



Koordinationsstelle für Geschlechterstudien,
Frauenforschung und Frauenförderung

How many Roles do I have to fulfil?

Mentoring and Multiple Roles in Science

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Table of Content

- 1 What Hat am I Wearing? - Multiple Roles their Relevance for Mentoring 2**
- 2 To Lead or not to Lead? A note on Shared Leadership 3**
- 3 Who Wins? The Inner Team and How to Deal With it..... 3**
- 4 References 5**



1 What Hat am I Wearing? - Multiple Roles their Relevance for Mentoring

Scientists have multiple responsibilities and roles. They are not only team leaders striving to foster excellent research results, but also managers of international projects, lecturers, strategic networkers on group and organizational levels. Many of them work frequently in their free time to prepare lectures and to complete their research, administrative and leadership tasks. They support junior scientists in their further career development as academic supervisors, but also as mentors and sponsors.

These different roles require researchers to constantly balance their tasks and deal with conflicts of interests, e.g. between lecturing and researching, or between the personal scientific career development of group members and the needs of the institute or research groups.

Multiple roles and shared leadership with other group members are some of the first challenging leadership experiences for mentees. The approaches and the “Inner Team Model” discussed in this MentoringBrief can be a useful tool for mentors to support a mentee’s reflection process, but also to reflect on their own roles.

Leaders of scientific teams are appointed to these positions based on their scientific expertise. However, additional skills are needed to enable them to successfully support team efforts. These skills contribute positively to the overall functioning and success of the team. As team leaders they should foster a culture of constructive feedback and collaboration, demonstrated for instance by the willingness to share data, credit, and decision making with other team members. In supporting team members and offering career development opportunities, team leaders must take care to be fair and offer equal chances to all, e.g. by assigning roles and delegate responsibilities, or by providing access to training and mentoring programs.

Leadership actions may cause unexpected impacts, depending on different understandings and perceptions based on culture, experience, or personality. Sharing perceptions within a group supports the development of relationships that are strong enough to overcome challenges and conflicts.

These skills can be trained and further developed by self-reflection. Becoming more aware of personal strengths and weaknesses is crucial to support others either as supervisor, mentor or coach. Team leaders can find mentors for themselves to develop further and improve their weaknesses. But they do not have to “know everything” by themselves. Additional, external mentors and role models providing specific expertise and different perspectives can be a benefit for the team members.



2 To Lead or not to Lead? A note on Shared Leadership

Especially in science, leadership does not simply mean to act as a supervisor, to delegate and control results.

Lateral or shared leadership refers to the need of a scientific team to switch and share roles and functions. For example, a leader who participates actively in the research process and receives feedback, and at the same time motivates others who might be leaders of other teams themselves (e.g. in an international project consortium). Frequently, scientists simply have to lead their peers in a project or situation where it is not always clear who is responsible for a specific decision or a creative solution. The challenges of shared leadership are thus:

Clear Direction: Teams need clarity and direction, which are hard to provide when conflicting priorities and expectations exist, and/or when the responsibilities are vaguely distributed.

Balanced Information: Information must be balanced to cover all aspects of individual and group performance and their contribution to the overall tasks. Lateral leadership needs a clear commitment of all members who share the leadership to gather this information and to mutually respect the contributions of others.

Authorized Leadership: It is important for the team to reflect and agree on a common understanding of leadership, to define who is authorized to take leadership actions, and on what grounds. For instance, this includes the final assessment of the quality of work and individual contributions.

3 Who Wins? The Inner Team and How to Deal With it

Multiple (conflicting) roles in science can be reflected by using the “Inner Team”, a model developed by Schulz von Thun. Each role or requirement is represented as a separate member of the inner team. All team members need to work together in order to be successful. By working with their inner team in a process of self-clarification, scientists gain more security and clarity in fulfilling their roles.

Although specific roles are inherently part of science, each team member might act differently. All identified team members should be accepted, and taken into consideration as they clearly represent experiences of value.

The different roles of scientists are to a certain extent contradictory, especially when considering time constraints: Promoting the personal scientific career vs. the career of others as well as fostering excellent group results; taking care of adequate financial resources, good teaching and lecturing, and scientific excellence at the same time. The core roles of scientific leadership might be defined as follows:



1. financial manager
2. scientific manager
3. lecturer
4. team leader and mentor
5. experienced researcher

Financial Manager. Scientists have to keep in mind the economic success of the research group, the department, and the overall research institution. They have to lead in their sphere of influence and responsibility in a way that all team members understand and contribute adequately to the strategic goals. Guiding questions to reflect this role include: „How do you perceive the situation from the perspective of the management of science? What are the financial chances and risks? How promising are the different tasks/options regarding the actual financial situation of the research group/department/institution? What do you have to demand from others in order to reach these goals?

Scientific Manager. A scientific leader has to make sure that scientific results are achieved efficiently. Guiding questions to reflect this role include: „What would you consider to be an excellent outcome? How efficiently are the tasks distributed? What kind of qualifications are needed in the team? What needs to be done in order to achieve the best outcomes?“

Lecturer. Lecturing is time-consuming. Still, lecturers strive to apply appropriate methods and approaches to facilitate and support the students' learning process as far as possible. Guiding questions to reflect this role include: “What support do the students need? Where does my responsibility as a lecturer end? Where does the students' ultimate individual responsibility for their personal success begin?”

Team Leader and Mentor. They have to create an environment that enables individuals to cooperate successfully with respect to the overall task and their personal careers. Guiding questions to reflect this role include: „What does the team need in order to cooperate? What does every single member need to reach his or her full potential? Is this useful for the individual only or also for the team? What needs to be clarified?“

Experienced researcher. Naturally, a scientist has to consider his or her own scientific career, but also the private life, health and personal capacities. He or she wants to achieve both unique scientific and personal goals. The experienced researcher might have completely different ideas and goals than the managers, the lecturer or the team leader. Sometimes it might be necessary to confront a team member with poor scientific performance, another time it might be better for high achievers to leave the team for their personal career development, although the team's overall scientific results crucially depends on them. Decisions based on organizational framework conditions can be difficult to announce, as individuals might perceive them as personally wrong and unfair.

Guiding questions to reflect this role include: „How do I perceive the situation as experienced researcher? What is of highest importance for my personal career and wellbeing? How can I fulfill the current role requirements without denying myself?



How can I find a balance between institutional/group/individual loyalty and loyalty towards myself? What are the best outcomes I dare to wish for, if everything went just perfect? What is especially hard to deal with? Who can help, what can be delegated?

The managers and the experienced scientist might have controversial opinions: scientific excellence needs sufficient time and resources without having to announce results too early. Also, the insights of the team leader can be in conflict with the experienced researcher. Maybe the scientific manager wants to pressure for performance, while the team leader thinks the opposite.

The model of the inner team can be used to examine all roles of scientific leadership systematically: Which roles of scientific leadership are easy to achieve, and which ones are difficult? What are the different perceptions and messages of each role and what are the final conclusions of the “experienced researcher”? Where are the greatest potentials for further development and successful integration? Which roles need to be either reduced or strengthened?

4 References

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