



## HOW TO CREATE A LEADERSHIP ACTION PLAN

By Sven Hendrix



Scientists are often excellent in their fields of expertise, but they may lack the leadership skills necessary to lead teams and manage projects. A leadership action plan is an efficient method to develop the necessary skills to become a group leader and pursue a successful career in science.



### Why do I need leadership skills as a scientist?

Most scientists work in groups, and they become group leaders sooner or later in their careers. Becoming a group leader means taking on a leadership position most scientists

are not well-prepared for. As a team leader, you need leadership skills to create a thriving working environment for your research group. You must successfully manage and motivate your team, work collaboratively, and effectively communicate with other scientists, research partners, and the public.

However, it is no secret – developing leadership skills is not the top priority of most scientists. They think they are doing a good job by teaching their staff members different methods they need in the lab. They do not reflect on whether their current skills are sufficient to lead their team successfully. They only track progress of the performances and are unaware that they play a significant role in the life of their PhD students and postdocs. At the end of the day, they often only reflect their role as a leader when staff members complain or resign.

## Why do I need leadership skills when I am not in a leadership role yet?

If you are still at the beginning of your career path, you may wonder whether you should really invest in leadership qualities early in your career. The answer is a resounding "yes." Most scientists become some kind of group leader (or "boss") sooner or later. Therefore, it [is advantageous for young scientists to train in leadership skills.](#)



As potential leaders, young scientists should prepare themselves \*before\* they reach these positions. **Training your leadership skills as future leaders in your current research group is the best way to learn in a relatively safe environment** (provided you have a good relationship with your supervisor).

When scientists are part of a research group as PhD students or postdoctoral researchers, they automatically gain informal leadership positions and become responsible for the successful outcome of selected projects. You may have to care for bachelor and master students and work with technicians or collaboration partners. You may supervise PhD students and postdocs who just started in your group.

## Starting with a small group

Many scientists start with a small group in an academic or industrial environment. They may start, for example, as an [assistant professor with a tenure-track contract](#) or as a research group leader in a company. In such a position, you will have various duties quite different



from pursuing a PhD thesis or specific postdoc projects. You need to develop organizational skills to use your group's resources efficiently and effectively.

As a PhD student and postdoc, you primarily manage your personal time, energy, and workspace to accomplish your assigned tasks. Now, you are responsible for a team that depends on you. In addition, you must adapt your group to the organizational culture of the institution in which your group is embedded (department, institute, university). In a way, you must develop a business strategy to sell your performance to those higher in the hierarchy to get intramural resources and support.

## Why do I need a leadership action plan?



**Leadership skills do not develop spontaneously.** A personal leadership development plan helps you to build them strategically. In other words, you start intentional leadership development with concrete criteria

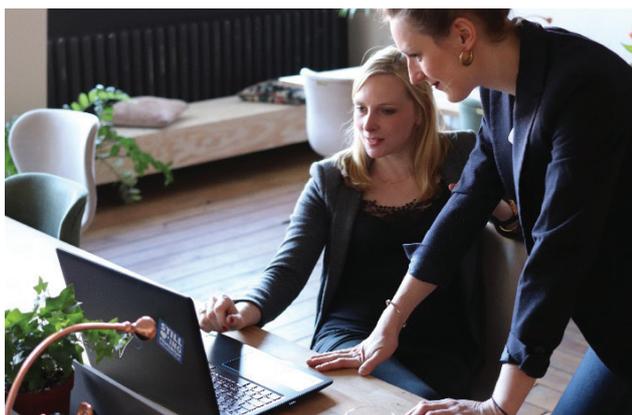
of how you want to train yourself. It encourages you to reflect on your goals, sets a timeline for achieving milestones in your career, and supports measuring and tracking your progress.

