



Leading a diverse team requires effective communication and organization.

FIVE 'POWER SKILLS' FOR BECOMING A TEAM LEADER

Volunteering with an organization can improve communication and help you adapt to the unexpected. **By Sarah Groover and Ruth Gotian**

Many scientists will oversee a team at some point in their careers, whether it is one or two undergraduates doing a summer internship, an entire research group, or a department with students, technicians and postdoctoral researchers. Scientists are trained in their discipline, but are rarely, if ever, trained in how to manage and mentor trainees. All too often, this results in a series of trials and errors that are frustrating to both mentor and protégé.

Based on our respective experiences, we have come to recognize how a skilled leader

can motivate and help trainees to reach their full potential. One of us (S.G.) is an immunology PhD student at Oklahoma State University in Tulsa and volunteers as vice-president of the American Physician Scientists Association

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(APSA) in Westford, Massachusetts. The other (R.G.) has nearly three decades of experience in directing leadership and mentoring development programmes in higher education and academic medical centres.

Identifying and developing ‘power skills’ – the crucial abilities that enable a manager to connect with people, communicate effectively, adapt to the unexpected and be open-minded – can help you to succeed in a supervisory role. It is never too early or too late to develop these competencies. Taking on a leadership role in a national

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organization as a student or an early-career scientist can be a great way to cultivate your leadership abilities. We've compiled a list of five power skills that we feel are integral to the success of a team leader.

Teamwork. It is essential that you and your team have mutual trust and respect. You need to motivate and utilize the individual strengths of team members. When assigning tasks or providing feedback, it is important that your members know that their contributions are valued and that their time is appreciated. Serving on a planning committee for an organization's annual conference can be a great way to practise good teamwork. Multiple components are required to create a successful event, from branding and advertising to fundraising and accounting. Capitalize on your colleagues' strengths and passions, and align tasks accordingly.

Communication. This is a key component to team success. When working with people based around the country or internationally, it is important to communicate effectively so that everyone is on the same page. We've experienced the negative impacts of poor communication when organizing a national meeting, ranging from insufficient advertising of the event to forgetting to keep records of travel-grant winners. The former caused the event to have a low turnout, despite the excessive amount of time and effort that went into the planning. The latter led to confusion and embarrassment when the award recipient wanted to use funding that the organizers were unable to provide. The ability to listen to the different needs and viewpoints of your team is essential. Always ask your co-workers for their perspectives, even if they're not initially offered.

Commitment and reliability. To develop a strong reputation as a team leader, it's better to under-promise and over-deliver. Leadership can include finding responsible people to staff committees, which is always a struggle. And spreading many responsibilities among a few people is challenging, particularly when deadlines are looming. It is important to recognize that as part of a team, your actions can impede the mission of an organization, leading to the late completion of certain initiatives or making the group appear unprofessional to outside members or partner societies. Your disorganization should not be someone else's emergency. I (S.G.) had planned to run for president of APSA after my term as vice-president ends. However, the prerequisite president-elect and president positions will coincide with my first and second years of medical school (I start in the autumn). Instead of taking on too much, which might sacrifice quality in either commitment,



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I made the difficult decision to take on a more manageable role in the organization.

Adaptability. Being flexible and innovative are key to a leader's success. When resources are lacking or a committee is understaffed, emergencies occur. Being able to bounce back exemplifies how to stay optimistic and

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focus on the solution. These opportunities can also be used to learn new skills and take on assignments. I (S.G.) have always considered myself technologically challenged, but when I needed to make some changes to the APSA website, I worked it out. Don't be afraid to step out of your comfort zone and learn something new in the process.

Open-mindedness and empathy. The most productive scientific groups are diverse and capitalize on their group's ability to bring different, creative or unconventional solutions to difficult questions. Volunteering with a national organization such as APSA has allowed me (S.G.) to work with a diverse group of individuals who bring a range of cultures, ages, backgrounds and perspectives to the table. Post-conference surveys highlighted that APSA members have varied interests and concerns that were not being addressed. We took strides to correct these points by creating groups and assigning them various initiatives, from mentoring to diversity. In turn, the teams created diversity summits and virtual mentoring programmes. In your own

discussions, be sure to include and amplify the voices of people who are usually overlooked; they have unique insights and opinions, and it is the responsibility of the team leader to ensure that their voices are heard. At APSA meetings, the most junior person at the table speaks first.

Being proficient in power skills such as the ones we have mentioned will equip you to effectively manage groups, projects, space and money so that everyone is motivated to give their best and maintain a healthy mindset throughout. Being a leader requires you to be reliable, self-aware, open to feedback and trust your team.

Opportunities to develop your leadership skills exist. Find an organization (preferably one you are already involved in) with a mission that aligns with yours. Spend some time working in various areas of the organization, becoming familiar with its structure, function and culture, and don't be afraid to take on a project outside your comfort zone. Use this as an opportunity to develop your leadership abilities, as well as to network in your area of expertise. Being talented in your field is important, but your impact can be much greater if you also know how to lead and motivate the next generation.

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