



LEADERSHIP IN RESEARCH ADMINISTRATION

A Different Approach

By Jessica McDonough and Jeff Derr

What does leadership in our profession of research administration look like? It depends! Each circumstance, institution, and situation likely requires a different combinations of qualities from a leader. Are you the person who initiates ideas? Are you an expert executor with any task put in front of you? Will you make tough decisions? What is your approach to teamwork? A leader in research administration can encompass multiple different skill sets; there is not a “one size fits all” way to lead in our world. Through our experiences, research, conversations, and reflections we have found the path to becoming a successful leader begins with knowing yourself.

Have you heard people refer to the oxygen mask analogy? It is the one used on an airplane during the pre-flight instruction announcements. The rule: If an airplane cabin loses pressure, oxygen masks will automatically fall in front of passengers, place your mask on yourself before trying to help others. Why? It is because you are best to assist others when you ensure that you, yourself, are taken care of. This method also applies to leading research administrators. Leaders must prepare and care for themselves to best support their team. We can also use the oxygen mask analogy proactively; we can prepare and practice instead of waiting for the emergency. The proactive technique we have had success using has three

key ingredients: relationships, mindsets, and preparedness. They are intertwined, often show up together, and circle back to each other.

Relationships—the core of research administration. Aristotle’s quote, “Knowing yourself is the beginning of all wisdom” is the starting point (Aristotle, ca. 350 B.C.E./1925). Knowing yourself, your preferences, how you like to operate, and the why behind the operation will be the framework for navigating other relationships. We are consistently the conduit between researchers, fellow staff, and sponsor contacts. What builds a great relationship? Does “it depend” on the situation? A firm foundation is built with trust. Researcher and educator Brené Brown

emphasizes the importance of breaking down the concept of trust with her acronym **BRAVING**, which can help us build and sustain trust in our relationships. Plus, you know Research Administrators appreciate an acronym! These concepts are defined below and critical to building successful relationships to achieve our goals.

Boundaries-making clear what is okay and what is not okay, and why... think Uniform Guidance, Terms & Conditions, importance of providing clarity/evidence for our decisions.

Reliability-do what you say you will do. Be aware of your competencies and limitations so you do not over promise and are able to deliver on commitments and balance competing priorities.

Accountability-You own your mistakes, apologize, and make amends as soon as you are aware of the error.

Vault-You do not share information or experiences that are not yours to share...think PHI! Share examples/consequences without identifying people.

Integrity-Choosing courage over comfort; choosing what's right over what's fun, fast, or easy; and practicing your values, not just professing them-Collectively we are trusted to be good stewards of the funding provided for research.

Nonjudgement-asking questions and communicating without judgment- ever tried explaining IDC or even what research administration is to your family?!

Generosity -Extending the most generous interpretation to the intentions, words, and actions of others-when we have to say "no," we want others to understand why! (Brown 2023)

We believe the bedrock of building that trust is a mindset of authenticity. People tend to trust you when they believe they are interacting with the real you (Frei & Morriss, 2020). Some of the best relationships we have had with investigators and colleagues are not the ones where we answered every question correctly. The times we conversed and answered honestly, owned mistakes admitted we did not know the answer and needed to research institutional policy to provide a solution that resulted in the most positive outcomes. After all, who hasn't made a typo in their projections?

Researcher Dr. Yvonna Lincoln writes "Authenticity criteria are criteria for determining the goodness, reliability, validity, and rigor of qualitative research" (2007). This quote resonated two-fold: our careers support research, and that criterion also sums up authenticity in research administration! Being authentic is being genuine and realizing that we do and will continue to make mistakes. An authentic leader is accountable when errors are made, reflects, reassesses, and provides alternative options for resolution; the result is a wiser leader for their team, their investigators, and their organization. Along with authenticity, transparency is key to effective communication, people prefer to work with individuals who are authentic and communicative. You know what you have there; that consistency builds trust and relationships (Erickson, 2021)! It is much tougher to navigate challenges when the relationship is with someone whose communication is ambiguous and inconsistent. Our mindset toward those we work with is critical; let us look at others' strengths and find ways to utilize them, accentuate those strengths, and help the person be in a situation that allows them to thrive and succeed. A colleague may not excel in communication and instead be an expert in attention to detail, leading to an expert reconciler! Observing without judgment helps identify strengths. When errors occur, observe and see how your colleague works before suggesting improvements. This allows you to assess, mitigate, and talk through a solution to avoid blame and judgment; and builds trust.

Last but certainly not least is preparedness-does one ever feel fully prepared in the world of research administration? It may be second nature for us to have CFRs, organizational policies, and sponsor requirements memorized, and regardless of our tenure in research administration, there will still be questions and situations we have not experienced and need time to offer solutions. Approaching leadership with the right frame of mind is key. Additionally, recognizing that leadership is not equivalent to supervision will help keep you prepared! Positional titles can project leadership, but the actions, positive influences, efforts, and results live out leadership.

Leadership in research administration is you! Wherever you are in your career, you can use your positive influence to lead and grow teams and better your organization as a whole. Like the research we support, we are all a work in progress; your self-awareness and earnest effort will shape you into a leader who makes a difference. We hope you find benefits in applying relationships, mindset, and preparedness to your role as a leader. ■

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