

[Opinion](#)

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# How to Be a Great Leader in Science

Building a positive research environment requires intention, support and a belief that kindness isn't weakness

By [Alison L. Antes](#)



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There is a common narrative, in academia and beyond, that says, “You have to be a jerk to be successful.” As a scientist who studies what makes a great leader, it is disheartening how often research trainees and junior faculty in the sciences ask me if this is true.

So, it's been an especially eye-opening week for science, as academics reflect on [Eric Lander's resignation](#) from his roles as the director the Office of Science and Technology Policy and White House science adviser. A whistleblower investigation found that he had [bullied and mistreated his staff](#), and seemed to be especially abusive toward women who worked with him.

Scientific research demands creative and complex work. Such [creativity and technical skill thrive in workplaces that are psychologically safe and supportive](#). I can tell you that for every abusive supervisor, there are multitudes who inspire, nurture and respect the people who work for them.

Leadership is a big responsibility, and in a field rife with setbacks, failure and pressure, it can be hard to get it right all the time. But we have to; we are losing talented people who either drop out of academic life because they have been bullied or abused, or are worried about it. These losses are a detriment to academia, science and society.

Here are some tips on positive leadership and bolstering academics in developing and sustaining good leadership practices.

### **Know who you want to be.**

Great leaders know what character traits they want to define their leadership. For example, integrity, honesty, kindness, optimism, passion, determination and fairness. They reflect on the traits that already define who they are and those they need to cultivate. [They seek out positive role models and mentors, always seeking to learn and grow.](#) They ask for input on their leadership from their peers, staff and supervisors and take criticism well. They are not afraid to show vulnerability and don't feign perfection. They learn from their mistakes and couple self-confidence with humility. Great leaders strive to take care of themselves by managing their own stress and external pressure.

### **Know what you value in a work environment.**

Great leaders know what qualities they want to define their work environments. For instance, you can value trust, openness, integrity, respect, support, accountability, cooperation, creativity, excellence, engagement, learning and inclusion. Great leaders recognize that their own behavior sets the example. They tell their team members what they value and prioritize these qualities in their decisions and actions. They bring in newcomers who are committed to these qualities and expect respectful conduct. Great leaders look for cues and ask for input to assess the status of the work environment.

### **Be intentional. Budget the time.**

Positive leaders make creating a supportive and affirming environment an explicit priority. They make time to build trust and develop healthy working relationships. They communicate openly, listen effectively and show empathy. They treat people with respect to bring out their best.

### **Know and develop your people.**

A powerful way that a leader can build relationships and foster effective performance is by understanding the interests and career goals of their staff, especially trainees. A great leader mentors and coaches staff, sets high expectations and provides the guidance and resources to achieve expectations. They also celebrate the small successes along the way.

### **Create space for everyone.**

Great leaders ensure everyone gets a chance to speak, and they acknowledge everyone's contributions. They create space for new ideas, encourage collaboration and insist that team members communicate respectfully. They establish norms for handling mistakes that makes it acceptable to mess up. They embrace productive conflict and engage in difficult conversations. They welcome [different personalities, perspectives and backgrounds.](#)

## **Cultivate a collaborative spirit.**

A great leader [supports team members in building their own trusting, healthy workplace relationships](#). A successful scientist once told me he tells his group they may be competing with other labs, but inside their laboratory, they are a team. Research is competitive, but [ambition need not squeeze out respect, kindness, and cooperation](#).

## **Foster a safe environment.**

In a safe environment, people feel respected and engage fully without fear of ridicule or judgment. They ask for help and clarification, offer solutions to problems, admit errors, raise concerns, disagree, and give and receive feedback. These behaviors are essential to conducting rigorous, trustworthy research. Leading by intimidation creates fear and anxiety. It breeds distrust, secrecy and misbehavior. It causes people to quit and [impacts their mental health](#).

## **Promote a top-down positive culture.**

Becoming a great leader also requires support from the top down. Institutions need to provide leadership development. They need to reward positive behavior. They need not only to have no-tolerance policies for bullying and abuse, but also to enforce those policies. Both institutions and the broader academic systems need to celebrate the success stories of great leadership and create space to discuss failures. All of these steps are critical for creating a true and lasting shift in the narrative and culture.

Might the circumstances today be different if [Lander had heeded this leadership advice](#)? How might providing leadership training and coaching to all researchers across their careers transform academia? What if it were the norm for researchers to talk about people skills? What if research trainees and staff could count on being safe and supported in research environments? What if they felt empowered to speak up about abusive behavior?

Academics are exceptional at learning, problem-solving, and rising to a challenge. I think that we are ready to create these needed changes, and I believe that we must.

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