

A different approach to supporting young scientists

Bringing the human factor into science

Key communication skills, setting goals and priorities, or dealing with conflict: the educational events organized by SystemsX.ch promote skills that are often neglected in science. Communications expert Sašo Kočevar has led the workshops since 2012 and explains why soft skills are particularly important for researchers.



Sašo Kočevar supports researchers in their scientific careers by helping them reflect on the human aspects of science.

What gave you the idea of offering coaching in soft skills specifically to researchers?

To be honest, it wasn't a strategical choice; it just turned out that way! One of my first clients was a research institution, which is how I came into contact with this topic for the first time. After running two courses with researchers, I knew that this was exactly what I wanted to focus on. I saw what little knowledge of communication, delegation and leadership there was in science – things that are standard in other fields – and what little support and training were available in these areas.

So you discovered a gap in the market?

You could say that. But when we first started running our workshops ten years ago, academia was only just starting to take these topics seriously.

To what extent has this changed since then?

The acceptance and awareness of soft skills and their importance in science has increased significantly. The first group leaders in our courses were viewed as peculiar by their colleagues. One or two of them were surely asked why they were wasting their valu-

able time on workshops and coaching. Since then, it has become a lot more acceptable for scientists to address these topics. The younger generation, such as students and postdocs, even asks after these types of courses. They expect to receive training on subjects like constructive collaboration, good communication and conflict management.

Why are soft skills particularly important for researchers?

The problems that researchers endeavor to solve are very complex, which is why they depend on collaboration with other researchers. Interpersonal skills are crucial in building fruitful collaborations and achieving goals together despite differences in approaches or ways of thinking.

What are the skills promoted in your courses that encourage constructive collaboration?

The first step is to become aware of the different personalities in your team, including your own. Then it is important to realize how these differences influence the roles in a collaboration. Recognizing individualities in the people you work with, and correctly handling these differences, is crucial in constructive collaboration.

Active listening, which means really concentrating on what your collaborator has to say as well as signaling attentiveness, asking perceptive questions, or giving appropriate feedback in the right way – these are all important skills that are practiced in the workshops.

What if, despite these measures, the collaboration doesn't run smoothly?

Scientists work in an extremely competitive environment, which means conflict is inevitable. In our workshops the researchers also learn how to deal with difficult interpersonal situations. Here, active listening plays a key role too, but how to address a conflict and negotiate a solution are also important elements in overcoming difficulties, and they can be practiced.

How do you ensure the successful implementation of these concepts in practice?

We work a lot with case studies. For example, in conflict management, participants bring forward concrete cases from their own experience. The techniques learned in the workshop are then put directly into practice by means of role-play. Since the researchers receive external feedback from the coaches, they are able to correct their own behavior, further strengthening the learning experience.

You also offer training in leadership and management skills. Why do you think young researchers need these skills at their stage?

In order to achieve a research goal, you need to get people excited about your own ideas and motivate them to contribute their potential. This is really a leadership problem, even if it's not formally associated with a leadership position.

And what if I don't feel I'm a born leader? To what extent can leadership skills be developed?

Competence in leading is nothing mysterious! These skills can definitely be learned. For example, motivation and enthusiasm cannot be commanded by you as a leader. Instead, you have to understand the underlying interpersonal processes involved and include others by integrating their ideas. These are skills that can be practiced.

For me, good leadership needs both skills and awareness. This is why we guide the researchers through practical examples and techniques, as well as imparting the analytical tools to tackle difficult interpersonal situations and sharpening the focus on these issues.

What else can researchers hope to learn in your courses?

An important aspect is correctly defining one's own role. In addition to the official capacity as a researcher, further roles such as supervisor (when dealing with students) or collaborator in a diverse research group can be identified. Each of these roles involves specific responsibilities, requiring a different skill set. The researchers

learn, for example, how to set goals, how to manage their own time, but also how to delegate. All of these skills are important in structuring their own research processes and making collaboration and teamwork more efficient.

This year's SystemsX.ch Retreat will focus on career development. How do your workshops support young researchers in their scientific careers?

The retreat will be all about the researchers recognizing and formulating their own competence profiles. This means understanding what abilities they can bring to the table. What skills are they developing right now during their PhD? And how can they incorporate these in a research project? The researchers will also learn how to formulate their competence profiles and present themselves well in a job interview.

In your opinion, what are the most important skills for a successful scientific career?

Organizing your own workflow, prioritizing and setting goals, as well as designing the collaborative process in the best way to achieve results are surely key ingredients. But research is not a one-way street to success. Being able to handle open questions as well as uncertainty and frustration is therefore just as important.

Do you perceive a difference in the participants at the end of the course?

We always like to see the participants leave our courses with increased self-confidence. They gain trust in their own abilities to solve conflict situations or problems that they would previously have deemed unsolvable. Apart from that, many of them see themselves just as a researcher at the start of the course, but by the end they can identify with other roles, too. During the coaching process, they realize that leadership is not some elusive magic ingredient, and they start to feel much more comfortable and confident taking on leadership roles. Last but not least, according to testimony, the participants feel they can take home the tools they have learned for use in their private lives, as well as their professional ones.



Sašo Kočevár and his team from hfp consulting focus exclusively on training and coaching for life scientists. A further SystemsX.ch Retreat and Post-doc Workshop are planned for 2017 in order to support and encourage young researchers in their current scientific work as well as in their career development.

More information about hfp consulting is available at: www.hfp-consulting.de

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