

Leadership Tips for Women

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By Elisabeth Pain | Sep. 17, 2013 , 5:00 PM

Since 2005, the **European Molecular Biology Organization** (EMBO) has offered more than 100 several-day **laboratory management courses** to more than 1000 emerging and established group leaders in Europe. The course was held again this past June, near Heidelberg, Germany, but this year's course was a departure from previous years: This time only women were invited, and the course was targeted at helping them succeed as **female leaders in academic science**.



Jacqueline Jacobs

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Behind this change is a desire to **further redress the underrepresentation of women in the life sciences**, says EMBO Deputy Director Gerlind Wallon. While women make up about half of the **long-term postdoctoral fellows** supported by EMBO, only about a quarter of EMBO's **young independent group leaders** are women, and less than a fifth of **EMBO's elected members** are women. Among the core aims of the course was to debunk gender stereotypes and boost women's self-confidence.

**"You can get rid of this insecurity and not be bothered by it." —
“ Jacqueline Jacobs,”**

Breaking stereotypes



Hilde Janssens

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Hilde Janssens

The new **EMBO Laboratory Management Course: Female Leaders in Science** began by dismantling common gender stereotypes, in particular the perception that leadership is gender-dependent. In one exercise, participants were asked to think of a female role model and describe what skills and attributes made that person a good leader. Next, they had to repeat the exercise with a male role model. When the two lists were compared it became clear that "a woman can be as successful as a leader as a man, and all the characteristics that a good leader should have would be the same for a man as it would be for a woman," says **Jacqueline Jacobs**, of the Division of

Molecular Oncology at the **Netherlands Cancer Institute** in Amsterdam, who attended the course.

"It's not so much gender that says if you're a good leader or not; it's more personality," says **Hilde Janssens**, who played a major role in designing and delivering the EMBO course as a freelance consultant for **hfp consulting**, a company based in Heidelberg that trains scientists in leadership skills. (Janssens is also a lab manager at the **Centre for Genomic Regulation** in Barcelona, Spain.) Being tough or being shy "is a much more contributing parameter to being a leader than ... if you're a man or a woman." (article continues **below ...**)

Some leadership lessons from the EMBO Female Leaders in Science course

- Leadership skills don't depend much on whether you're female or male; leadership style and effectiveness are linked much more strongly to personality.
- Everyone needs to develop their own leadership style. It's OK for women to be tough; you just need to be comfortable in that role.
- Knowing what you're good at can help you build confidence and become a better leader. Think of your strengths as helpful friends that

you can depend on.

- Having strategies to address your weaknesses can help you feel empowered.
- Practice talking about your strengths and avoid apologizing too much.
- Learn to act confident and real confidence will follow.
- Employ positive language and an authoritative voice.
- Even if it doesn't come naturally, you can learn to be an effective leader.

*The course also attacked stereotypes that relate gender and behavior. For example, both men and women can be extremely shy, and compared to the range within one gender any differences between genders is small, Janssens says. "You have to separate gender identity from behavior."

With this as a premise, participants were encouraged to gain awareness of their own personality and leadership styles. In introspective exercises, participants analyzed their own values, goals, strengths, and resources. "And suddenly you realize, yes, this is the person I am, and this is my vision, and this is my leadership, and this is really so good," says participant Susana Cristobal, of the Department of Clinical and Experimental Medicine at Linköping University in Sweden. Participants were encouraged to set aside gender stereotypes and accept who they are. "It's OK to be tough and still be female," Janssens says.

More self-confidence

Although the skill set needed to be a good leader doesn't depend on gender, some characteristics seem to be rarer in one gender than the other, Janssens says. One such characteristic is self-confidence, which in general, women have less of, Wallon adds.

The course aimed to tackle this difference upfront through introspective exercises. Cristobal credits these exercises with helping her recognize her strengths and potential. While she could still see room for improvement, she left the course believing that her years of trying to become a better group leader have paid off. "Yes, I think I have improved," she says. She also gained a greater awareness of her aptitudes and skills, and assertiveness in discussing them.

