Self-taught soft skills

Junior researchers can learn career-boosting skills by forming their own groups, says Alexandra Lucs.

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unior researchers are becoming increasingly aware that in addition to honing their scientific know-how, they need to develop their ‘soft skills’, such as the art of communicating, managing or collaborating. For most, opportunities for formal training in soft skills are limited. Independent courses are starting to emerge, such as the ‘Leadership in BioScience’ sessions at Cold Spring Harbor Laboratory in New York, but not everyone can afford the requisite time or money.

At the Feinstein Institute for Medical Research in Manhasset, New York, several young investigators and I are trying a different approach. We have found an easy and inexpensive way to foster our people skills by taking on the training ourselves. By forming a small group, we have learned soft skills from each other, as well as from resources found online.

We decided to include no more than one person from any given laboratory to avoid intra-lab politics and to ensure that members feel free to speak openly and confidentially about any personnel issues that might arise. This is particularly important when discussing, for example, what makes a good manager, the ways in which researchers influence others around them or the tools needed to manage difficult conversations.

Some were initially sceptical; they simply hadn’t considered the importance of soft skills in a laboratory. But after discussing the need to better negotiate our future positions, hire a strong talent pool and mentor or manage current personnel, the doubters quickly understood the potential benefits.

Our ten-person group has met monthly since April 2013, with each meeting lasting 1.5 hours. We begin the sessions with brief updates on each member’s career progress and challenges, such as their grant applications, invitations to talk and problems in hiring capable personnel.

An online tool called Lean In (http://leanin.org) has greatly facilitated our efforts. Although intended for women, the website’s informative videos feature topics that are relevant for both genders. They address such issues as ‘How do team dynamics affect scientific contributions?’, ‘How can we exert influence in our collaborations?’, ‘Who at our institutions can help us learn how to become group leaders?’ and ‘How can we negotiate for new positions?’ We watch the videos on our own and discuss them as a group.

One topic that we discussed was when to ‘walk away’: that is, how to recognize when a position or job offer does not fulfill your aims. The goal of one of our members was to become a professor, but she identified some additional goals, such as independence, upward mobility and the ability to pursue science research. She received a job offer that seemed to satisfy these requirements, but she didn’t jump on it — not yet. She knew she could walk away if need be. At her next meeting she firmly stated that she needed her academic appointment within a certain time frame. There were no threats, only clear determination, and she got what she wanted.

Another group member recognized that her often-dodile demeanour led to her contributions being under-appreciated. It inspired her to become a better advocate for her career, and she quickly got two job offers. Before joining the group, she would simply have accepted the first offer she received, but instead she negotiated with specific salary and time commitment requirements in mind. Both employers agreed.

An unanticipated benefit of this group is that we have formed a strong network. We talk to each other more outside meetings and have formed interdisciplinary collaborations. In attempting to learn soft skills together, we have also enhanced each other’s science.

In the past few months, new people have joined our group to replace those who have moved on. Some may enter the group with doubts about its merit. But soon they realize just how important these soft skills are — and just how much we can teach ourselves.

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