

## Owning Your Place at the Table

Doing good work is necessary, but it's often not enough — the value of your work needs to be seen by people who matter. A lack of visibility isn't a flaw in you or a sign you lack skill or ambition. Developing strategic visibility is a different skill set, one that many researchers haven't been taught.

Many of us hesitate. We don't want to seem arrogant or make grandiose claims. Feelings of self-doubt are common, particularly if you're in a minority in your field or navigating spaces where unconscious bias exists around gender, race, or class. These are systemic realities, not a personal failing. The playing field isn't always level; the focus here is on what remains within your control.

### The yes trap

Certain behaviours earn early recognition — saying yes to everything, over-preparing for meetings you're already qualified for, being quietly dependable, consistently prioritising others' work over your own. Early in a career, these habits build trust. As you move toward more senior or strategic work, relying on the very skills that made you successful, by default, starts to limit your influence and leaves little capacity to actually lead.

### Two ways of operating

There's a useful distinction between two common ways of showing up. In the first, you're proving yourself, smoothing over conflict, letting the work speak for itself — saying yes to others mainly to protect relationships. In the other, you speak from your expertise with respect, without apology or fear, you make decisions, and make sure the right work is visible to the right people.

This stepping into leadership might be a natural evolution for you or need a conscious choice — dropping the habit of overaccommodating, choosing instead to lead from your values and expertise.

The difference between these two shows up clearly in something as ordinary as a weekly update:

Focused on effort: “I spent this week reading the literature, and I helped draft the introduction.”

Focused on outcome: “Completed the literature synthesis, keeping the paper on track to submit.”  
Same work, different signal.

### Protecting your capacity

Operating this way takes time and energy, which means capacity needs protecting deliberately. It is easy to find yourself struggling to find time for what you know is your most important work. To create space to make your contribution, use a “Yes filter”. Before agreeing to a request out of habit, three questions are worth asking: Does this increase my visibility to the right people? Does it align with my current goals? Am I genuinely the only person who can do it?

Run a typical request — organising a department's admin seminar series — through that filter, and it's often a straightforward decline: unlikely to build visibility, unlikely to align with core goals, and rarely something only you could do. Declining, or advocating for someone else to take it on instead, is a legitimate use of the filter, not a failure to be a team player.

### One small move

Growth here happens through consistent individual decisions, not a single transformation. This week, try identifying one habit of over-functioning and interrupting it — rewriting a weekly update to focus on outcomes, or running the next request through the three questions above. Telling one other person about the change you're making adds a small, useful layer of accountability.

---

**This is one of a series of Briefing Notes on managing the realities of research life by Dr Margaret Collins.**  
**Find more inside Research Navigator at [MargaretCollins.com](https://margaretcollins.com).**

