From parade ground to PI

At the end of my postdoc, I excelled at moving tiny amounts of colorless fluid from one tube to another at strange times of day, and I had a vague sense of where I wanted to go scientifically. But my experience in the lab wasn’t sufficient to equip me to run my own group. That preparation came from my double life as a British Army Reserve officer. Admittedly, I learned several things in the army that have not been so useful in a research lab, including how to march in time with others, shout very loudly, and swear with an unrivaled range of colorful expletives. Critically, though, my time in the army taught me how to be a leader—for good and ill.

One piece of military management advice that has stuck with me is that “it’s not a popularity contest, sir.” In the army, I sometimes had to make unpopular decisions, such as who stayed behind to guard the barracks while everyone else went on rest and recreation. Getting the job done was more important than being universally liked. I now draw on this mindset in running my lab, whether I need to assign people to empty the garbage or decide who should get first authorship on a paper.

My military experience also helps me prioritize my time in the best interests of the lab. This often comes down to knowing when to lend a helping hand with a big experiment—the popular choice—and when the lab will be better served if I stay in the office to finish that paper. More broadly, the army taught me that sometimes there is no best decision, only a least worst decision. This helps me make difficult choices in science, such as when to ditch a study.

I also learned the importance of the team. Science can feel like a solitary activity. You may find yourself working in the vicinity of other people—the one who leaves the lab a mess, the one who books the key piece of equipment for 3 days solid and then doesn’t use it, the one who talks too loudly about inappropriate things in the communal office—but this isn’t the same as working with other people. In the army, on the other hand, working in stressful environments with people who were tired, cold, and wet fostered camaraderie and understanding that helped us be more effective individually and as a group.

So, as a group leader, I have prioritized team-building. I have found that getting to know my team and building rapport—breaking bread, going to the pub, doing things together outside the lab—makes it possible for me to stress them from time to time, for example by making demands for data and paper revisions and setting deadlines for experiments. But, having stressed the team, I have also found that it is then necessary to rebuild. To do this, I apply the ABCs: acknowledgment (telling people they’ve done well), booze (a bottle of Prosecco goes a long way), and cake.

Of course, the lab is not the army. Among other differences, academia is less directive and more discursive. Discussion leads to better science, but I sometimes find the lack of hierarchy a challenge when it comes to the day-to-day work of running the lab. People don’t simply do things I tell them to just because of my position, and shouting at them in my best parade ground voice (plus expletives) is equally ineffective. Telling one of my students to “JFDI” (look it up) when we were arguing about the best way to do an assay did not have the desired effect—quite the opposite, and it took a bit of ABC to fix this. So, I have learned to temper my inner sergeant major, though he does tend to rear up when I am overworked and stressed.

Ninety percent of being a good lab head is being able to direct your team. Although I’ve needed to adjust my leadership style for different surroundings, having the opportunity to develop a leadership style in the first place has been a real advantage. The army is not for everyone. But if you want to learn to lead, I would recommend getting out of the lab.
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*Science* 359 (6373), 362.
DOI: 10.1126/science.359.6373.362