

What is Leadership? An Idiosyncratic Guide to Seven Practical Principles for Building a Research Team and Running a Lab

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PROLOGUE

What is leadership? How does it differ from management, power, and authority? Can you improve your ability to be an effective leader?

Harvard Business School students take an entire course on *Organizational Leadership*. At West Point Military Academy, all future Army officers take courses in their department of *Behavioral Sciences and Leadership*. In contrast, academic scientists are often left to figure out leadership on their own, usually by trial and error. As a result, many academics have little or no understanding of what it takes to be an effective leader. Why is this a problem? Do scientists really need to understand the principles of leadership? If your work is solitary and scholarly, conducted independently in a library, on a computer, or with pen and paper, then a lack of leadership skills is not likely to be a major concern. Increasingly, however, empirical research in the natural sciences depends on building and leading teams of scientists.

I wrote this essay primarily for the senior members of my lab, the faculty research associates, postdoctoral fellows, graduate students, and research coordinators who lead small teams of students and trainees. My goal is two-fold: First, to guide them now in these leadership roles, and second, to prepare them for the future when they may go off to build their own labs or teams. Some people take to leadership roles naturally and instinctively, while others struggle. Perhaps some people are, indeed, "born leaders." I do believe, however, that **everyone can learn to become a better leader**.

My secondary audience is the other members of my lab: I want everyone in my lab to know what they can expect from me as their Lab Director, and what they should expect from senior staff members who have leadership responsibilities. Finally, I am happy to share this essay with other colleagues, especially junior faculty at the beginning of their careers who may be struggling to build, manage, and lead lab teams. After reading this essay, you can expect to: (a) learn seven practical principles for effective leadership, and (b) understand how to apply these to be a better team leader. As an overview, these are:

1. Leadership is not the same as management and does not derive from power or authority.
2. Leadership is a persuasive form of communication, inspiring others to follow you because they see you as a role model, respect your expertise, buy into your vision, and trust you will take care of them.
3. Trust requires both transparency and reciprocity of trust.
4. Humility signals strength and confidence; style and tone matter.
5. Model, nurture, and defend healthy interpersonal team dynamics; everyone should feel welcome, appreciated, and respected.
6. Your time, energy, and empathy are finite: Husband all three by prioritizing your team and team members. Model and support a healthy work-life balance for everyone.
7. In a crisis, leaders rise to the challenge. Remember: "Keep calm and carry on"; compassion is not weakness; not all relationships can be fixed; the buck stops here.

As a caveat, you should recognize that this is a highly idiosyncratic and personal narrative, one which, at times, will be shamelessly autobiographical. I do not expect every principle to apply to each reader; rather, they are simply what has worked best for me over the last four decades.

1. Leadership is not the same as management and does not derive from power or authority.

Let me start by telling you what leadership is not.

1. **Leadership is NOT management.** We *lead* people but we *manage* projects, data, budgets and other processes. Some of what I do is management — I am managing the lab when I oversee our lab finances, when I prioritize projects and agendas, when I deal with donors and funders, and when I receive and redistribute weekly lab reports. While all are important parts of being the Lab Director, this is actually a very small part of the role I play in the lab. Other people in the lab do far more management than me. Lisa, as the titular “Lab Manager” spends almost all her time doing just that: Managing our research ethics compliance, managing expenses, and managing our interactions with Human Resources and Procurement.

2. **Leadership is NOT power and authority.** I have ultimate power and authority in the lab. I have the power to fire people, to demote them, to take away some of their privileges — that is to **punish** them in a variety of ways if I am not pleased with their work. At the same time, I have the power to **reward** people with raises, promotions, nicer offices, professional development opportunities and conferences, or other shows of largesse. However, if I use my power to punish and reward people as the tool through which I get my staff to do what I want — *that is not leadership*. It is being bossy, powerful, and authoritarian; but it is not leadership.

If leadership is not management, power or authority, what is it?

2. Leadership is a persuasive form of communication, inspiring others to follow you because they see you as a role model, respect your expertise, buy into your vision, and trust you will take care of them.

Leadership is an act of communication. When I lead by example, communication and persuasion, people are motivated to follow me and be part of my team of their own volition. They should not feel compelled, ordered or coerced, but rather infused with their own agency.

Communication includes listening. Leading people requires knowing them, learning about their hopes, concerns, and personal goals. An effective leader starts with a clear vision but can adapt that vision based on learning what the people they lead know, want, and need.

