

Good practices to do well in ESO/Chile

This document is meant to be a sort of personal recollection of good practices to apply to our everyday's life in ESO/Chile in order to have a rewarding experience as an astronomer and as human-being. It based on my own previous experience and on the many mistakes I did in my previous stay.

It is a personal reminder to help me to avoid doing the same mistakes again. However, I wrote in such a way that other colleagues (possibly fellows) could also read it and take advantage of my previous experience.

1. The key: Be proactive.

Proactivity is maybe the main quality that one has to exercise to have a successful experience in ESO/Chile.

By proactivity here does not refer to someone who always come with new ideas on how to improve things. It refers more to our capacity to move things forward based on a responsible attitude to a given event or circumstance. This attitude is the result of a reflection (awareness) process, after which we chose to act in a certain way.

It has to do with how we deal with a car problem in Paranal, or with a mistake done by ourselves or by a colleague, with a nervous visitor. It is how we use our language ("Let's see the alternatives" instead of "This is not my problem"; or "Let's try a different approach" instead of "This is the way I am!"). In short, it has to do with how we view the problems and how we decide to put our energy to work towards a solution that brings mutual benefit (one of the principles of the judo).

So be a light, not a judge. Be a model, not a critic. Be part of the solution, not part of the problem. Don't argue for other people's weaknesses. Don't argue for your own. When you make a mistake, admit it, correct it, and learn from it (ukemi). Don't get into a blaming, accusing mode. Look at the weaknesses of the others with compassion, not accusation.

2. Scarcity Mentality vs. Abundance Mentality

To illustrate what I mean by the Scarcity and Abundance mentality, I quote the book *The 7 Habits of Efficient People* by Stephen Covey.

"Most people are deeply scripted in what I call the Scarcity Mentality. They see life as having only so much, as though there were only one pie out there. And if someone were to get a big piece of the pie, it would mean less for everybody else.

The Scarcity Mentality is the zero-sum paradigm of life. People with a Scarcity Mentality have a very difficult time sharing recognition and credit, power or profit – even with those who help in the production. They also have a very hard time being genuinely happy for the success of other people.

The Abundance Mentality, on the other hand, flows out of a deep inner sense of personal worth and security. It is the paradigm that there is plenty out there and enough to spare for everybody. It results in sharing of prestige, of recognition, of profits, of decision making. It opens possibilities, options, alternatives, and creativity.”

You probably realized already that the scarcity mentality is very common in the scientific environment. You often hear people saying “it is my idea, my result, my proposal, if someone else takes it from me, I am lost, finished.”

The scarcity mentality generates such an enormous fear that simply kills our ability to cooperate and collaborate with others. The net result is that we are limited to ourselves, we might even get our piece of pie, but it will be tiny anyway! Instead, if we operate under the abundance mentality, we are (truly) able to join forces with our colleagues to achieve greater things. Like creating the recipe for the pie, cooking it and enjoying it in a team!

So collaborate, help each other, share ideas, and expertise!

3. Burnout: a dark and long tunnel.

“Emancipate yourselves from mental slavery, none but ourselves can free our own minds.” (Redemption Song, Bob Marley).

In an environment like Paranal, there are a few mental pitfalls that we frequently fall into. They work exactly like a cancer, without noticing, they conquer your mind and use your own creative and vital energy to feed themselves.

The outcome is often the same; this mental cancer leads you to a burnout, which the only way out is to quit the job. Below, I identify a few forms of such a cancer. I stress that strengthening your proactive attitude is the best prevention.

(a) Don't complain

Complaining drags you into a sort of dark pit whose potential barrier is really hard to overcome. It is a runaway process. It starts with a small seed, a discomfort about a colleague, a boss, or a given situation. During coffee break, we bring the issue to one or more colleagues who also share a similar feeling. We keep feeding the fire, without any proactive attitude – we only focus on the problem not in the solution.

This goes on, day after day, for weeks, months and even years leading to a burnout. We could have broken the circle or not even started it, but due to a wrong attitude we became slaves of our own complaints.

It sounds like the Lord of the Rings and the Precious – but it happens all the time not only in the movies.

(b) Don't gossip, don't criticize

Often we experience a great deal of frustration when we face a conflictual situation, which is left unsolved. In order to win this conflict, we denigrate the opponent (whoever this opponent might be). This happens usually in the form of gossiping and/or unfair critics towards the opponent when the opponent is not in front of us. It is fundamental to watch our language and how we refer to our colleagues. Counteract gossiping and critics with respect and ethics. Don't hesitate to leave a circle if you feel that the conversation is turning bad – protect your mind and spirit.

(c) Stay physically fit

Very often we are going to be physically tired. Don't underestimate this fatigue. If not properly treated, it accumulates turno after turno with devastating consequences for your family and scientific life. If your body starts to lag behind, your mind will follow and soon you will experience a burnout.

There are two basic things to do. The first one is to rest. Take your compensation days, at least 3-4 of them. Second, keep physically active. Do sports while in Paranal and when back in Santiago. It is hard, you are tired, but energy generates energy. You will be more fit to create, to play with your kids, you will have a better sleeping either in Paranal or back in Santiago.

4. Clarify your priorities and organize your time

Another chronic illness that affects 99.9% of all astronomers is our impossibility to say "No!".

Sometimes you don't what to say no to a project because it looks interesting, or because we don't want to give an impression to our supervisor that we are lazy?!

If your open projects are duly logged and your priorities are defined, you are immediately in a position to say "yes" to a new project or even to say "sorry, now I can't, but in 2 months from now it will be possible". The same is true for your supervisor. If you can commit to your goals and priorities, people will trust you and you will be experience an overwhelming feeling of happiness because you are in control of your stuff.

