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# Four ways trainees can use leadership as self-care

By Sara Wong (http://www.ascb.org/author/sara-wong/) | August 18, 2017

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What does your go-to example of a leader look like? Is it the president of your university? A camp counselor who took your group on an overnight hike? It might be easy to think of someone in a position that may seem unattainable to you right now. And if you can't immediately see yourself in these roles, it is also easy to assume that some people are meant to be leaders while others are not. Although you might not be the CEO of a company now (or ever), you can still practice leadership.



Leadership is about your intent and actions, rather than your title. It is being committed to your work in a way that allows you to help and inspire others. It is a way to bring motivation to yourself and others through communication and teamwork. Importantly, it can be practiced on different levels, much like running. Some athletes are running ultra-marathons at record speeds and others are dedicated to running a 5K every week. Yet, we consider both groups to be runners. Leadership can work in the same way. Sure, there are "ultra-marathon" CEOs leading hundreds of employees, but that does not diminish your accomplishments in leading a summer research project for an undergraduate, or helping to organize your departmental retreat. In fact, the practices you use in leading one student or a small group of your peers likely follow the same principles that established CEOs use to lead hundreds.

While there are many resources to help you become an effective leader, this article will focus on how taking leadership roles can help your personal development. When things feel out of control, thinking of yourself as a leader, and acting like it, is a great way to stay focused and motivated. It is a way to shape the narrative of your training, drive the big picture of your research and interests, and find resources outside the lab. Like running, leadership depends on muscles you can develop over time.

**Define your mission to build resilience:** To define your overarching goals, consider what you enjoy doing – work you can do non-stop for hours without losing focus, conversation topics that catch your attention, things you don't mind struggling through to get better at. Having a driving force helps maintain motivation when things don't work out as planned. Since future goals are more important than past failures, it is helpful to keep your mission in mind as you battle obstacles. Over time your motivation may evolve as you learn more about the mission and the roles you want to take, but what are the core questions that keep you up at night? This mindset can empower you to take ownership of your projects and take on more defined leadership roles. For example, you might decide to become the editor in chief of a student-run science blog because you want to revitalize the scope

of the blog and reach wider audiences than before. Perhaps you will take the time to help a rotation student design and execute a small experiment, in an effort to make sure your lab continues to practice good science. Whether big or small, title or none, for yourself or someone else, taking an initiative in something you care about will reveal your goals and values. In keeping morale up for yourself and/or the group, you will learn to take pride in your achievements and bounce back from your failures.

**Find your people and stay engaged in your work:** Many people are drawn to science because it is a field where their curiosity can make a positive difference in the world. But science exists in the wider context of society and it's worth asking yourself, what is your ultimate goal? What sort of work do you want to do and what questions will you ask? A great way to explore this is to get involved in activities outside of lab (e.g., joining a student association on campus or with your professional society, like COMPASS, volunteering to help run a lab class at a summer camp, or offering to hold a workshop in your favorite programming language for your classmates), or take leadership roles within the lab (e.g., mentoring undergraduates, developing databases for reagents, or accumulating best practices and protocols from other lab members). Whether it is communicating the importance of your research through a blog post or starting a student-run consulting group, exploring new things will help you narrow down interests by the process of elimination. Further exploration into things you enjoy will allow you to meet people with similar interest and build a community that will help you grow by providing support, resources, and mentorship. As new members enter your community, you will take steps to help them as others have helped you before.

**Be your own advocate to find your voice:** As you take more responsibility for your goals, you'll likely have to discuss your work with various audiences. Being able to quickly show someone why your work is important not only helps you solidify your mission but also teaches you how to promote yourself. When you promote the work that you are doing, you also have to promote yourself as the best person to do it. By building your personal brand, you can decide the type of leader you want to be, and the overarching mission you are following.

**Listen carefully to learn broadly:** Leading is the opposite of bossing people around. Grounded in communication, a good leader will take the time to learn from others and become inspired by their work. They also appreciate diversity on their team, as different perspectives bring new ideas, advice, and criticism. Leaders also take the time to understand all of the groups affected by their work—from the people who do the work to the communities that the work serves. By listening to all of your audiences and to your team members, you can learn new things that will change or drive your mission and impact how you lead in the future.

As we learn how to be leaders in our research fields, consider how you are learning to be a leader in the lab and in your community. If you become interested in another field, such as business or law, you will need to learn the language they use and truly act as a bridge between your new field and science. Spreading your wings and seeking new experiences can be a great way to familiarize yourself with the new lingo. By taking ownership of your interests and leading projects, no matter how big or small, you will advance your general abilities to mentor others, listen carefully, promote your work, and contribute to projects you care about.

Have you taken a leadership role during graduate training? How did it affect your experience in graduate school?

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