Much of what I have learned about leadership came not from my role as a Professor and Lab Director, but through my “side gig” as a kayaking and outdoor adventures guide. When a group of kayakers joins me for a trip I am leading from Manhattan to Staten Island, across busy New York Harbor, you might ask: **Why do they follow my lead?** It is *not* because I am their boss. It is *not* because I have the power to fire them or order them to do something. Rather, it is because they want to emulate what I do, kayak comfortably and safely around the waters of New York City. They respect my **expertise** as someone who has kayaked here for many decades, they are excited by my **vision** of a trip across the harbor, and they **trust** I will take care of them, getting everyone safely to our destination.

Remember this: Expertise, vision, and trust are the basis of leadership, not power and authority. People follow leaders whose **expertise** they admire and respect, who create a shared **vision** that people want to be part of, and—most importantly—in whom they have reason to **trust**.

3. Trust requires both transparency and reciprocity of trust.

If leadership requires trust, how do we earn people's trust?

The *first* answer is: **transparency**. People will trust you if you talk to them straight and candidly. Never leave people guessing what you want them to do. Avoid ambiguity in conveying your thoughts or

feelings. It may be awkward at times to say things people don't want to hear. It may be tempting to be vague and indirect to avoid difficult topics. Don't fall into the trap of saying what people want to hear rather than what they need to hear. Being specific and concrete prevents misunderstandings as well as wasted time. People may not always like what you tell them, but they will always know you are transparent, and hence, **deserving of their trust**.

The *second* element of earning trust is showing trust; it is a reciprocal relationship. Once you have hired people, and trained them, trust them to do their job. Delegate well, frequently and fully. Learn to say, "*You decide*" and "*I defer to your judgment.*" When you do that, you give people confidence and a personal investment in the success of the choices they make.

Remember: **micromanagement is still management, not leadership.**

4. Humility signals strength and confidence; style and tone matter.

Humility signals strength; acknowledge freely the limits of your knowledge and skills.

The more comfortable you are saying, "I don't know", the more you encourage other team members to be open and honest about the limits of their own knowledge and skills. You are far more at risk from people who hide their ignorance, than from those who readily admit it. All lab members, including yourself, grow and learn best in an environment that encourages honest humility about one's limits.

Style and tone matter in communication.

Humility is also the basis for effective and confident communication. I encourage a team dynamic where everyone (including me) is treated as a friend, a peer, and fellow team member — with as little regard or explicit reference to title, rank, and educational attainment as possible. Someone visiting the lab should not be able to tell, from the tone or style of interpersonal interactions, who outranks whom, or who is the boss of whom.

Bottom line: **Talk to each other as peers and teammates, not subordinates and superiors.**

How do I put this principle into action? When I want something done, I could communicate this as an order or a demand, in the form of "*You do this*", or "*You do that.*" I have the power and rank to give orders to anyone in the lab. Instead, however, I generally choose one of two alternatives:

First, I **ask** for something, much as if I am asking a friend for an optional favor. To some degree this is a fiction since both they and I know that my asking is usually a mandate that needs to be followed. Nevertheless, this creates a style of interaction that feels friendly and human rather than distant and hierarchical. We all prefer to do favors we are asked, rather than follow commands we are given. **Asking**, rather than telling also has the advantage that sometimes I am wrong or mistaken in what I am asking — it might not be the right move for me or the lab. By asking rather than telling, I convey that I am open to someone in the lab convincing me of why this isn't a good idea. I consider myself doing really well as Lab Director if 90% of the time I make the right decisions — being open to correction on the other 10% saves me and the lab from the consequences of any leadership errors.

Second, I will **explain** why something needs to be done and what is the priority and time frame in which it should be accomplished. I might say "*We need...*" ... rather than "*I want...*" to emphasize that this is about my sharing and explaining what the broader lab (that is "we") needs. I am channeling here **not my authority**, but my **broader vision and understanding** of what we are seeking. By taking the time to explain what needs to be done and why, I inform and motivate people to see how completing their task is both to their own benefit and to the benefit of everyone else in the lab. This infuses them with agency and commitment.

To summarize: **Rather than giving orders, ask for things you need or want, and explain lab needs and agendas.** In both approaches, you communicate respect and help create a shared vision and mutual understanding of where the whole team wants to go.

Whenever possible, **act more like a coach, and less as a boss.**

5. Model, nurture, and defend healthy interpersonal team dynamics; everyone should feel welcome, appreciated, and respected.

