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Advice on being a good team leader (essay)

Submitted by Adriana Bankston on August 28, 2017 - 3:00am

Over the last several years, I have had the privilege of participating in or leading teams in various capacities. But I don't think I ever quite realized how grateful I should be for such opportunities. Someone took a chance on me and allowed me to learn and grow personally and professionally alongside them, as well as gave me independence to pursue my own interests. That helped me make the transition from an inexperienced graduate student to an independent researcher.

I have always felt grateful to my mentors but never quite articulated it out loud. That is one of the issues with academe today: we expect certain things from our principal investigators, and if we are lucky enough to have a great mentor (as I did in graduate school), we should thank them for what they did for us and not take them for granted.

While working in the lab, I knew my place within the team and, as a naive early graduate student, I at first saw my PI as "the boss" who could do no wrong. Then later on, as I grew more confident, I realized that having an opinion (even if it was wrong) was better than not having one. I was lucky enough to be able to discuss issues that were important to me with my Ph.D. mentor, who explained why my views were wrong (which they were most of the time, at least in the beginning) or why my ideas were good when that was the case. I appreciated not only the criticism but also the praise, which can be rare in academe these days.

Looking back, I realize that I had always been grateful for the opportunity to grow in the lab as part of a team, but I never realized how lucky I was to have someone invest so much in my future. I think that we can all do a better job at expressing gratitude for our mentors.

That's the case especially in academe, but it is also true outside of it. I've now had experience being part of a team or leading them at various nonprofit organizations, and I again appreciate how much other people have supported and helped me. I continue to be amazed at the level of confidence they have placed in my ability to perform multiple tasks, which has positively influenced both my personal and professional development in significant ways. I am grateful to everyone who has ever put their trust in me to tackle a project and then stepped away and let me lead it. Having someone have complete confidence in my abilities has been a very powerful motivator for me to lead others in much the same way.

Leading Teams in Multiple Settings

You can find a lot of parallels between running a research lab and leading teams in various other settings, including nonprofits. Drawing upon my own experiences, I offer the following advice for being a good team leader both in academe and outside it.

Foster a common vision. As a team member, what motivates me the most is knowing that I am part of something bigger than myself and that, in some small way, I am contributing towards a

greater goal. That also encourages my sense of belonging, which is important when you are part of any organization.

I've also come to realize that working toward a common vision is much more motivating to me than my own personal reasons for carrying out a task. In a way, that could possibly be the single most important issue in academe: How would the system change if we all worked together towards the common good instead of focusing on our own individual motivations? Collaborating towards a common vision is something I have tried to impart to any team that I have led -- and will emphasize with those I lead in the future.

Have a plan, schedule and deadline. Most people are busy, and if you want something from them, it is best to let them know well in advance. So give them plenty of notice for meetings or tasks you want them to perform and schedule meetings at a time when everyone can participate. Create a detailed plan so that each person knows what they are supposed to be doing. Perhaps it is just personal preference, but I am much more productive when I know what I need to do, when it's due and how it fits into the grander vision. Although it takes practice, I do my best to give the volunteers whom I have led on various committees a good sense of those things.

Have a product in mind and work backwards. Knowing what the final product of my work will be (whether it's a publication, poster or something else) has always been helpful to know ahead of time. That allows a team to work backwards in thinking about how to accomplish the small, gradual tasks leading up to the ultimate goal. When I started graduate school, I mostly looked at the details of my experiments and didn't think about the broader vision of my work. At the time, I was probably thinking that the most important thing in the world was to publish a paper and graduate with my Ph.D. -- which was quite selfish.

Later on, I realized that my mentor had always looked at the big picture and filled in the details that made the most sense for what we were trying to accomplish, and I trusted in her leadership. Now, after having led teams in various settings, I understand the need to work backwards from the broader vision to the specific details.

Find a mentor and appreciate them. None of us can succeed alone. We must have someone who will be our champion along the way and help us progress down a certain path -- and, in my case, also help us discover what that path is. By having not only a supportive mentor but also someone who will let us explore things on our own, we can discover so much about ourselves along the way.

This type of discovery is not possible without stepping away from our busy lives and taking the time for introspection, and it also requires having someone to allow us to do that. I appreciate the people who trained me in that way, and I try to do the same for others.

Build a versatile team. As important as it is to be a good leader, you will not be able to achieve much -- or at least not be able to make a lasting, long-term impact -- without a team to support you. Picking a good team can make or break entire organizations because it takes multiple motivated people to succeed. When each member can bring different perspectives and strengths to the table, it often creates the best path to success. For usefull discussions, you may even want to have some members on your team who disagree with you on certain things (but not on the core messages of your organization).

Knowing the personalities, interests, motivations, passions, likes and dislikes of your team members is also very important for making sure that each one feels valued and that you use their strengths in the best ways possible. Understanding someone's background is crucial to knowing what might motivate them to act for change.

Have a mission and say it often. Even the most motivated people sometimes lose track of the bigger vision and their role within it, which is why having a leader who can articulate the mission

repeatedly is vital to the overall success of any group. It's important to remind team members of where they fit in the larger goal of the organization, as well as to show appreciation for their contributions to it.

Be the type of leader you would look up to. As a leader yourself, it is not always easy to stay on task. Having a team of people in whom you have confidence backing you up and doing the work behind the scenes can allow you to take a break and just let things happen sometimes. As a leader make sure to follow up with them, but also trust them to do their job, and they will thank you for it.

You should try to be the embodiment of what you would like to see in a leader. That means having integrity and honesty, keeping your word, learning from everyone and remembering that your role is to serve. You should also learn to delegate and accept criticism, listen more than you talk, trust and value your team members, apologize when you are wrong, and ask for help when you need it. Finally, don't be afraid to take risks, plan for the long-term, stay humble and true to your grand vision, and articulate that vision early and often.

And again, always be grateful to your current and past mentors. Doing so and leading others by example are crucial elements for the success of any team, whether within academe or in other settings.

Author Bio:

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