes are fixable and that no project is perfect.
- Identify 2-3 potential problems, not 20.
- Plan just enough to take the first step and build in review checkpoints.
- Accept that you will never feel “ready.”
- Do it scared.

While it’s important to be prepared, there is no substitute for progress other than action.

Reflection:

What are you postponing because you don’t feel “ready”? Is there anyone who can help you (Lesson 1)?

3. I avoided receiving feedback

What I believed

Objectively, I knew how to separate myself from my work. That doesn't mean that criticism of my data, writing, or presentations didn't hurt. After all, I spent over 5 years working on my Ph.D. With that amount of time invested, I felt like feedback was an attack on my competence. And since coral restoration is mission-driven, it sometimes felt like I was failing the mission.

What slowed me down

I can recall a few instances of when I had project ideas, ideas that even eventually got funded. However, I was so passionate about some of these ideas that I was afraid to share them with others because I feared they would disapprove. In doing so, I slowed these projects down and missed opportunities to strengthen them.

What I'd do differently

If there was one thing I would recommend when it comes to feedback, is that you should always respond to it with a question, especially if the feedback seems highly critical. That prevents you from sounding defensive, and gives the other person a chance to clarify what they mean.

By asking a question, you and the other person can approach the work collaboratively, attacking the problem instead of each other.

Here are some additions tips:

- Invite feedback early (ask for help) to set yourself up for success.
- Feedback is a sign that someone cares about your work—assume positive intent.
- Even if the feedback is confusing or seems inappropriate, it still indicates some miscommunication or lack of clarity.
- Evaluate feedback in a safe environment, not while you're receiving it. I usually wait until after a meal before I consider, incorporate, or dismiss feedback.

Reflection

When was the last time you invited critique before you felt ready?



4. I never celebrated my progress

What I believed

One thing that bothers me about academia is that it often treats significant events and milestones (e.g., conferences, publications, awards, graduations) like checkboxes: “another thing to add to your CV.” It bothers me because these should not be treated as everyday occurrences or prerequisites to have a meaningful, successful career, especially when these events used to be your dreams and aspirations. They should be celebrated!

Yet instead of trying to break free from this mindset, I ended up becoming part of the problem. Graduating undergrad felt like the midway point until I got my Ph.D. I felt relief from my first, first-author publication rather than excitement and pride. My first Reef Futures felt like a requirement instead of a life-changing experience (now I view it as the latter).

Why that slowed me down

While this mistake didn’t slow down my progress directly, it did have other effects:

- I never stopped to rest until I was completely burned out.
- I never felt pride or closure after a long phase of field- or lab work or when I finished a project. I only felt relief.
- I missed meaningful connections with colleagues because I wasn’t always present when engaging with them. I was always thinking about what I “should” be doing.

What I’d do differently

Ultimately, sharing wins with your community is an important part of being human. Here are a few ways to make sure you are celebrating your hard work:

- Remember, these milestones used to be dreams of yours. Your past self would be so proud of you.
- Find little ways to add joy and fulfillment to your day. Have you ever seen videos of deep sea biologists watching ROV footage? They are amazed and laugh at everything they see!
- When you reach a milestone, reward yourself with something. It can be as simple as a 15-minute walk outside (my go-to), a brief dance party, or treating yourself to ice cream or a long weekend.
- When you feel proud of something you accomplished, tell someone. Be sure that you don’t rationalize it and accidentally diminish its value to you.

Reflection

What’s something you finished recently that you are proud of?

5. A Win! I invested my time in my team

What I believed

Now, I want to highlight something that I did well during my Ph.D.

There is no way I could've completed my lab work without a team helping me. Hundreds of DNA extractions. Thousands of PCRs. I know some people are capable of doing that on their own, and I certainly did a great number of them, but I would've needed upwards of 10 years to complete everything.

When I hired my first assistants, I didn't want them to feel like I was using them for free labor in exchange for "experience." Instead, I wanted them to feel valued and like I was truly preparing them for a career in science. I wanted to create a group of individuals that felt confident in their work and comfortable voicing their ideas. I wanted a team.

There's some irony there, considering I'm terrible at asking for help, but this overlaps with my recommendation in Lesson 1 to surround yourself with a network of people invested in you.

What I did—and will keep doing

Here's what I did to develop my team. I'd like to point out that much of this is feedback directly from them:

- I clarified my expectations when they first joined and equipped them with the training and resources to meet my high expectations.
- I communicated regularly with them and always shared what the next steps were, so they could see a project's journey in its entirety.
- I invited them to share their input during discussions and while troubleshooting, giving them a sense of ownership and buy-in. On multiple occasions, I chose to follow their ideas.
- I showed patience when they made mistakes and how most mistakes are fixable. They also saw me make many, MANY mistakes.
- I made time to sit with them when they needed help or advice, demonstrating that our relationship was a two-way street.

How that helped me

Because I invested my time this way, the primary reason I lost assistants was because they simply graduated. This lack of turnover meant that I didn't need to hire and train new assistants constantly, and I knew the quality of the work would meet—and even exceed—my expectations.

More importantly, I'm grateful knowing that there are several individuals advancing their careers, empowered with the technical, critical thinking, and personal skills to make a lasting impact on the world.

Reflection

How are you investing your time to elevate your team? Do the people you lead understand both the expectations and the path to meet them?



What these lessons cost me

I picked these 5 lessons because they had both direct and indirect effects on my time, finances, and wellbeing, three of your most valuable resources.

By trying to solve everything on my own (Lesson 1), getting stuck in analysis paralysis (Lesson 2), avoiding feedback (Lesson 3), and burning myself out repeatedly by not acknowledging my successes (Lesson 4), I slowed down my own progress while missing out on meaningful engagement with colleagues and sacrificing my emotional health.

Altogether, I would estimate that these lessons cost me anywhere between **6 months and 1 year** and **thousands of dollars for myself and my lab**. The grant that funded my research even wrapped up 2 semesters before I defended...not a position you want to find yourself in.

Takeaway message

When you're first starting your career, whether it be as a graduate student or in an entry-level position, you are expected to make mistakes. It's a natural part of building experience, and the right leaders will guide and support you through those mistakes and turn them into wins (Lesson 5).

Some of those mistakes can be painful unfortunately. My hope by sharing this guide is that you can learn from some of my most painful mistakes (and my one huge success) to save you time, money, and stress, so you can focus on saving coral reefs.

I realize I probably sound like I'm being too hard on myself...because I am (Bonus Lesson?). Please know that there is also a list of behaviors I know I do well, and if you're interested, I share them freely with tips on how to incorporate them into your day.

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