One of the most important things you can do as a leader is communicate and model how you want people to treat each other.

My lab is known as one of the friendliest, most social and convivial of labs. That is not true of all labs. Many of you have heard — or experienced firsthand — horror stories of toxic labs where lab members resent and dislike their lab director while fighting amongst themselves for resources, advantages, or prominence. In some labs, the faculty director actively encourages this: pitting one graduate student against the other to compete for their favor. This creates a stomach-churning stressful environment that makes people want to leave the lab as soon as possible, and — in some cases — leave science all together.

Living up to our lab's reputation as a warm, caring, supportive environment is not something I can accomplish alone. I can set an example, I can explain what I would like — **but it is up to each lab member to embody, project and maintain that reputation.**

What I can do as Lab Director, however, are two things that proactively defend lab harmony:

- (1). **Ensure that nobody gets ahead within the lab by using sharp elbows on their lab mates.** Success within my lab (and with me) comes from being supportive and helpful to everyone else, not from looking out for only individual needs and goals. People who act otherwise, try to step on or over other people in the lab, or are not able to play well with others, get *one* warning, only. If they persist in these forms of asocial behavior, they are quickly removed before they can do more damage.
- (2). **Step up and step in when there is conflict between two or more people.** As your team grows, the number of interpersonal relationships increases exponentially, as do the possibilities for discord. It is important to monitor and be aware when interpersonal conflicts arise. Most often, people are on their best behavior when the team leader is present; as such, these conflicts may be invisible to you. For this reason, it is helpful to have trusted senior people within your team—that is, trusted both by you and by other more junior members—who can alert you to conflicts that are impairing smooth team functioning. It might be tempting to step back, disavow responsibility and simply say, "*Let them work it out themselves.*" However, unaddressed conflict festers and can spread widely like an infection, disrupting broader team dynamics. As team leader, you have a unique standing and credibility to try to get all parties back on track. What often helps is to start by talking privately to each of the individuals, hearing them out, trying to understand their perspective in an open-minded nonjudgmental fashion. If possible, seek input from others in the lab whose opinions you respect and trust; they may be able to offer additional objective insights. Some conflicts can be resolved by mediation and through talk alone, explaining to each party your hopes and ideas for how they might work better together in the future. Fixing other conflicts, however, may require taking concrete steps including re-defining or clarifying job responsibilities, changing reporting duties, moving people to different projects, and/or assigning people to different offices. When all else fails, and if there is a clear culprit, removing that person from the team may be essential surgery for the broader health of the entire team.

For me, the lab is my happy comfort place because I love being there; I feel **welcome, appreciated and respected**: three things which all of us crave. It is my hope that each staff member feels the same way about being in the lab. For this to be realized, it is essential that everyone contributes to that sense of welcoming, appreciation, and most of all, respect for everyone else, regardless of other lab members' background, education, rank, or title.

6. Your time, energy, and empathy are finite: Husband all three by prioritizing your team members. Model and support a healthy work-life balance for everyone.

Prioritizing your time, energy, and empathy are critical to being a successful leader, especially when you become the faculty leader of an entire lab (and thus likely have also assumed additional teaching and administrative responsibilities). As the billionaire investor, Warren Buffet, Chairman and CEO of Berkshire Hathaway, wrote:

*"The difference between successful people and really successful people is that really successful people say **no** to almost everything."*

As a new faculty member launching your career, the more you let yourself be drawn into other people's agendas, the more you allow yourself to sink time into opportunities that don't excite you, the less of yourself will be available to give to your own team, and to your own priorities. Say "no" to projects you find uninspiring. You may worry that you need to say "yes" to people so that they will like you or think you are a good person or a good colleague (especially if these people are senior to you in the academic hierarchy). Remember: other people have their own agendas, and they may not always overlap with yours. Other people may be disappointed by your saying no, they may even grumble a bit, but they will get over it, and accept that you prioritize your own missions, not theirs.

The word "no" is your friend; it is the single most powerful word in the English language to protect your career in academia, your priorities, and your overall quality of life. Practice saying it regularly and frequently.

Some people's lives and careers go terribly awry because they say "yes" to too many things that get in the way of devoting time and energy to what they care about most, including their own research and the lives and careers of the people in their lab. Make your team, and your team members, a priority.

Saying "no" to distracting requests from professional colleagues will also allow you to avoid overworking, saving critical time and energy for self-care (including naps!), extra-curricular interests, and family. This will enable you to set a positive example for your team by modeling **a healthy work-life balance**. Let those you lead know that you support and recognize the importance of their whole lives, both work and non-work related.

