Leading Without A Title

Doing the work and guiding the work are two different things. Most researchers slowly transition, leading more, for years before any job title confirms it. If you've supervised a student, steered a collaboration, or held a project together without a single person formally reporting to you, you already know that authority was never really the point.

The expert trap

It's common to feel some internal tension stepping into this — the desire to be that expert and sometimes, a reluctance to stand out, a worry that speaking up reads as arrogant or noticing a tendency to avoid giving honest feedback because it feels unkind. These tensions aren't unusual and they don't indicate a lack of leadership potential. They point to values you're actively navigating, like humility and collaboration, while you find your own style.

Leadership isn't bestowed by a promotion — it's built through your decisions.
Leading and managing draw on different skills. Managing often relies on positional authority: budgets, delegation, keeping systems running. Leading is about setting direction, motivating engagement, building relationships, and none of that requires positional power or financial control.

The Vitae Researcher Development Framework — the sector's own model for what successful researchers do — in its section on engagement and influence, it names leadership as “influencing where appropriate and persuading through listening and convincing discussion”. The sector's own standards already treat leadership as a function of influence, not authority.

Five levers, no budget required

David Rock's SCARF model identifies what motivates people, particularly in expertise-driven environments: status, certainty, autonomy, relationships, and fairness. When these are present, performance and motivation rise. When they're threatened, stress increases and creativity drops.

None of the five need a budget or a title, you can simply build your leadership by actions. *Status* can mean recognising a colleague's contribution in a meeting. *Certainty* comes from agreeing clear expectations for a shared deadline. *Relationships* build simply by making sure a junior researcher feels included in a discussion. Small, low-cost moves, consistently applied make a difference.

Adapting as a team member grows

Leadership adapts. A new team member typically needs clear structure early on — that's certainty. As their confidence grows, too much direction starts to threaten their autonomy, so the shift is toward independence. Eventually, once they're self-directing, the most useful thing a leader can do is step back and let them work. Adapting to the person and the moment isn't inconsistency — it's what leadership actually looks like in practice.

The same adaptability applies to delivering feedback. Withholding honest feedback because it feels unkind isn't protecting someone — it withholds the respect and trust that timely, clear feedback actually represents. Giving feedback, honestly and with kindness, shows you believe someone has the capacity to grow.

One authority-free decision, made today — recognising a contribution, agreeing a clear expectation, or giving feedback you've been holding back — is where this starts.
Leadership here isn't a title. It's a pattern of choices, repeated.

This is one of a series of Briefing Notes on managing the realities of research life by Dr Margaret Collins.
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