Personally, I found a system (Thanks to Thomas Dall!) to help me to deal with my stuff. The whole system and its implementation is presented in the book "Getting Things Done" written by David Allen.

5. Get involved with the Observatory

Paranal is a magic place – no doubt about it. After a while, however, if our duties are restricted to the so-called “core duties”, motivation will suffer a serious threat.

Getting involved with the Observatory activities, on the other hand, can be extremely fun and rewarding and help us to get alive and kicking. One can have projects within an IOT and within one of the SciOps groups. One can help the office for science in Santiago or even have external activities (for instance, lectures in a Chilean University). All this is possible as far as your core duties are done.

It is again a matter of clarifying your goals and priorities and communicating your ideas to the corresponding person.

6. Work continuously on your communication skills

This is one of the most important items in this document.

We are team. We are constantly exchange information, ideas, view points. Sometimes the content of the communication is not easy to be transmitted. If you have the feeling that you interlocutor did not understand your message, no problem. Rephrase it. Try again and again. Don't let it go. Otherwise you might get in the frustration scenario and fall into the gossiping trap.

The flip side of the coin is that you have to be able to listen! When engaged in a conversation, be open, listen truly to your colleague and then discuss your opinion if necessary.

Get to know the people around you, even though they are not working with you directly. People in the casino, in the reception desk, and in the administration in Santiago. Talk to them. Exercise your humanity – daily!

Equally important, talk to our Garching colleagues as often as you can, for instance, say hi from time to time via skype. Stop with “the Garching people” stigma, we are all ESO pushing towards to same common goal.

Whenever in Europe for a conference, do a detour in Garching, if possible. It could be just for one or two days. Just to visit and meet your colleagues, discuss open issues and consolidate relationships.

7. Don't give up science

Discipline and consistence are the key here. Due to our physical fatigue, we have the natural tendency to post-pone science. One, two, 4 weeks, don't have the time yet, ok, next month then, and so on. Then we realize that 6 moths passed and we haven't got anything done in terms of science.

To come back, it is really tough. Again, you really have to set your priorities and goals and commit to them. For sure, the ups and downs caused by the turnos don't help at all.

But after a while, you are in position to identify which tasks we are able to do and when. For instance, am I able to write a paper in chunks of 30min that I have in Paranal from time to time? No – ok. What can I do? I write a script to reduce the data or do a complex plot. Or I scan of astro-ph and select the papers for future reading, for instance.

When back in Santiago you may not feel “back in business” immediately. For instance, you were not able to sleep well in the mountain or you got flu up there. So, after you had your proper rest, you still don't feel your brain ready to work on your science. Pursue it, insist on it! Force yourself to work on something for half an hour, write a paragraph in a paper, in a proposal, read one page of a pre-print. Don't let it go!

8. Identify local opportunities

Chile is far from the rest of the world. Your scientific career will probably be affected by this fact.

Science as any other human activity has its hidden social codes. One terrible feature of humans is that they only remember you if they see you in a regular basis. Therefore targeting a future position back in US or Europe, or simply starting new collaborations might be hard from Chile.

ESO acknowledges that and give to all of us the chance to go to conferences, invite collaborators, and take science leaves.

A second possibility, which is not minor, is to get locally involved. Among the faculty we find people with different backgrounds and expertise, get to know our colleagues is the first step in identifying local possibilities of collaborations. Look whether you can join one of the thematic groups in Vitacura.

The astronomical community in Chile is growing at a fast pace. Get in touch of the different astronomical groups in Chile is a wonderful opportunity to push your science forward and develop your network. You could consider having students in co-supervision, giving talks in the universities there or even a short series of lectures.

9. Don't victimize yourself – be responsible and seek the dialogue

Even if we put all this in practice, there will be tough moments. Peaks of works at the observatory, family complains due to a last-minute change of schedule, collaborators that push to have our bit of a given science project done, etc. Don't victimize yourself – review your commitments, talk to the stakeholders,

renegotiate them – seek the dialogue with yourself, supervisors, family, and collaborators. There is always a way-out to bring your balance back.

Mistakes will happen for sure. Be proactive. Accept them with responsibility, learn the lessons, discuss them with your colleagues and supervisor, document the solution, and move on! Take those mistakes as an opportunity to grow. Don't try to excuse your mistake putting yourself in the role of a victim.

10. Family – Seek the dialogue even harder

We staff members are having an awesome time working for ESO. But, what about our families? Usually we are so absorbed with our instrument, papers, upcoming conferences that time just flies. Life goes 1000km/h! Next to us, our spouse is maybe bored for not having a work or a creative activity, for being constant be left alone, for not being able to communicate.

Check constantly how life is going to the ones in your family. Maybe some readjustments are necessary or even leave ESO in order to reestablish the balance.

11. Summary

- Be proactive, have a positive attitude in seeking for solutions. Help people
- Embrace the abundance mentality, be a team player and grow together with your colleagues
- Don't complain
- Don't gossip
- Stay physically fit – your brain will certainly follow suit!
- Get your stuff (duties, science projects, etc.) organized. Prioritize and learn how to say No!
- Capitalize your work in Paranal – do more than your core duties! Have more fun!
- Talk, Talk and Talk more. Communication is the key in our environment.
- Get to know people around you and those working in Garching
- Be consistent and work on your science as much as you can. Learn how to deal with fragmented time, fatigue, etc. Don't give it up
- Get local! Seek collaboration within ESO/Chile and in the Chilean Universities. Work with people close by is much nicer!
- Again, be proactive. In case of mistake, get up, digest it, learn from it and move on! Be responsible, don't seek for an (external) excuse.
- Remember to often review your family balance. The turno life is maybe having an impact on them that you haven't realized yet.