Attributes of Successful Leaders in Research

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What makes a leader successful? As the Director of Research at the Vanderbilt-Ingram Cancer Center’s (VICC) Clinical Trials Office, I had to think of new ways to engage employees when I became the director nearly 15 years ago. The staff started a GLUE (Greater Loyalty Utilizing Empowerment) Committee. We established the committee to help keep our employees happy and build connections. Isn’t that what all leaders want? I quickly learned that keeping all employees happy at all times was impossible but the GLUE committee provided an avenue for bonding that built many much-needed bridges during challenging times.

After nearly 30 years in this field, I have to say that I truly believe that effective leadership is the ability to build relationships with all customers. A turning point in my career was when I realized that relationships with not only my employees, but the physicians were important. The principal investigators and physician scientists with whom I have worked have taught me to trust my instincts even if it meant doing something that was uncharacteristic or unpopular. The relationship with my employees improved my leadership skills. Even today, I look back at some of these relationships and the memories are positive.

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Another attribute of successful leaders is being able to focus and having undying passion. I do not think there is a person who knows me who does not think I am
passionate about what I am doing. Sometimes, though, for a leader this can be to a fault. Partnering with people to create ideas builds teams, preventing burnout. As a driven leader, one must find that balance so they neither navigate nor deteriorate from the goal.

With the complexities that we face in clinical research, finding a balance with the stress is also a good quality to have. One big task is to lead your “stressed out” staff to stress relievers and humor. For some, the responsibilities are too enormous to handle and they walk away. This is where the GLUE Committee did its magic by having the creativity to set a positive tone with stress relief for the staff, and which helped me as a leader.

As a leader you also must continuously learn and grow. Health care is a moving target and there are numerous ways to find information. SoCRA, HCCA, and NCURA all provide avenues for learning and keeping current with the issues we face.

Curiosity is a trait that I want in employees. I want drive and a hunger and desire to learn. Curiosity is a trait that I want in employees. I want drive and a hunger and desire to learn. There is never a stupid question in clinical research. From the moment I begin working with someone, I get excited when they ask questions or bring issues to my attention. In order to meet compliance, questions must be asked and answered. As a leader, I believe that staff should trust me so they are confident in bringing their matters to me. This shows integrity. I believe that a leader who promotes integrity leverages success while leading.

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Look at yourself in the mirror. Do you see a leader of whom people are proud? Do you encourage communication? What intangibles can your staff say about working for you? Do you actually talk to your staff? Do you know their families and ask how they are doing? Are you reasonable with their requests? When was the last time you showed a staff member gratitude? These are all attributes of a strong leader. I believe there are five rules for successful leadership.

Rule #1: Do not just talk to your staff. Listen to what they say.

It is common for leaders to just talk and never truly listen to what people are saying back at them. Just because you have more experience does not necessarily mean you have all of the answers. Listen and learn from your team and you will reap the benefits.
Rule #2: Think about the first words that come from your mouth in a tense situation.

Most people spontaneously reply when there is a heated discussion. Have a scripted answer that provides you time to think before you react, especially when dealing with your staff or busy physicians. This will go far in working with them. You might say, “That is an excellent discovery. Let me take some time to consider what you have said and get back with you.”

Rule #3: Leave your ego at home.

All of us are egotistical. In academic medicine where there is some competition, egos can sometimes damage relationships. Defining roles will build confidence that everyone knows their place in the organization. “I” is not the operative word you should use, but “we” as a leader.

Rule #4: Respect open-mindedness in the workplace.

Flexible scheduling has always been successful no matter where I worked. Grasping differing cultures and ideas and blending them is challenging but can be one of the most successful things you do as a leader. Learn as you go and do not be afraid to ask.

Rule #5: Find the humor and make work fun.

I recall some of the holiday parties we had a Vanderbilt and it makes me smile. Some of our employees formed a band called “The Placebos”. They played at many employees’ events; to this day, I think that band was probably one of the best “successes” ever in my time as a leader. I did not have to do anything but support what the committee did and encourage them to have functions where our employees could enjoy themselves and relax. “The Placebos” are forever engrained as one of the true benefits that positively affected our functioning as an office.

So as you can see, the attributes to successful leaders in research involve understanding human nature first and not ignoring the needs of your team. I go back once again to the GLUE Committee and recall the value in leading by example and supporting what the employees did. The power of team building was by far more important than my support of the committee’s work. In my mind now it was the GLUE that kept us together as a team. That relationship did more than I could have alone in my time at the VICC and the advantages gained were not all mine!
**ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

*Kelly Willenberg* is the owner of Kelly Willenberg, LLC. She has a vast array of knowledge and works with a variety of research compliance advocates to meet the needs of her clients. She has extensive knowledge in clinical trials management and research compliance, including all aspects of billing compliance. She has nearly thirty years of clinical research experience with over fifteen years in billing compliance. She is an experienced oncology nurse and has presented at HCCA, ONS, ASCO, AHLA, MAGI, ExL Pharma, SoCRA, AHIA, and other professional organizations. She assisted in writing the *Research Compliance Professional’s Handbook* for the Healthcare Compliance Association (HCCA) and serves as a faculty member for HCCA’s Research Compliance Academy. She also is serving as an editor for the 3rd edition of the *ONS Manual for Clinical Trials Nursing* and authoring a variety of chapters in that edited publication. She is certified in Healthcare Research Compliance (CHRC) and Healthcare Compliance (CHC). She worked for over twelve years at Vanderbilt University Medical Center as both the Director of Billing Compliance and as the Director of the Clinical Trials Office for the Cancer Center. She has owned her own consulting business for the past five years, specializing in research healthcare compliance.