A Very Personal Perspective on (Research) Staff Management

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Foreword

- **This is going to be rather personal**
  - A biased selection of what I think is important and what works for me
  - I’ll make minimal attempts to generalise

- **I’m a physicist by trade**
  - Being a scientist and a creative researcher is my main identity
  - **Revelation #1:** that is not mutually exclusive with being a good manager
  - **Revelation #2:** getting some training is not only ok, it’s necessary

- **I’m sure I have at least as much to learn from you as you do from myself**
  - I look forward to lots of interesting discussions today
About Myself

- **I joined Sussex in 2009 to establish a new research group in collider physics**
- I founded and lead the Sussex team working on the ATLAS experiment at the Large Hadron Collider (Higgs boson discovery in 2012 – and much more)
- My ATLAS team has grown from 2 faculty, 2 PhD students, 1 tech initially to 5 faculty, 6 post-docs, 9 PhD students, 1 tech now

- **Challenges have evolved with the team size and its growing ambitions**

- **I am also Head of Experimental Particle Physics (EPP)**
- 10 faculty, 12 post-docs, 17 students, 3 technicians – including the ATLAS team
- I am the PI on the Sussex EPP Consolidated Grant (platform grant awarded by the Science and Technology Facilities Council – £1.838M (2012), £2.336M (2015)), as well as on a number of other smaller grants (ATLAS upgrade grants, etc – a few £100k)

  The majority of the funding goes into salaries –

- **Management of resources ≈ management of research staff**
Core Values

- Tacitly or not, you and your team will have agreed a set of core values, on which your research ethos and your working practices are founded
  - E.g.,
    - Doing excellent science
    - Respecting one another
    - Pursuing the greater good of the team as well as that of individuals

- In an ideal world, only good things descend from those values
  - Hard work
  - Enthusiasm
  - Fairness
  - Collegiality
  - ...

- Of course, there are loopholes...
You’re Hired!

- The management of team members begins with recruitment
  - Out of the field of candidates, they will be the best fit to the job description and to the talents of the rest of the team

- On arrival, a good induction and a welcoming atmosphere will make new research staff feel fully engaged
  - You want them to hit the ground running
  - Recruit support from the rest of the team and from other key staff (including admin and tech)

- The first research meeting is very important
  - An early opportunity to set out mutual expectations and goals
Meetings, meetings, meetings

- Regular scheduled interactions with team members are crucial at all levels (although no one likes unnecessary meetings)
  - Circulation of information
  - Planning & review of research strategy and objectives
  - Ongoing assessment of pathways to objectives
  - Early evaluation of emerging opportunities
  - Early identification of challenges and solutions
  - Technical discussions for day-to-day running of research

- In addition to probation, appraisal and other review meetings scheduled at institutional level, I normally have:-
  - Weekly one-to-one meetings with early-career researchers
  - Weekly group meetings with my entire research team
  - Bi-weekly meetings with the entire EPP faculty group
  - Termly meetings with the entire EPP group
  - One-off meetings with individuals and/or small groups if required

- It’s a lot of work!
  - But it pays off in the long term
+ Your Success Is My Success

- **If individual researchers do well, the team does well**
  - And vice versa

- **Expect and encourage everyone in the team to become the best that they can be in all circumstances**
  - As talented and productive researchers
  - As decent human beings
  - Including when things don’t go that well

- **Support people’s realistic career aspirations**
  - Including through self-reflective personal development and formal training

- **Acknowledge and celebrate success**
  - Promotions, conference talks, publication of papers, grants, significant outreach activities, appointments to panels and committees, teaching prizes, …
Leadership Styles

- **We all develop our own “signature” leadership style**
  - There isn’t just one right way to do it
  - In fact, I think everyone gets it wrong at least sometimes
  - Some more than others!

- **Team members will also have their own wide range of attitudes and dispositions towards authority**
  - Which they may sometimes challenge, for various reasons
    - Not a problem as such, but requires managing

- **An authoritative manager is grounded in the team’s core values**
  - Leadership
  - Clear sense of direction
  - Knowledge of subject matter
  - Awareness of own role and that of others
  - Fairness
  - Accountability
Mentoring

- I consider it a measure of my success when a researcher in my team gets on to the next step of their career ladder
  - I want to help them get there
  - Need to discern when to lead, teach, walk with, give a hand, or just sit back and relax

- There’s a lot more to an academic job than just research
  - People need opportunities to grow
  - Hours “away from the lab” aren’t always “lost hours” – we have a duty of care
  - Motivated researchers are better researchers

- Fully rounded research staff need opportunities to get experience of teaching, grant writing, public speaking, outreach, and more
  - Access to high-quality internal and external collaborations and training is always enriching
Like To Get To Know You Well

- **Get to know your colleagues well** (and allow them to get to know you too)
  - It doesn’t mean you’ll be best buddies, but it’s civil –
    - and going to work in the morning becomes a lot more pleasant
  - It also facilitates positive group dynamics

- **Colleagues need to feel comfortable taking their instances to you**
  - Sometimes life gets in the way
    - Maternity/paternity leave, sick leave, other major life events

- **Prevention is better than cure**
  - It helps hugely if one can foresee (and possibly avoid) conflicts
    - Or minimise their impact

- **People are people**
  - A good team spirit is a great aim, but there are differences to respect
    - Because the law asks us and because it’s better for everyone if we do
It’s Not Always Plain Sailing

- **Foresight is a gift, but things don’t always go as planned or intended**
  - In fact, you can bet that sometimes they won’t

- **If a crisis happens, be on the case immediately**
  - Act promptly
  - Don’t let it fester or deepen

- **Let your feedback be of the constructive kind**
  - Every situation can be turned into a learning opportunity for everyone
  - Even when straight talk is necessary

- **Be a good listener**
  - There might be useful feedback in it for you too

- **Some things cannot be altered**
  - It’s important to learn how to manage change
  - And to know when to let go
Do As You Would Be Done

The Golden Rule
Thank you!