The balancing act: Leading creative teams for clear, accurate science communication

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Abstract

Leading a team is inherently complex, requiring managers to juggle diverse organisational goals, meet superiors' expectations, and cater to individual team member needs. The challenge intensifies when leading creative teams in a scientific environment. Here, bridging the apparent work-culture gap between scientific and communications disciplines is key. Leaders must ensure scientific accuracy while crafting communication that resonates with the target audience.

This article dives into the specific challenges faced by medical writers and other science communication teams: achieving clear, engaging communication without compromising scientific precision. It explores the complexities of leading such creative teams within a rigorous scientific environment. Effective leadership extends beyond mere results; it cultivates a team culture that both unleashes creative potential and prioritises meticulous fact-checking. The article presents strategies for fostering a high-performing team and addresses the perceived tension between scientific rigor and audience-friendly communication.

Introduction

Arguably, the best result in a professional setting emerges when the person doing the work can perform at the top of their ability. And since several brains contain more competence between them than one, a team of people have greater potential to achieve good results than a single person (if, that is, they can get along).

Effective leadership unlocks this potential. It empowers individuals to perform at their peak while fostering a collaborative spirit within the team. To maintain this high performance over time, a healthy team dynamic is essential, ensuring contentment and motivation among its members.

Achieving this requires fine-tuning one's leadership to each employee, in the current context, and as a part of the current team. This is a task that's daunting enough to any manager but doing it in a creative team while processing highly complex subject matters adds a few layers of considerations.

This article explores the intricacies of leadership within science communication teams. It argues that effective leadership is less about achieving results and more about *how* they are achieved, and emphasises fostering a team environment that enables creativity and high performance.

The myth of the good vs. the bad boss

Before delving into what it takes to be an efficient manager of a creative team in a science-focused workplace, let's first look at what can be said about good leadership in general.

While employees will be highly affected by the boss' leadership style, team managers themselves are generally assessed by their own superiors in the C-suite – i.e., the highest-ranking "chief" positions in a company – based primarily on results. Sadly, often too little attention is paid to how those results are achieved.

A team that enjoys a high degree of psychological safety, that has well functioning work processes, where failure is accepted and success celebrated, will likely produce good results and be at the forefront of innovation.[1] But so may – at least for a period of time – a team led with an authoritarian leadership style, where individuals are more prone to experience burnout. An annual review may show the same quality of result for these two teams. It can take years before signs of destructive leadership become apparent from the outside, when the number of sick days, staff turnover, incidents reported to HR, and so on, reach a level that can be considered statistically relevant.

The C-suite would do well to keep a closer eye on the quality of the internal leadership, however. Bad management doesn't just sour the workday for employees, it has real and tangible repercussions for an organisation's bottom line, too. A UK study[2] done by the Chartered Management Institute and YouGov in late 2023 showed that managers have a deep impact on employee satisfaction, motivational levels, and likelihood of switching jobs. The study found that one in three people (both managers and workers) have left jobs because of a negative work culture. Among those respondents who reported that they had ineffective bosses, 50% planned to quit within the year.

On the other hand, soft, social skills work wonders. The consulting firm EY ran a survey on the correlation between authentic empathy and business success in the US. The results showed that 85–88% of the respondents felt that mutual empathy between business leaders and employees leads to increased efficiency, job satisfaction, creativity, idea sharing, and innovation.[3]

Conflating superficial traits with real leadership competence

Unfortunately, there are ample examples of ineffective bosses. Part of the explanation is that leading people is inherently difficult, and there is no such thing as a natural born leader.

