The bad supervision guide

Bad supervision, like any other skill, can be acquired and developed with practice. This guide lists a number of simple rules, which, if followed assiduously, can result in the following benefits: 1. Either you have a large number of PhD students under your supervision (adding to your prestige and releasing you from more mundane academic duties) or you have no PhD students to bother with; 2. You enhance your reputation by publishing the work of your PhD students under your own name; 3. You are nominated for the highly prized “Bad Supervisor of the Year” award (which, suitably amended, can embellish your CV). If this fails, you can always bully a student into nominating you for the “Supervisor of the Year” award.

Rule 1: Be inaccessible. Some supervisors make it virtually impossible for their students to contact them. This can be because of frequent interstate or overseas travel or simply because they claim to be too busy to arrange a meeting. Not replying to messages is a useful tactic often employed by bad supervisors.

Rule 2: Don’t return written work because you are “too busy” to read it. Some supervisors have been known to sit on material for more than a year, or even lose it altogether. Alternatively, return the work with no useful or constructive feedback, saying “it’s fine” or something equally unhelpful.

Rule 3: Humiliate and belittle your students with savage, brutal and unfair criticism. Ideally, a student will leave your office in tears after a meeting (and be reluctant to arrange another).

Rule 4: A somewhat different tactic employed successfully by some bad supervisors is to treat their PhD students as unpaid research assistants. The student is simply told what to do and the supervisor publishes the results in a scholarly journal, with the student’s contribution acknowledged (if at all) in a footnote. Better still, wait for your student to produce a publishable piece of work in which you have been no more than marginally involved, and then publish it in your own name. (You need to be careful that your student will not publicly accuse you of plagiarism, or even worse, instigate legal proceedings against you).

Rule 5: Offer bad advice. Bad advice can take a number of forms.
   1. Suggest an inappropriate topic. A topic may be inappropriate for various reasons. For example, it may be logistically (or ethically) difficult or impossible to collect the data or the results are likely to be trivial (i.e. not increase knowledge).
   2. Recommend research methods that have poor validity or reliability.
   3. Recommend inappropriate statistical methods for analysing the results.
   4. Allow your student to submit a thesis that is based on insufficient research.
   5. Encourage your student to carry out far more work than is necessary.
   6. Discourage your student from publishing prior to submission.

Rule 6: Choose bad examiners. Bad examiners are often inexperienced researchers who are more intent on pointing out the limitations of a thesis than acknowledging its strengths.