

# Leadership and Research Administration

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## ABSTRACT

Leadership is defined as “the position or function of a leader, a person who guides or directs a group” (Dictionary.com). Most think of a leader as the head of an organization. I challenge that: every single person is in a position to be a leader even if they are not the head of an organization and do not have direct reports. There are many different organizational structures for an Office of Sponsored Programs, but typically there is one director, one or two associates/assistant directors, and coordinators or grants specialists. The director and associate/assistant director(s) have direct reports, but in many cases the coordinators do not. Does that mean that coordinators are not leaders? I think not. Coordinators assume the role of leaders in their daily work life and need to be an effective leader in the organization. Being a leader has less to do with position and title and more to do with having or attaining the main characteristics of a great, successful leader, which are: excellent communication skills, being able to build and work in a team effectively, having effective interpersonal skills, and being positive and producing win-win situations. These characteristics are not stand-alone—they interconnect. An effective leader will have these common elements.

## CHARACTERISTICS OF A LEADER

In researching what makes an effective leader, many characteristics came to light. For this article I focus on those that are essential to making a great and successful leader in research administration. The top four must-have characteristics are *Communication Skills, Team Building,*

*Interpersonal Skills and Positive ‘can-do’ attitude.* The most elementary of the characteristics and yet the one that is most often missing or misused is communication skills.

*Communication Skills.* Communication skills are used daily by research administrators and therefore having the ability to communicate effectively and

accurately is essential to accomplishing daily tasks and responsibilities. There are many means of communication. In the electronic age in which we live today a great majority of communication occurs via email, texting, Facebook and the many other electronic mediums that exist. Although these are important and each carries its own benefits, the most effective form of communication is still face-to-face. It allows for an immediate interchange and most often a positive outcome.

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In research administration reaching out to meet someone in person automatically lets that person know that you care about them and their work enough to make the effort to meet with them. That in itself promotes a positive setting that will make a potentially difficult conversation go much better. Face-to-face communication does have its own challenges for research administrators due to the time-sensitive deadlines that are always looming. If you are working with a faculty member on a proposal that is due in 2 days and multiple items are missing or incorrect, meeting face-to-face becomes impossible because you may also have 8 other proposals you need

to submit in the same time frame. As a result, most often email becomes the most used form of communication and one that we no longer seem to be able to live without.

Email can be utilized effectively if used correctly. Whenever possible, use what I refer to as the 'two-email rule'. If a given situation is not resolved with two emails, pick up the phone and discuss it verbally. Email can be misconstrued and the wrong tone can be read in an email and taken badly, making the communication go south rather quickly. When meeting face-to-face is just not possible and a quick email does not resolve the situation, picking up the phone and having a conversation is preferred. Explaining something verbally will avoid time, of which research administrators do not have a lot, and may resolve the issue favorably. Additionally, do not be afraid to ask a colleague or supervisor for assistance in explaining a situation or making the call alongside you.

It is recommended that when time allows, research administrators visit faculty members in their offices or labs even if it is just for a quick check-in to say hello. Ask about their research; ask if they have heard the results of a proposal; ask about their family; or simply state, I am dropping by to say hello and ask if there is anything I can do for you at this time. Showing interest in faculty research lets the faculty member know that we are vested and care about

their work. Officially meeting someone face-to-face will make the next email and phone conversation go more smoothly because you previously established a relationship with that person. This same concept applies to visiting departmental research administrators and others in the department with which we constantly work. They are no different than we are. We all enjoy the personal touch and knowing that the person with whom we are discussing our work genuinely cares about us and our work will go a long way in communicating effectively.

As part of having great communication skills the leader absolutely must be a great listener. Listening to employee's ideas, thoughts, and any frustrations is the key to working on problems together. Employees will be more vested in a company that has a leader who listens to their ideas and contributions and seriously considers them.

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There are leaders who are great public speakers, but without the ability to truly listen to the team, that leader will not be an effective one. Everyone has something to

contribute; if we built the right team everyone will have different skill sets that will complement the team. This brings us to the next characteristic that makes a successful leader in research administration.

*Team Building.* Building a strong team is just as important as having a great leader. A leader is not expected to be an expert in all areas, but the best leaders will surround themselves with people who have strengths in different areas. The collective whole and not the individual comprise a strong team. Team building is essential. An office with a divided team will not work toward one common goal. Building a team takes time and starts by sharing the common goal or objective for that team. In a large organization it would be by clearly defining the mission of the organization so that all team members know what the ultimate goals are. Susan Heathfield, a human resources expert who wrote "12 Tips for Team Building; How to Build Successful Work Teams", emphasized that "Belonging to a team, in the broadest sense, is a result of feeling part of something larger than yourself. It has a lot to do with your understanding of the mission or objectives of your organization" (Heathfield, n.d., n.p.). Knowing the bigger picture sets expectations and allows individuals to feel part of the overall organization, even if their direct contributions are only one piece of the puzzle.

