

What Is Leadership?

For many researchers and academics, leadership isn't something sought out — it's something that arrives. Deep expertise in a subject gets you promoted, and suddenly you're supervising a student or heading a project, often with no training in how to lead one.

That gap between expertise and preparation isn't a personal failing. It's a gap in the system.

Defining it for yourself, first

Before reaching for a framework, it's worth pausing to reflect on your own definition of leadership.

- What's the first thing that comes to mind when you finish the sentence “leadership is...”?
- Think about the best leader you've worked with — what did they actually do, and how did they make you feel?
- What do you think other people expect of you in a leadership role?

Noticing where your own instinct about other leaders differs from what you assume is expected of you is often revealing on its own.

A working definition

Marshall Ganz's definition is a useful anchor: leadership is taking responsibility for enabling others to achieve a shared purpose in the face of uncertainty.

Nothing in that definition depends on having a title or being formally in charge — it's a function, built on service and clarity of direction, particularly when the way forward isn't obvious. Leadership isn't a fixed state you arrive at. It's something you do, repeatedly, and you learn it by doing it.

Leadership versus management

When “leading a project”, management is the what and when — tasks, deadlines, logistics. Leadership is the how and why — the process of creating direction, aligning effort, and building commitment, especially when things get difficult.

Delegation is a good example of the difference in practice: it isn't offloading a task, it's an act of trust that gives someone else room to grow, and it frees you to focus on the larger picture. Some days leadership means giving clear direction. Other days it means listening. There's no single right mode — only the right one for the moment.

Communication as the connecting thread

Every leadership action — delegating, enabling, sharing a direction — depends on communication, and not just on what's said but on how. “This draft needs a lot of work” and “This is a good start, how can we strengthen the argument in section two?” convey substantially different things, even when addressing the same weakness. One reads as judgement. The other reads as an invitation. That distinction is itself a leadership choice, and a small one repeated consistently is what builds trust over time.

Leadership here isn't about adopting someone else's style — it's an authentic expression of your own values, applied intentionally. The question worth taking forward is smaller than that: what's one deliberate choice you could make differently, starting with your next conversation?

This is one of a series on managing the realities of research life from Dr Margaret Collins. Find more Roadmap resources: Research Navigator at MargaretCollins.com.