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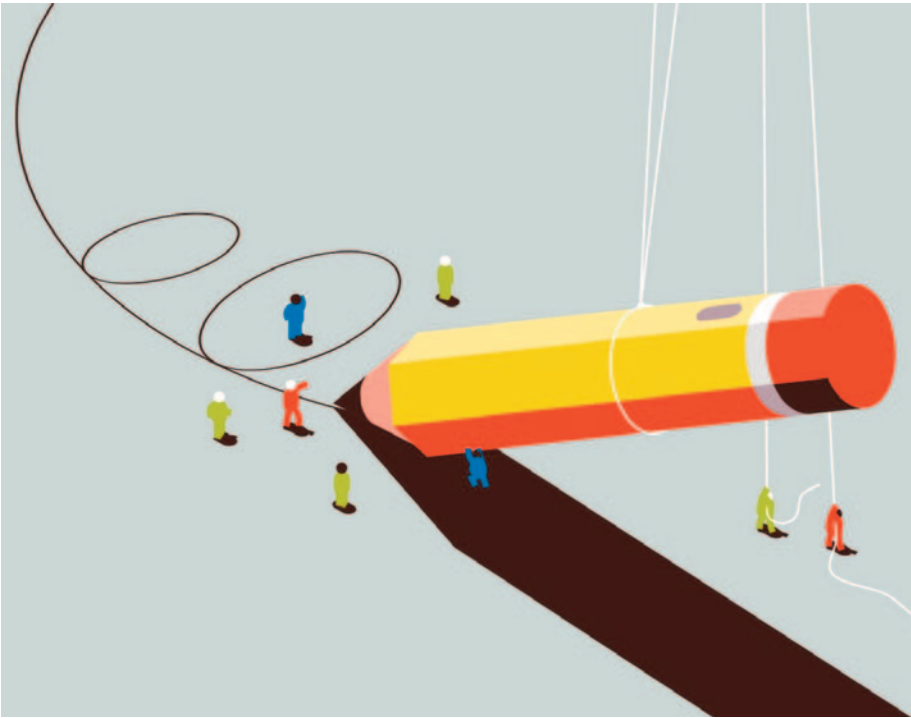
Another factor to consider is the tendency for certain personality types to gravitate towards leadership roles, and many who seek power are not the most pleasant kind of leader to report to. For example, research published in *The Leadership Quarterly* shows a positive correlation between narcissistic tendencies and career advancement.[4]

And further, selection bias can play a role. Boards and hiring managers may prioritise stereotypical leadership traits such as confidence, charisma, certain physical traits, gender, and so on. Focusing too much on superficial attributes leads to overlooking qualified individuals with more quantifiable leadership strengths. Research[5] by the psychologist and writer Dr Tomas Chamorro-Prezumic supports this notion, highlighting the importance of focusing on skills and experience over subjective characteristics.

It is, however, important to distinguish between ineffective management and malicious intent. Research shows that passive leadership, characterised by a lack of engagement and clear direction, can be more destructive than intentional manipulation. Most "bad managers" are just regular, well-meaning people who miss the mark because they lack the necessary skills or resources to fully support their teams. This often manifests as unclear roles in the team, muddled priorities, and vague instructions, ultimately creating an environment of stress, conflict, and inefficiency in the team.[6]

Given the many various pressures leaders face – organisational goals, expectations from superiors, and the widely different needs of individual team members – perhaps it's no wonder that most bosses will fall into passive leadership from time to time.

Becoming a better manager

The good news is that passive or otherwise destructive leadership doesn't have to be the norm. People in leadership positions have every opportunity to set another standard, whether it is as a staff manager striving to be a better boss to their team, or as a C-suite executive taking care to hire managers based on real leadership skill rather than superficial attributes.

Becoming a good boss – or at least a better boss – is a commitment that requires self-reflection, competence development, and an honest and regular assessment of your own and your team's progress. Below are some factors to take into consideration when you embark on this journey.

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- **You're probably not a good manager (yet).** The first step to recovery is to admit that you have a problem, as the old adage goes. In this context, it means acknowledging that you're unlikely as good a manager as you think you are. Throw out any false notion of what a "born leader" or a "good leader" is. You may have confidence for miles, but if you're not able to listen to and understand your team members' needs, you're not there yet. You may be well liked, but if you can't provide clear instructions and set expectations, you're not there yet. Take stock of your strengths as a manager and be honest about your shortcomings. Your mission is now to start improving your leadership in the areas where you are most weak.

- **Focus on what your employees need.** Are you present enough where you're needed? Consider if you're giving your employees the tools and support they need to perform at the top of their ability. Maybe they need active coaching, or it can be a matter of setting the right priorities and clear goals to work towards. Pay extra attention when changes occur, for example new team members joining or new projects starting. These are the times when even high-performing employees, who have so far been working effectively on their own, may stumble and need help to find the new direction.

- **All good leaders are a work in progress.** You'll never reach a point when you're too competent, so make your own continued development a priority. If you have access to formal leadership training, make the most of the opportunity. Additionally, set time aside periodically to analyse your own and the team's performance and progress. By gaining insights into what's working well and what's not, and what has improved, stagnated, or deteriorated, you're able to course-correct and continue developing your own leadership as well as your team.

Leading creative teams in a scientific environment

While leadership in all forms is a balancing act between many demands, leading creative teams comes with its own particular prerequisites. The phrase "creative team" here refers to the many professions that meet and blend in the communications sphere, such as writers, designers, photographers, video- or audio producers, digital channel specialists, brand experts, marketeers, and so on.