Course participants were encouraged to identify five strengths and think of them as friends to rely on. These are your "sources of power," Janssens explains. At the end of one exercise, participants were asked to present

themselves, saying, " 'I'm a leader, and my strengths are this, and this, and this'," Janssens says. "To say that out loud in front of everybody, with a body language that matches, with a voice that matches, is quite powerful, and it helps to internalize it."

Participants also worked to employ an authoritative voice and positive language. They were encouraged to say things like, " 'Well, I am actually pretty good' " rather than, " 'I think I might be good' ", Janssens says. They were also made aware of the impact of apologizing excessively. When asked for a clarification following a presentation, most male speakers just explain whereas "a woman often apologizes... 'Oh, sorry, I didn't explain that very well,'" Janssens says. She encourages women to rephrase answers so that they sound positive, she adds.



Susana Cristobal

CREDIT: Susana Cristobal

If you practice coming across as more confident, you probably will end up feeling more confident.

CREDIT: Susana Cristobal
Susana Cristobal

That was the message of a **TED talk from social psychologist Amy Cuddy** of Harvard Business School, which participants viewed during the course. Cuddy's research on what she calls "power posing" showed that testosterone levels go up—and with it your perception of your own power—when you adopt a confident posture. "The awareness of the importance of body language and posture was also a kind of eye-opener," Jacobs says. This is something that you can use when giving presentations but also during meetings, especially if a problem comes up that you need to tackle upfront, she adds. "You can get rid of this insecurity and not be bothered by it."

Addressing shortcomings

Participants also took a hard look at their own personalities to identify any shortcomings that affect leadership. Jacobs, for example, realized that because she is a perfectionist she often just did things for people in her lab instead of showing them how to do it better. "I want to try to be more like a coach to my people," she says. Jacobs's lab, which studies telomere damage and cancer, employs one postdoc, three Ph.D. students, and a technician. Cristobal, whose environmental proteomics lab is staffed by three postdocs

and four Ph.D. students, believes that she needs to be more empathetic and do a better job transmitting her passion for research and her long-term vision.

Once shortcomings were identified, the course aimed to help participants address them by honing their lab management skills. Participants did exercises and discussed problems they had in the lab and ways those problems could be dealt with. Coming back to the lab with specific tools and strategies for improvement make you feel empowered, Jacobs says.

Creating a peer group



Gerlind Wallon

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Marietta Schupp

CREDIT: EMBO/EMBL Marietta Schupp
Gerlind Wallon

can make a big difference. So don't wait to feel like you are a good leader to act like one, Wallon says. "You have the role already, so you'd better fill it out, and you can fill it out."

Perhaps the most important aspect of the course, some participants said, was spending 3 days interacting with women facing similar challenges. Indeed, within a few days of the course's end, they decided they would all meet once a year. Having a peer group like this allows you to "just discuss issues that come up, ask, 'OK, I have this problem. ... Did you ever run into that? How did you solve it?' —you know, that helps a lot," Jacobs says.

"Some people are more natural leaders than others; it has to do with their personality," Jacobs says. "But you can learn it," and just making a few small changes

Further Reading (suggested by Hilde Janssens)

- *Delusions of Gender: How Our Minds, Society, and Neurosexism Create Difference* by Cordelia Fine
- *Ask For It: How Women Can Use the Power of Negotiation to Get What They Really Want* by Linda Babcock and Sara Laschever
- *Same Difference: How Gender Myths Are Hurting Our Relationships,*

Our Children, and Our Jobs by Rosalind Barnett and Caryl Rivers

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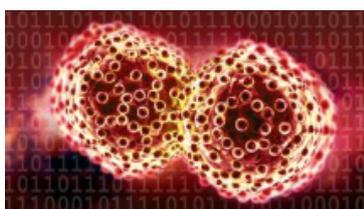


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