

SCIENCE MANAGEMENT ASSOCIATES

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Dear HR, Learning and Development and Training Professional:

Here are some questions I hear from people in roles like yours:

- **How can I convince my scientists that the skills your workshop teach are important? They say they're too busy doing science"**

and

- **"The scientists in my institution have no management training and for some of them it really shows in how they treat the people in their group. How can I get them to understand that they need to learn these skills?"**

I concluded long ago that if a scientist doesn't believe that good management, leadership or interpersonal skills are important in getting their work done then there was very little I could do to convince them otherwise. Of course, there are decades of research in the management and social science literature showing the relationship between these skills and productivity, but scientists will argue (incorrectly) that those studies don't apply to scientific research enterprises. The good news is, that I have seen a dramatic shift away from such skepticism over the last ten years. The new generation of postdocs and junior faculty seem to know the value of these skills, to the extent that in many organizations they get together and create their own training seminars when the administration does not.

The issue is not whether scientists or managers want or even think they need such training. The issue is that you as institutional officials and they as managers have a responsibility to ensure that scientists are being managed and trained in accordance with the best possible principles and practices. Poor or uninformed management and leadership skills are every bit as dangerous as toxic chemicals in the lab. They harm people, they affect people's well-being and can impact the life and career trajectories of trainees. These skills are therefore the direct responsibility of institutional officials and of people in your roles.

You wouldn't think of allowing scientists to work with dangerous and harmful agents in the lab without the proper training. Why then would you allow untrained scientists to manage, train or lead others given the possible (and all too common) negative impact on trainees? You shouldn't.

The acquisition of these skills should not be an option but a requirement for being a manager in your institution. This is not a radical idea – pharmaceutical and biotech companies, many of whom are clients, invest considerable resources and time in training their scientists in management and leadership. A valued client, the National Institutes of Health, requires anyone (including their most senior leaders) who manages or supervises even one other person, to participate in management and leadership training not once, but every three years.

- **“The scientists in my institution only want workshop X (fill in the blank – one specific workshop in the list of 11 that I offer). They’re not interested in the others.”**

Exactly which workshops or training programs are needed in your organization is to some degree up to you. And I mean you, not the scientists. Asking a scientist what kind of management or leadership workshops they need is akin to asking a toddler what they want for lunch. You could do it to be polite, but they probably have no idea what the options are or what they need to be healthy and to grow. At Science Management Associates we have carefully honed our workshop offerings to address the most critical skills that science managers need to acquire, based on our decades-long personal experience in the world of scientific research and in response to requests from people like yourself. We strongly recommend our core offering, the two-day sequence “Leadership and management skills for scientists” (Workshop 11), a “boot camp” for new and seasoned managers alike as the place to start. The fact that it’s a two-day commitment emphasizes the importance you place on these skills.

- **“My scientists won’t come to any workshop that takes more than (fill in the blank - an hour, a half day, etc.). They say they’re too busy.” Or, “Do you run workshops that take only an hour?”**

They are not skills that can be learned in an on-line 45-minute webinar. We firmly believe, and evidence shows, that real learning requires face to face interactive experiences including role playing, one-on-one and team exercises. We understand that taking two days in a row to participate in Workshop 11 is a significant time commitment. When you ask scientists to make such a commitment you are reinforcing the importance of these skills. Depending on geographic location, we do offer the option of separating the two days in workshop 11 by several weeks or more.

- **“Do your workshops teach emotional intelligence?”**

The primary purpose of our workshops is not to improve the emotional intelligence, sensitivity or empathy of those who attend them – although we have seen that happen. Their purpose is to improve the scientific productivity of those who attend them. We firmly believe that scientists who are managed well, are given clear goals with helpful feedback, and who feel that their managers have an interest in their career and development are more motivated and productive than those who lack these advantages. The result is improved communication, collaboration and productivity.

- **How can I increase the likelihood that the scientists in my institution will take these workshops seriously?**

The best way to send the message that this training is important (other than making it mandatory) is to ensure that the senior scientific leadership of your organization is 100% behind the training. It is even better if senior scientific leaders personally introduce the workshops or even attend one or more of them. If support is half-hearted and if allocating time for training is done grudgingly scientists will get the message that it is not that important.

- **Why should my institution spend money training postdocs how interview for a job (for example the “Best Foot Forward” workshops for postdocs) or how to run their own labs (Workshop 11 for postdocs)? These things relate to their future careers, not their work here.**

The skills that your postdocs will learn in Workshop 11 (among others) will improve their ability to work as part of team, to collaborate and to interact productively with others in the lab. These skills will directly impact their productivity at your organization.

As for your responsibility in helping them be productive after they leave, remember that your postdocs are trainees. You have a responsibility to give them the skills they will need to be productive in their careers after they leave. If all you’ve taught them is how to do science, you’re sending them into the job market ill equipped to be successful. I know from experience that today’s postdocs know this and are hungry for training that will give them an advantage both in the job market and in their future scientific productivity.

You and your faculty and staff should emphasize during the postdoc recruitment process that your institution takes your training and mentoring responsibilities seriously and will provide valuable training experiences that will help them become successful in their own careers. Institutions that do this will almost certainly have an edge in recruiting the best and most productive postdocs.

I look forward to talking with you about your science management training needs.

Carl M. Cohen, Ph.D.
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