The science-vs.-communications culture clash

When you're leading a creative team in a scientific environment, you also need to mitigate an inherent clash in work cultures and values. To simplify, it's a conflict between *what* is being said and *how* it's being said. Scientifically focussed professions tend to value facts, figures, and absolute accuracy – and for good reason, what would science be without it? Communications professionals, on the other hand, aim for appealing to the intended audience by adjusting the language to the appropriate level and packaging information in ways that both grab attention and leave a lasting impression.

The clash between the *what* and the *how* can express itself through, for example, a researcher insisting on the importance of minute details while the creative writer insists that simplifications are needed for the sake of readability. Or a heavy report getting pulled through the editorial machinery to add linguistic flair for the benefit to the reader, but often to the chagrin of the researchers who may feel that their results are strong enough without extra aesthetics.

Both the researcher and the communicator have honed their skills in professions with different gold standards. To the inexperienced, taking the "other side's" perspective on what's most important for a piece of information (the *what* or the *how*) can feel like making a U-turn on something that lies at the very core of one's vocation.

Enter the science communicator, whose task it is to satisfy scientific rigour while striking an emotional chord and leaving an impression with the intended audience. Finding that balance between detailed, factual accuracy and presenting information in a way that's accessible to the audience takes practice.

This author, in the role as a science communications leader, has had the privilege to hire both communications professionals with no prior experience of science communications, as well as scientists making a career change but with no formal training in the art and craft of communications.

Citing experience rather than research, a successful science communicator is the one who,

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as a first step, approaches "the other" with curiosity and respect for their priorities and expertise. As a second step, a foundation of knowledge into the new field must be built. This means the scientist-turned-communicator needs to learn the craft of creative communications, and the communicator-breaking-into-science must acquire at least a basic understanding of that scientific field.

Leading a science communications team

As discussed at the beginning of this article, good leadership means enabling individual team members to perform at the best of their ability, making a team of people pull in the same direction, and maintaining a healthy dynamic.

Given the conditions of the communications profession, as well as the added particularities of the science communications, or sci-comms, profession, achieving that boils down to a few key points.

- **Make room for creative exploration.** There's a saying that goes "creativity is 10% inspiration and 90% perspiration". While it is true that most creative communication stems from hard work and craftsmanship, it's crucial to not lose sight of the inspiration part. Make sure to carve out time for creative exploration for your team, so they can try out new things and enjoy the creative process for its own sake, which adds inspiration to the day-to-day work.

- **Make room for learning.** Since very few people step into the work force as full-fledged science communicators, creating opportunities for continued learning for your team is crucial. That's especially true given the break-neck speed with which digital communication channels and technologies alter the foundations of how we exchange information. Perhaps your team members need to learn how to use a software or come to grips with an ever-changing social media algorithm, or they need to adjust to the

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emergence of AI in order to create and publish more efficient content. Or they need to strengthen their understanding of the scientific field or the research processes at the current workplace. The latter can be achieved for example by finding online short courses or asking the team member to team up with a research colleague to create a specific information package – they'll learn heaps in the process.

- **Mind the quality control.** Within scientific fields with particularly complex topics, there is an increased risk of miscommunication, and with that comes an increased need for quality checks. Keeping both the research perspective and audience perspective front and centre is particularly important within medical or pharmaceutical areas; even when industry peers with a high level of technical knowledge are the intended audience, issues relating to health and medicine attracts attention from the general public. Within life sciences, it's worthwhile to do a double round of quality check to ensure that your communication is both factually correct, and that the audience will understand it as intended.

● **Play the diplomat.** While you and your merry band of science communicators are used to walking the tightrope between the scientific and creative fields, the rest of the colleagues in your organisation most likely aren't. If you're met with skepticism towards, for example, the value of creative communication, the purpose of social media, the need to dress things up or tweak text to make it more accessible, take the time to explain your point of view. When possible, back up your claims with the kind of hard facts that the scientific process relies on – metrics and results measured over time work wonders.

Medical writers face a unique challenge: bridging the gap between scientific rigor and clear, engaging communication. This requires not only strong writing skills but also a firm understanding of the specific scientific field they'll be working in. This article has highlighted the importance of fostering a team environment that encourages both creative exploration and meticulous fact-checking. As a medical writer, embrace the opportunity to learn from your colleagues on both the scientific and creative sides – their combined expertise is what fosters truly impactful science communication. After all, successful science communication isn't a compromise between scientific accuracy and audience engagement; it's the harmonious marriage of both.

Disclaimers

The opinions in this article are the author's own and not necessarily shared by EMWA.

Disclosures and conflicts of interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

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