**You need a strategic plan, a concept of the type of leader you want to become, a long-term vision for your career and your group's purpose, measurable goals and action items, and a method for tracking your progress and getting feedback from trustworthy others.**

It is not a simple process and will take a lot of time. An important aspect is to be aware of **specific steps you need to pursue in a particular order** that fit your personality and life situation. Trying to improve all critical elements at the same time will overwhelm you. Thus, it is advisable to rank your skill development actions and pursue your objectives one after the other.

The following steps will help you to develop your first leadership action plan efficiently. I will use the terms "leadership development plan" and "leadership action plan" synonymously in the text below.

## What type of leader do I want to become?



The first step in creating a leadership development program is determining what type of leader you want to become. Unfortunately, there are numerous typologies of leadership styles. When you google "what types of leadership styles are there?" you get multiple lists of the 3, 4, 7, or 11 leadership styles that experts of any qualification describe.

Be aware that there are **professional researchers**, for example, organizational psychologists, who have investigated leadership their entire scientific career - and there are **successful leaders** who describe their personal experience in an autobiographical style. Both perspectives have their advantages and disadvantages.

The researchers may be questioned because they are only 'observers' who may have never been in a prominent leadership role. In contrast, you may criticize successful leaders because they generalize their autobiography ("That's what I did, do it my way!"), although their approach may not be relevant for others in different life situations.

As a start, you may find a list of different leadership styles like the following one:

1. Democratic Leadership
2. Autocratic Leadership
3. Laissez-Faire Leadership
4. Strategic Leadership
5. Transformational Leadership
6. Transactional Leadership
7. Coaching Leadership
8. Bureaucratic Leadership
9. Visionary Leadership
10. Pacesetting Leadership
11. Situational Leadership

See this [post](#) for details.

This is a long list, and you may be tempted to select one leadership style that attracts you most or fits best with your personality traits. However, this would substantially limit your ability to lead your team.

In the late sixties, Paul Hersey and Ken Blanchard developed the so-called "[Situational Leadership Theory](#)."

## The fundamental principle of the situational leadership model is that there is no single "best" leadership style.

The most successful leaders adapt their leadership style to the ability and willingness of the individual or group they want to lead and the tasks to be accomplished (Hersey & Blanchard, 1977).

**Therefore, it makes a lot of sense to follow at least 3 courses on leadership to get a broader perspective. If you are lucky, your employer offers courses as part of a doctoral school or HR program.**

If no courses are available in your institution, you can follow online courses on platforms such as Udemy, Skillshare, Coursera, LinkedIn Learning, Creativelive, Edx, and many others. Check the possibilities carefully to get classes at reduced prices before you invest a lot of money in possibly mediocre leadership courses. This strategy may save you thousands of Dollars.

If you want to learn more about the basic principles of leadership, let me suggest my two favorite books on this subject:

1. "[The Five Levels of Leadership](#)" by [John C. Maxwell](#): This book explores the different levels of leadership development and the characteristics of leaders at each level. It shows you how to progress through them to become a more effective leader.
2. "[The Five Dysfunctions of a Team: A Leadership Fable](#)" by [Patrick Lencioni](#): This book is a must-read for starting group leaders. It presents a fictional story about a struggling team and the five dysfunctions that prevent it from achieving its goals: absence of trust, fear of conflict, lack of commitment, avoidance of accountability, and inattention to results. It offers practical strategies for overcoming these dysfunctions and building a cohesive, high-performing team.

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## Leadership development goals

In another article, I have summarized [15 essential basic and advanced leadership skills](#). The basic skills include defining and communicating your vision, more effective communication, conflict management, motivating people, giving constructive feedback, and complex project management of multiple projects. The advanced skills include effective delegation, change management & negotiating, effectively handling administration, finance for non-financials, and intercultural leadership.

## Good leadership or great leadership?



Define your goals precisely and with passion. **The aim is to find leadership goals that are neither too small nor too fantastic.** As mentioned above, you can learn and improve about 15 complementary skills. You should set so-called SMART goals to avoid getting overwhelmed and stretch goals to avoid staying in your comfort zone. In other words, to become a \*good\* leader, you should consistently train in the basic skills – and to become a \*great\* leader, you should leave your comfort zone and strive for mastery in the basic and advanced skills.