Smaller teams that are created within a group should follow the same concepts. The leader should identify the goals, set the expectations, and engage the team members' participation. Listen to the teams ideas closely and allow each individual's thoughts to be shared.

In our Office of Sponsored Programs it became evident that our policies and procedures manual was outdated and needed revising. As the leader of that team I initially thought that revising this document was my responsibility and after several years of not making much progress for one reason or another, I decided to form a team for the task. I started by discussing it at one of our weekly staff meetings; stating that we were looking to form a team of five members and I asked for volunteers.

There were two reasons for asking for volunteers: to engage those who had an interest in writing procedures, and to have employee buy-in. I certainly could have made this a direct assignment, but I am sure it would not have had the same effect or outcome. Much to my surprise I had more than five volunteers, a team was formed, and work began. What began as a Policies and Procedures Manual Committee quickly turned into a Website Committee. The team collectively realized that it would be so much more effective for our faculty and staff to have the information on our website. The team set regular meetings, set goals for one another, and held each other

accountable. Just recently, the website was unveiled and the mission was successfully accomplished. The team members feel proud of their accomplishments every time they search the site or continue its improvements. Teamwork is powerful.

*Interpersonal Skills.* A great leader has the ability to build a good rapport with everyone, which is the definition of interpersonal skills. Having interpersonal skills is a quality that most employers look for in prospective hires because it is the most critical skill to have. Having the ability to connect with people and get along with everyone makes you an approachable person, which is an absolute must as a research administrator. Being approachable is critical at many levels. In an office, if you are not approachable your colleagues will not seek your advice, which is counter to being a leader. In working with faculty it is essential that they feel that we are open-minded and available at all times and will listen to their concerns. Interpersonal skills are one of the most critical characteristics of a successful leader and ties in with being positive, which leads us to the last characteristic of a leader in research administration.

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*Positive 'Can-do' Attitude.* A great research administrator will have a 'can do' attitude and always attempt to achieve a 'win/win' situation. Stephen Covey wrote about the "Win/Win" in *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People*, stating that "Win/Win is a frame of mind and heart that constantly seeks mutual benefit in all human interactions. Win/Win means that agreements or solutions are mutually beneficial, mutually satisfying. With a win/win solution, all parties feel good about the decision and feel good about the action plan" (Covey, 1989, p. 206). Mr. Covey also stated that the "Win/Win is a belief in the Third Alternative. It's not your way or my way; it's a better way, a higher way" (Covey, 1989, p. 206). These are such powerful statements and as research administrators a critical characteristics to have.

When approached with a problem the first response cannot be, 'no that cannot be done'; it needs to be, 'let's discuss this further and find a way to accomplish what is needed'. Approaching the situation positively builds a great relationship and lets others know the leader is approachable

and willing to work towards one common goal. The opposite is also true. If the immediate response is 'that cannot be done', it automatically sets a negative connotation for the rest of the conversation. Turning it around takes much more effort and at times becomes impossible, raising frustrations and a demonstrated lack of commitment. The next time you are negotiating a contract and have to communicate with a faculty member about the importance of not giving up the Intellectual Property (IP) or publication rights, have the discussion with a 'can-do' attitude and think of the "Win/Win" (Covey, 1989, p. 207). Approach the conversation positively.

## CONCLUSION

As this article demonstrates, these characteristics are intertwined and a great leader possesses all of them, even if they are stronger in one area than another. I wish I could say that everyone in a leadership position has these characteristics. The sad reality is that many people in leadership roles do not have great leadership skills and are not great leaders.

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There are good leaders, there are bad leaders, and there are great leaders. The good news is that leadership skills can be learned and achieved and a great step towards becoming a great leader is realizing that you need additional training and development and striving to attain the required skills. If you are reading this article and have realized that you may be lacking a

characteristic or two, you have taken the first step toward becoming a successful leader. Take the next step, identify someone whom you know does have these skills and seek their wisdom; or seek out a leadership skills course and sign up for it; or simply read a leadership book and choose a different path and become the leader you know you can be.

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### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

**Miriam A. Campo** is the Director of the Office of Sponsored Programs at the University of Tennessee-Knoxville campus. She has been in her current position for five years; her responsibilities include pre- and post-award (non-financial). Miriam's research administration career began in 1985 at Florida International University in Miami, FL. She has written several articles for the *NCURA Magazine* and has served as Co-Chair for the NCURA Region III meeting.