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Leading a research team

Introduction to Research Leadership

This module is part of the Introduction to Research Leadership series of resources, which provides an introduction to leadership theory, skills, behaviours and attributes for researchers who aspire to a research leadership position.

These resources were created by Vitae, a UK-based non-profit programme that supports the professional and career development of researchers globally. The resources are designed as a practical guide for you to use at an individual level. Depending on your preference and the amount of time you have available, you can focus on just one or two modules or work through all of the modules in the series at a pace that suits you.

Leading a research team

'. . . In being a research leader you have a responsibility . . . not just in leading a particular research area but actually leading a group of people. If you can't lead the group of people effectively then you're not going to achieve what you want to achieve.'

(Senior research leader)[1]

1. Denney, F., Mitchell, A., & Wheat, K. (2015). 'Developing the next generation: Guidance and good practice in the development of early career researchers and academics'. The Careers Research and Advisory Centre (CRAC) Limited. www.vitae.ac.uk/vitae-publications/guides-briefings-and-information/developing-the-next-generation-vitae-brunel-lfhe-2015.pdf



Leading a research project successfully will require you to take on some very different types of responsibility. One way of understanding these areas is provided by John Adair's[2] three-circle model which identifies the following key areas of responsibility for the leader.



As the above diagram shows, working with other people in teams and as individuals, and the ability to interact with them in a way that achieves things positively, is as important as managing the research, and a key aspect of working in the sector.

This module relates to the following aspects of the Vitae Researcher Development Framework:

D1 Working with others: team working, influence and leadership, people management, and collaboration

C2 Research management: project planning and delivery

Action-centred leadership

Being an effective leader of a research team can be challenging.

'if you've got a large research group, meeting up with everybody for an hour a week is a big drain [on time]. So you've got to look for the structures, maybe group discussions . . . but teaching them how to write, teaching them how to research, all those kinds of things come from talking to people. And I don't think there's any substitute for it. You have to give people time.'

(Research leader, 2015)

Many research leaders feel there is inadequate time to manage their people, research and other responsibilities. The leadership model created by John Adair can help you understand and take control of the challenges.

Adair's theory approaches leadership from a practical and simple angle by describing what leaders have to do and the actions they need to take. As shown in the diagram, leaders must:

- achieve the task
- build and develop the team
- develop the individual

2. Leadership theorist John Adair was appointed to the world's first Chair in Leadership Studies at the University of Surrey, UK, in 1979. The author of over 40 books, translated into many languages, in 2009 he was appointed Chair of Leadership Studies United Nations System Staff College in Turin, Italy.

3. Denney, F., Mitchell, A., & Wheat, K. (2015). 'Developing the next generation: Guidance and good practice in the development of early career researchers and academics'. The Careers Research and Advisory Centre (CRAC) Limited. www.vitae.ac.uk/vitae-publications/guides-briefings-and-information/developing-the-next-generation-vitae-brunel-lfhe-2015.pdf

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The three circles overlap because they are mutually dependent, as well as being separately essential to the overall leadership role.

- The task needs a team because one person alone cannot accomplish it and the team is made up of individuals
- If the team needs are not met the task will suffer and the individuals will not be satisfied
- If the individual needs are not met the team will suffer and performance of the task will be impaired.

> *'These three areas of need influence one another for better or worse. [For example] achievement in terms of a common aim tends to build a sense of group identity . . . Good internal communications and a developed team spirit based upon past successes make a group much more likely to do well in its task area . . . [and] an individual whose needs are recognised and who feels that he or she can make a characteristic and worthwhile contribution both to the task and the group will tend to produce good fruits in both these areas.'*
>
> *(Adair, 2006)*[4]

The model proposes that delivering the best possible outcome over time requires the effective leader to create and maintain a balanced focus on all three areas.

This is sometimes referred to as the 'helicopter' approach, which requires the leader to 'hover' above a situation to get the bigger picture perspective and then to focus in on any particular area that requires attention. This may involve resolving issues in one domain to the exclusion of others. This, however, will be a temporary state of affairs. Over time the effective leader will be clear about the need for balancing these three aspects.

Reflection

Can you think of examples of good leadership of team, task and individual?

How is this balance maintained in your group or department?

4. Adair, J. (2006). Leadership and Motivation. Kogan Page.

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Leaders need self-control and good control systems in place, to maximise results

What do leaders do?

Adair lists eight leadership functions that need to be constantly developed to ensure success.

Defining the task: Set a clear objective

Planning: Should be open-minded and creative, with contingencies planned for

Briefing: Team briefings are essential to foster teamwork and motivate the individual

Controlling: Leaders need self-control, good control systems in place and effective delegation and monitoring skills to get maximum results from minimum resources

Evaluating: Assess consequences, evaluate performance, appraise and train individuals

Motivating: Adair argues that motivation is half intrinsic (from within a person) and half comes from their environment and particularly the leadership they encounter

Organising: Good leaders need to be able to organise themselves, their team, and their organisation

Setting an example: The best leaders naturally set a good example. If effort needs to be made it is unsustainable and a bad example is noticed more than a good example.

Reflection

What motivates you? Do you think others in your group or department are motivated similarly or differently?

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Think of a situation when you felt empowered by the leader of your team or group. How did that influence your behaviour?

Putting it into practice

Whilst managing task, team and individual is a very simple concept, it is difficult to put into action successfully. To practise the skills involved, you could use the six-stage process below to guide you.

Practising action-centred leadership

1. Think of a project you need to get done in the next one to three months. This can be at work or at home, needs to be reasonably complex, and involve input from yourself and others
2. First, meet with your team to agree what success means: how will you know if the project has been successfully completed?
3. Generate a list of the tasks that need to be completed and write each one on a separate sticky note
4. Arrange the sticky notes in the order that tasks need to be accomplished
5. Encourage individuals to take ownership of specific tasks, taking into account their skills and preferences
6. Include regular group meetings to review progress and meet with individuals too in order to balance all three of Adair's circles
7. Plan for once you have achieved your goal to gather feedback and to reflect on your own performance in the role of leader

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