## SMART goals

**SMART** is a mnemonic acronym giving criteria to guide in setting specific goals and objectives that are assumed to provide better results in project management and personal development. According to this concept, your personal and professional goals should be specific, measurable, achievable, relevant, and time-bound (the first letters form the acronym 'SMART'). Thus, you can make a simple table for each skill you want to train:

*Specific:* target a particular area for improvement, such as *conflict management*.

*Measurable:* quantify or at least suggest an indicator of progress. For example, read two books about conflict management and/or follow a course on conflict management and develop a list of 3 strategies to avoid or solve conflicts in your work environment

*Achievable:* set a realistic timeframe, such as reading one book per month within two months.

*Relevant:* choose themes that are relevant right now. For example, apply the newly acquired strategies in current conflict situations to learn and improve in the real world. In your head, it may work well but fail in your workplace.

*Time-bound:* specify when you will have achieved the results. For example, within nine months, I will have followed a course on conflict management and have applied the new strategies systematically for at least two months.

## Stretch goals

The concept of SMART criteria is helpful to start setting goals efficiently. However, there is a considerable danger that you stick too much to easily achievable goals and avoid leaving your comfort zone. Therefore, an effective leadership development plan should include at least one stretch goal – or several. [Stretch goals](#) are targets that are beyond your existing work capacity. **Stretch goals are goals that require you to go the extra mile.**

They have two unique features. First, stretch goals are usually **challenging** to achieve. They are not entirely practical or rational. Stretch goals also take into account the best possible outcome for any activity. Second, stretch goals rely on **novelty**.

Setting stretch goals for your leadership action plan may motivate you to take on new responsibilities and expand your talents. For example, suppose you have never taken on a leadership role. In that case, you may set individual goals to manage an entire research project independently – including some supervision of technicians or bachelor students. Or, later in your career, you may accept a role as a board member, for example, as treasurer of a scientific society.

If you want to learn more about goal setting for yourself and your group, let me suggest my favorite book on the subject: [Measure What Matters: How Google, Bono, and the Gates Foundation Rock the World with OKRs](#) by John Doerr.

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## Leadership vision



Defining and communicating your vision is an essential task for you as a leader. For a long time, [it has been known in the business](#)

[world](#) that purpose-driven companies see 400 percent (!) more returns on the stock market than other successful companies. In addition, when staff members feel that their work has special meaning and is not 'just a job,' they are 11 times more committed to staying with their organizations and 14 times more likely to look forward to coming to work.

Simon Sinek, a leadership expert, developed the famous concept of the "[golden circle](#)" in his book "Start with Why." He writes that the most inspiring organizations, such as Apple, start their communication by defining their purpose ("Why we are doing what we do"). They use this as the foundation for all of their actions and communication in real life and on social media. This "why" inspires and motivates people to follow and support the leader or organization.

When your group members understand the purpose that drives you and your research, they are much more engaged and inspired to join you in working toward a common aim.

To develop strategic plans and short-term goals, you must first have a vision and long-term goals. You may start with a one-sentence vision statement such as "With my research, I will develop the first therapy for XYZ disease." Over the years, you will develop a much more complex vision for great leadership.

You should outline your core values and personal vision in a personal vision statement and combine it with a [professional vision](#) for your research group and institution in a professional vision statement. These two complementary vision statements may include your career path from now until retirement and your personal and professional development. In addition, they may include the development of your research group, your institution, your research field, the professional career of your staff members, new projects, and a community goal.

Developing a personal and professional vision is a lot of work. If you want to learn more about creating a compelling vision for yourself and

your group, let me suggest my favorite books on this subject:

1. "[Vivid Vision: A Remarkable Tool for Aligning Your Business Around a Shared Vision of the Future](#)" by Cameron Herold et al. This book explains how to develop a clear, compelling vision to motivate your team.
2. "[Start with Why: How Great Leaders Inspire Everyone to Take Action](#)" by Simon Sinek. This book explores the concept of a compelling purpose (the "Why") as a key element of leadership and effective communication.