Caring about your people means not only caring about their contributions to research, but caring about their health, their family life, and their overall emotional wellbeing.

7. In a crisis, leaders rise to the challenge. Remember: "Keep calm and carry on"; compassion is not weakness; not all relationships can be fixed; the buck stops here.

As a wilderness guide, I have dealt with many crises and challenges. Most have been small: getting temporarily lost, dealing with minor discord among participants, and occasional cuts, bruises, and blisters. Twice, however, I dealt with major crises.

Once, while leading a kayaking trip in New York City Harbor, an unexpected storm with high winds came upon us, separating our group and putting the weaker and less experienced kayakers at risk of being flipped over into heavy waves. Some people came dangerously close to being pushed into and under piers. I had to make quick decisions to radically change our route plan and keep the group together, making sure nobody panicked while leading everyone to a safe port. Another time, while leading a hike to the top of Breakneck Ridge in the Hudson Valley, one of the hikers in my group slipped on wet leaves, fell onto a rock, and broke both bones in her lower leg. This left her immobilized and in excruciating pain, begging for morphine. While dealing with her pain and fear, I was responsible for keeping everyone calm, and getting everyone back home safely. Getting her to a hospital took 8 hours, involved approximately 50 rescue and

emergency personnel, two fire trucks, an all-terrain vehicle, a helicopter, and a morphine drip which I held as we carried her down the back side of the mountain, in the dark, with a team of firefighters.

From my years of leading kayaking, hiking, and other wilderness trips, I have learned three key principles for navigating a team through crises:

- (1). **Emotional leadership is key, especially during challenging times. Practice positive thinking.**
- (2). **Look at crises as an opportunity for everyone to work together more closely, to grow individually and collectively, and to rise to meet a new challenge.**
- (3). **Recognize when you cannot solve a problem alone. Know when to say: "I need help."**

In my professional life, I have dealt with several crises which have tapped into similar leadership skills. Twice in my career, my lab has been on the brink of bankruptcy. Each time, this required me to make painful decisions about who to lay off and who to keep. A key element for getting through these periods was inspiring calm confidence in the remaining lab members to convince them not to jump-ship when I needed them most.

The 18 months of pandemic closure was a crisis period for which none of us were prepared. For me, seeing the lab through this time required a broad range of both emotional and professional leadership. In mid-March of 2020, we packed up our laptops and other belongings and shifted to working from home. Nobody knew how long it would be until we returned to the lab or saw each other again in person. I encouraged everyone to use this time to think deeply about what each of us wanted to accomplish: the direction that we, as a team, wanted the lab to move. Several new collaborations developed during this period. New ideas for research flourished as we took the time to dive deeply into our backlog of data for hints of pilot results worth exploring further. We wrote and submitted a flurry of NIH grant proposals, most of which were rejected (some several times). However, just enough of these proposals were funded to allow us to double and soon quadruple the size of our budget and our team as we emerged in 2021 and 2022, bigger and stronger than before the pandemic. This brings me to Lesson #1 for crisis management:

1. **"Keep calm and carry on"**. This was the mantra and meme of a 1939 motivational poster from the government of Great Britain, as it prepared the populace for WWII. If you lose your cool, get angry and emotional, display fear and angst, it will spread to other members of your team, adversely impacting everyone's ability to function through the crisis.

The most common recurring crises I have faced as a lab leader relate to three different types of **interpersonal challenges**. These are: (a) conflicts between me and another lab member (usually due to their failing to live up to expectations or standards of conduct and productivity), (b) discord between two or more lab members that undermines our team harmony (see also above), or (c) threats from external partners or associates who have disappointed us or turned against us. There is no magic rule for dealing with all three types of challenges — other than knowing that **they will arise for even the best-run teams**. As general guidance for these situations, I offer three additional mantras to keep in mind:

