



Be human first, a scientist second

Want to get the best research from your team? Take these six steps to invest in stronger relationships, urges Alison Antes.

“I was a human first, and then I learned to be a scientist. If I forget the human part, then that’s a problem.”

This is what I heard when I interviewed 52 scientists recognized as exemplary by their peers for their scientific accomplishments and conduct. Related themes come up in my work with scientists who have been referred to a formal remediation programme after lapses in research integrity.

I’m an organizational psychologist, specializing in the scientific workplace. What interests me are the decisions and behaviours that yield innovative, rigorous, ethical research.

The past few months have drawn attention to unhealthy working environments, especially bullying in academia. We should also focus on a related, widespread problem: mentors who have excellent intentions but limited knowledge of how to create a healthy workplace.

Many scientists whom I work with feel that they lack management and leadership skills. They want help with concrete tasks such as coordinating projects or facilitating meetings. But what comes up most emphatically is that conducting research requires them to establish and maintain positive relationships in the lab.

Many researchers in our remediation programme have had strained interactions with compliance officers and have struggled in their roles as supervisors. By contrast, exemplars resoundingly emphasize how they foster good team dynamics by being involved, approachable and aware of the workplace atmosphere. As one told me: “Rule number one in the lab is harmony. First and foremost, we have to get along, we have to respect each other, we have to trust each other, and that is the operating principle for everything else.”

Yet, given the choice between working on a scientific paper or broaching a difficult conversation, many researchers pick the former — the task that feels most directly connected to research goals. Principal investigators might need to work consciously against the feeling that ‘nothing is getting done’ during personal interactions. Because, whether it is mentoring a struggling trainee or celebrating a hard-won achievement, investing in strong, respectful relationships is an investment in effective science.

So, what to do? All principal investigators should add relationship building to their to-do lists.

Task one: put recurring one-on-one meetings with the members of your group on your calendar. Set up a notebook or spreadsheet and jot down anything you should bring up during these meetings. Set an alert for ten minutes before the appointment to decide how to approach the meeting. Does the team member need encouragement? Career guidance? Feedback on their project and direction for next steps? Are they behind on deadlines or lacking confidence? Try a respectful, yet firm, nudge. Have you expressed gratitude for their contribution? As

one exemplar noted: “I value what they do, and I tell them.”

Ask yourself whether it is time for a difficult conversation. If so, grasp the nettle. That is part of a leader’s job. Sometimes principal investigators worry that they will damage relationships by having challenging discussions. In the long-run the opposite is true. Use your ten minutes to list a few observations. State the specific behaviour of concern; describe how it affected you, the team or the project. Then, ask the person for their perspective. If there is discord in the lab, speak to the individuals involved, state your expectation of mutual respect, ask them to discuss and identify a solution.

Task two: invite people to share both complaints and highlights. Several exemplary scientists explicitly require their trainees to relate a concern or struggle at some point in one-on-one meetings. They want to help people to be comfortable enough to bring problems and mistakes to light, and so address issues early, while they are manageable. Several exemplars noted that researchers need outlets for discussing frustrations and anxieties. They know it is difficult to show up and do your best when plagued by worry. And they want to know what is working well in the lab, so as to leverage these successes.

Task three: walk the ‘shop floor’. Even when team members are welcome to visit your office, visibility supports approachability, impromptu brainstorming and immediate trouble-shooting.

Task four: model desired behaviour in team meetings. How you communicate will carry over into peer-to-peer interaction in your group. Ask questions, expect participation and

prompt people to share their thoughts. Find out where obstacles are. Encourage cooperation and mutual support. Explicitly state that you value a collaborative spirit in your group.

Task five: schedule a few social occasions for people to spend time together in a more relaxed way. Such activities might feel far removed from science, but they can ease tensions in the lab. Start small. Be sure to accommodate the needs of parents and carers, people with cultural or religious considerations and those on tight budgets.

Task six: advocate outside the lab. Talk about these practices in your department, share those that work and learn from people known to be great team leaders.

New principal investigators commonly adopt the practices of their own mentors without reflection, and often their role models were not ideal. Some relationship-building tasks will feel awkward at first; that’s okay. Showing that you care is more important than showing that you are perfect. ■

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