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## New skills to learn

When you have developed a rough idea of what you want to achieve (thus, your first draft of a vision), you have to assess your own skills and compare them to the list of skills you want to acquire. The ranked list of the list of skills you want to acquire is your first list of leadership development goals.

For example, if inspirational leadership is your goal, there are [six traits you have to develop](#), such as staying calm in stressful situations, showing your personal side, listening well, being resilient, showing integrity, and developing talented staff members.

Suppose you are more attracted by the concept of [organizational leadership](#). In that case, you may focus more on problem-solving and decision-making, identifying future innovations and opportunities, thinking strategically, system-wide, and holistically, spreading the organization's vision, and inspiring others to share that vision.

Depending on the leadership ability you want to learn, you need different types of training. It is a good idea to get feedback from trustworthy colleagues higher in the hierarchy and leadership trainers on which skills are appropriate for your personal situation and career state.

## Time management

Time management is an essential skill for becoming a great leader. If you do not manage your own time and energy well, you are not a role model for your staff members. Your way of managing time and energy will be copied by most employees.

There are many great books on time management that can help you improve your productivity and efficiency. Here are four of my favorite books on the subject:

1. [Measure What Matters: How Google, Bono, and the Gates Foundation Rock the World with OKRs](#) by John Doerr: I have already recommended it above. This is my favorite book on defining clear goals, objectives, and action items.
2. ["The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People"](#) by [Stephen R. Covey](#): This classic book provides a framework for personal and professional effectiveness, including principles for managing your time effectively.
3. ["Getting Things Done"](#) by [David Allen](#): This book teaches a system for organizing and prioritizing tasks in a way that allows you to stay focused and achieve your goals.
4. ["The One Thing"](#) by [Gary Keller and Jay Papasan](#): This book focuses on the importance of identifying and prioritizing your most important tasks and offers strategies for achieving maximum productivity.

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These are just a few examples, and many other great books on time management may be helpful depending on your specific needs and goals.

## Effective communication and emotional intelligence

Communication skills are essential for leaders to clearly define and communicate the goals and objectives of the group and the team members. It also helps understand team members' goals and desires and solve their grievances. Group

leaders must develop an open rapport with their teams to increase productivity and a supportive work environment.

Unfortunately, not everybody is a born communicator. Some say jokingly that scientists are further in the autistic spectrum than the average population. Thus, clear communication may be a challenge for group leaders in science.

What are the most efficient ways to develop these leadership competencies?

The first step is to learn about [emotional intelligence](#). Emotional intelligence is the ability to recognize and understand your own emotions and the emotions of others and to use that awareness to manage your behavior and relationships effectively. The term was first coined in 1990 by researchers John Mayer and Peter Salovey and later popularized by Daniel Goleman.

Emotional intelligence is typically broken down into four core competencies, which are classical soft skills every aspiring group leader should train:

1. Self-awareness
2. Self-management
3. Social awareness
4. Relationship management

### 1. Self-Awareness

Self-awareness is your ability to recognize your emotions and the effect they have on you and your team's performance.

### 2. Self-Management

Self-management means managing your emotions, particularly in stressful situations, and maintaining a positive outlook despite setbacks.

### 3. Social Awareness

Social awareness describes your ability to

recognize others' emotions and the dynamics in your institution.

## 4. Relationship Management

Relationship management refers to your ability to influence, coach, and mentor others and resolve conflict effectively.

My favorite books on the subject are:

1. "[Emotional intelligence: Why It Can Matter More Than IQ](#)" by Daniel Goleman: The classic book that popularized the concept of emotional intelligence.
2. "[Crucial Conversations](#)" by Patterson et al.: A must-read about strategies to handle tense discussions between two or more people where the stakes are high, opinions vary, and emotions run strong.
3. "[Difficult conversations](#)" by Stone et al.: A classic book on why some conversations are difficult, why we tend to poorly deal with them, and how to have more productive discussions.
4. "[Cues](#)" by Vanessa van Edwards: A potent guide to the tiny signals you send with your stance, facial expressions, word choice, and vocal tone. You will learn which body language cues assert that you are a leader and why one should join you.

