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Science & Society

Research and leaders: a twisted tale!

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Good leadership is important for the efficient functioning of an organization. PhD and postdoctoral research is a mentally challenging job, and a good mentor must be able to both treat students with compassion and provide motivation. Coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) has resulted in the decline of the mental health of a large fraction of mentees.

The right leadership in any field or organization paves the way for a smooth and stress-free work environment. This, in turn, forms the basis, and leads to the advance of, a hassle-free management system, which culminates in job satisfaction for employees, with a sense of empathy toward the organization. Leadership is not an ability that can be learnt in a defined period of time. It takes a lot of understanding of human behavior at both the personal and community levels to get the best out of an individual, which can ultimately prove beneficial for both the person and the organization.

Making hierarchy less stringent

Research and development are the main building blocks of a prosperous nation. A conventional research organization comprises group leaders, who form the top level in the hierarchy, followed by researchers, such as PhD students, project fellows, and postdoctoral fellows. An organization that has everyone at the same table irrespective of their hierarchy appears sounder and more logical. A place where your work is respected more rather than your position opens novel avenues where the foundation for rigorous scientific

discussions can be laid. A good leader must be open to such scientific discussions and constructive criticism.

Let us thrive for a healthy working environment

A healthy laboratory environment and strict compliance to research ethics are the main reasons underlying the success of the most productive laboratories around the world. Acknowledging an individual for their work is one of the most important aspects that paves the way to procuring this healthy atmosphere. Similarly, sharing undue credit or failing to acknowledge the contributions of those who deserve it, while being unethical and malicious, can also disturb researchers at a personal level. Such spiteful practices should be avoided, and a leader must be compassionate in handling such situations. Mentors need to continuously monitor the mental health of researchers. Various reports have demanded time and again immediate attention to the mental health of PhD students [1,2]. The number of mentees who leave academia due to a lack of compassion and inefficacy of the leader is increasing daily [3]. Most such cases go unreported and no one is held responsible for them. Mentees must report incidents that cause mental distress and violate their human dignity. However, there might sometimes be repercussions of reporting such incidents, especially when the institutional committee judging the case comprises other biased mentors. Suicidal tendencies for several reasons, including hopelessness, depression, desperation, excessive workload, among others, are often noticed among research scholars, [4]. A good leader must be capable of assessing these symptoms and providing the necessary mental support and supervision. Sometimes, a single motivational sentence can save a life.

The importance of communication between mentors and mentees

For success in research, healthy communication between group leaders and their

team is imperative [5]. Communication helps to sort issues that may turn out be detrimental for the laboratory environment. Science is a field that brings together people with a passion for the subject. To sustain this passion, group leaders must constantly motivate their team members. Many leaders fail to do so, resulting in inefficient laboratory governance and incubation of mental depression among team members. Another important aspect is the approach adopted for day-to-day activities. Well-planned work builds the confidence of researchers in their group leaders, thus boosting their confidence to execute a given project. All discussions and planning must be bidirectional, with the viewpoint of every member being seriously discussed. This not only lifts the confidence of researchers, but also instills a sense of importance among them. Neglecting an individual's opinion not only deprives them of their rights of equality in an institution, but also lowers their morale. Every researcher must be treated equally and compassionately for the better future of the scientific community at large.

Leadership driven by selfish ambition

Self-centered leadership (me, myself, and I) imposes a serious threat to the scientific community. Personal development in terms of awards and achievements is important, but this should not come at the cost of malpractice toward team members. Research is an excellent platform for both the group leaders and their team members to grow and develop scientific achievements together. The accomplishment of one person must not come at the cost of the failure of another member within the same laboratory.

Leadership and COVID-19

The current pandemic caused by Severe acute respiratory syndrome-Coronavirus-2 (SARS-CoV-2) has caused havoc for human existence [6]. The situation has been stressful for both students and their mentors. Research laboratories around

the world have been functioning intermittently. This has been coupled with the revocation of job offers, snatching away opportunities from PhD students and postdoctoral researchers [7]. Loneliness, depression, and anxiety among students has been on the rise [8–10]. Thus, it is important for mentors to provide assistance to support their students mentally in the current scenario.

Every team member is a potential future leader

Good leaders help develop excellent and scientifically ethical research environment, which, in turn, contributes to the well-being of everyone in the team. This not only reflects in the quality of publications and products developed by a group, but also the happiness index and consideration among group members. A good group leader earns the respect of their team not only because of their position in the hierarchy, but also due to their excellent management skills and ability to treat a human as a human rather than as a means of exploitation to achieve self-centered goals [11]. A leader must not only learn from their past experiences, but also attend to the experiences of others to advance their

leadership qualities. Learning is a continuous process, and every experience teaches us something valuable. Leaders must be flexible enough to modulate themselves as the need arises for the betterment of their team. Honesty among team members is built on a strong foundation that is laid by the team leader, who is constantly working for the well-being of those who have trusted them and dedicated precious years of their lives to their workplace. Every team member must be treated as a potential future leader, and the group leader must strive to bring the best out of them.

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Declaration of interests

No interests are declared.

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