2. **Compassion is Not Weakness**. People (both within and outside the lab) will, from time to time, let you down, disappoint you, undermine you, betray you, even turn against you and blame you for ills that have befallen them. Striking back in anger and frustration can be tempting. Nobody, however, will fault you for giving someone a second chance, an opportunity for a do-over, so long as you communicate clearly why you were disappointed in their behavior or performance. Sometimes this works and the individual is deeply grateful for your having had the grace to turn the other cheek when you didn't have to. Even the most tempestuous of personal conflicts can sometimes be fixed with forgiveness and compassion.
3. **Not all Relationships Can be Fixed**. You will often have to make painful and difficult decisions that negatively impact another person's life and career. Your concern for one individual must be balanced against your broader and greater responsibilities to the rest of the lab. I have lost more sleep from difficult personnel decisions than from any other crises. I fired my first secretary for insubordination and gross neglect of duties — a process that required 72 pages of documentation

and three rounds of union-mandated hearings. My second secretary left more quickly, after I had her arrested and jailed for theft and embezzlement (fortunately, my third secretary, Connie, was the charm: she remained with me for over 20 years, beloved by all). In more recent years, I have had to terminate various people from the lab and sever collaborations with partners outside the lab when those relationships soured. These are always hard decisions to make; they sometimes leave people angry at you and resenting the choices you made. However, **excising toxic people and discontinuing non-rewarding relationships is essential ablation surgery for maintaining the broader health of your team.** When that is the only option remaining—after all other avenues have been explored (including offering second chances or do-overs)—it is helpful to take this action from a calm strategic perspective, one that seeks to protect yourself and the rest of the lab as your only priority. A key tip: End relationships (with staff, students, or external partners) in a way that does the **least possible harm to the individual with whom you are severing relations.** You never know when they may circle back to become a part of your life and career again, perhaps in a different context and role. Try to part on the best possible terms.

4. **“The Buck Stops Here”.** This was a sign on the Oval Office desk of President Harry Truman during the final years of WWII. What did he mean? Truman was referring to an expression from the early 1800s, in the Wild West, when men would gather around a table in a saloon to play poker. The responsibility for dealing cards would circulate clockwise around the table. To indicate who, for a given hand, was the dealer, these cowboys and hunters would place the horn of a male deer (also known as a buck) in front of the current card dealer. If, when it was your turn to deal, you preferred not to accept that responsibility, you could “pass the buck horn” to the man on your left so that he would deal the next hand rather than you. What Harry Truman meant by *“The Buck Stops Here”* was that, ultimately, he alone had the final responsibility for all major decisions, there was nobody on his left to whom he could **pass the buck.** Being a leader is about stepping up to challenges, small and large, and taking **responsibility** for decisions. Some of these decisions might need to be made in an instant, on the fly. Other decisions are best arrived at slowly and carefully, sleeping on the problem, collecting information and opinions from others, and then only when you are ready and sure, making the final decision. Ultimately, as a team leader, or as leader of an entire lab, **the buck of responsibility lies with you.**

While every crisis is different, these four mantras (or memes) may help you get through even the most challenging circumstances.

LET'S RECAP THE KEY PRINCIPLES

1. Leadership is not the same as management and does not derive from power or authority.
2. Leadership is a persuasive form of communication, inspiring others to follow you because they see you as a role model, respect your expertise, buy into your vision, and trust you will take care of them.
3. Trust requires both transparency and reciprocity of trust.
4. Humility signals strength and confidence; style and tone matter.
5. Model, nurture, and defend healthy interpersonal team dynamics; everyone should feel welcome, appreciated, and respected.
6. Your time, energy, and empathy are finite: Husband all three by prioritizing your team and team members. Model and support a healthy work-life balance for everyone.
7. In a crisis, leaders rise to the challenge. Remember: “Keep calm and carry on”; compassion is not weakness; not all relationships can be fixed; the buck stops here.

EPILOGUE

I want to end by thanking each of my current and past lab members for their contributions to our lab's academic and professional success, and—just as importantly—for creating a caring and welcoming community we all want to be part of.

As a parting bit of advice about leadership, and what you can accomplish through effective leadership, I share this quote from a former US Army Lieutenant Colonel, New York City Police Chief, and President of the United States:

“It is not the critic who counts, not the man who points out how the strong man stumbles, or where the doer of deeds could have done better. The credit belongs to the man who is actually **in the arena**, whose face is marred by dust and sweat and blood, who strives valiantly, who errs and comes up short again and again, because there is no effort without error or shortcoming, but who knows the great enthusiasms, the great devotions, who spends himself in a worthy cause; who, at the best, knows, in the end, the triumph of high achievement, and who, at the worst, if he fails, at least he fails while daring greatly, so that his place shall never be with those cold and timid souls who knew neither victory nor defeat.”

—Theodore Roosevelt
Speech at the Sorbonne, Paris, April 23, 1910

-- *Mark A. Gluck*