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## Recruitment and building a team

Building a productive team starts with excellent recruiting. Professional recruiting ensures that you have the right mix of skills, knowledge, and experience in your group. Effective recruiting also helps to create a positive work environment and culture, which can be crucial for team morale and motivation. By carefully selecting team members with the skills and expertise to deliver high-quality work, you can help build a strong reputation and establish a competitive advantage in your industry.

My favorite books on the subject are:

1. "[Who: The A Method for Hiring](#)" by Geoff Smart & Randy Street: The book provides professional interview techniques and evaluation practices. It explains how to attract and retain the best team members.
2. "[Who not how](#)" by Sullivan & Hardy: This book explains the importance of delegating tasks to others. Inviting them to help you achieve the group's goals will give you more free time and valuable, lasting professional relationships.

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## Leading a team and personal development

Employee engagement strongly depends on your ability to inspire and guide others toward a shared vision or goal. Your staff members will mirror your attitude, passion, and engagement.

Thus, professional development means personal development. Individuals behave differently in their organizational roles compared to their private life. This so-called organizational behavior is strongly influenced by your behavior and personality traits. Thus, you must leave your comfort zone to develop effective leadership. Successful group leaders become lifelong learners and develop their social influence by developing themselves and training the [essential basic and advanced leadership skills](#).

## Your personal leadership plan

An essential starting point is developing a **simple plan of which skills you want to learn and in which order**. Successful people know that it is much more probable to succeed when you do not address all subjects in parallel but instead rank them in order of importance and work on them one after the other. A successful leadership development plan includes different types of training, including books, online

courses, and live seminars by experienced leaders.

It is crucial to remember that a personal leadership plan is not a one-time exercise but rather an ongoing process of self-reflection and improvement. As your career progresses, your leadership skills and priorities may change. Thus, you must regularly review and update your plan to ensure it remains relevant and effective.

## Good role models

The best leaders have a detailed plan of how to get to know influential leaders in their field. Action steps may include organizing a symposium (even as a PhD student or a postdoc, you may organize a PhD symposium) and invite the persons you want to meet. You may start a collaboration or write a joint grant. If you are lucky, they may give you advice and show you the right direction to develop strong leadership.

## Executing your leadership action plan

Now that you've determined your goals and created a plan, the next step is to start executing it. You should rank each action item and follow through one by one to avoid being overwhelmed.

This means implementing specific actions, such as participating in leadership training seminars to learn best practices, developing new skills, and attending focus groups. Thus, for successful execution, you need a good action plan that is specific, measurable, achievable, relevant, and time-bound (SMART, see above). It includes enough new challenges and is still realistic.

## Create a system of constructive feedback

Finally, it is vital to create a system of constructive feedback. This means providing yourself and your team members feedback at regular intervals. You need input from mentors and colleagues about your management and leadership challenges. Thus, discuss your challenges on a regular basis with trustworthy persons.

You also need feedback from your group members, and they need feedback and guidance from you. Thus, you should regularly plan lab meetings with everybody and personal appointments with each group member.

These two strategies are the best ways to develop a culture of mentorship over time.

## So much work to become a good leader – is it worth it?

Creating a leadership action plan may seem like a long way off, but it will be worth it in the end. It will take a lot of time and effort, but you will be able to develop the necessary leadership skills to become a better leader every year.

Even after 20+ years, my colleagues and I are still regularly experiencing new leadership challenges because every new project and every new group member is a new challenge. And for every new challenge you need a lot of reflection and new skills.

When you keep learning, you will be able to lead your team to new heights. So, don't be afraid to take the first step in creating a leadership action plan today.

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