

# ARE YOU A LEADER WITHOUT EVEN KNOWING IT?

## What do you look like when you are leading?

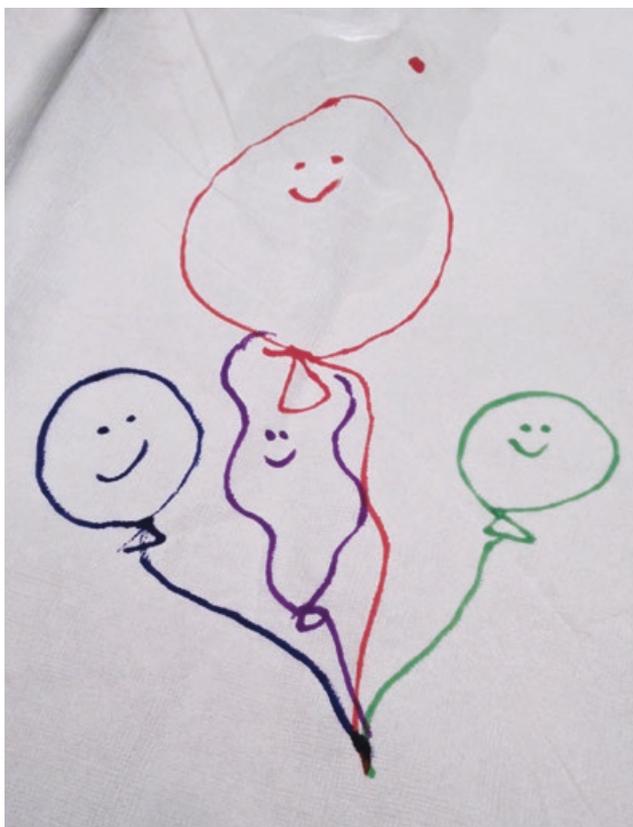
by Anne Osterrieder

If you had asked me a year ago what a leader was, I would have replied: a person in power, not only capable to, but having the authority to initiate change. In science, this person would be someone with heaps of publications and a stellar reputation. Would I have described myself as a leader? No way.

Then, 'Aurora' happened. 'Aurora' is a programme run by the Leadership Foundation for Higher Education. Its aim is to help women in higher education, in academic and professional roles, to develop their leadership skills. More importantly, it encourages women to think of themselves as leaders in the first place. I never would have applied on my own account to attend the course, imposter syndrome and all. Luckily, my university proactively recruited its first Aurora cohort, and my department and faculty funded the course.

To my big surprise, I discovered that even though I was an early career scientist, far from being in any official position of power or influence, I was already leading without realising it.

I always felt very passionate about including public engagement in my everyday work. But, recently, I had noticed that I was doing fewer outreach activities. Instead, I had started to run training sessions for other researchers; I had set up a funding scheme for small public engagement projects in our faculty. My focus had shifted from doing, to enabling others to do, public engagement. I had felt guilty about this. If I was that passionate, should I not be doing as much as possible myself?



The answer that very quickly emerged from 'Aurora' was, that being a leader does not just mean being the best in doing something. Leadership means having a vision and communicating it, creating structures, inspiring and empowering others, and working collaboratively towards a common goal.

I should add that this is my own, possibly quite simplistic definition of leadership. The day I went into the library to search for books about leadership, I discovered that there are many different leadership concepts and styles. I felt like a duckling just having taken its first step into unknown deep waters.

One of the most important things I learnt is that you do not need to be in an official position of power to be a leader. Have you taken on leadership roles by organising an early career researcher symposium? Have you organised a stall at a science festival, or a workshop at a summer school? Start picturing your vision. What do you want to achieve?

What are the goals and objectives needed to get there? Who should be part of your team to help you, and how do you communicate effectively with them?

Also think about your vision beyond your immediate research focus. My public engagement vision is "to create a supportive environment, which inspires and enables researchers to integrate public engagement activities with their everyday work". My personal vision is to be a connected researcher, identifying and creating opportunities to connect with people in other areas, to maximise impact and discover new avenues of thinking.

In the first Aurora workshop, we had to draw a picture of ourselves when we were leading. Someone pictured herself riding to battle on a horse, with a small army behind her. Another woman drew a swan, frantically paddling under water, but appearing calm on top. At the time, the exercise made me cringe. Slightly stuck, I scribbled a smiling balloon on the tablecloth, lifting up a bunch of other balloons. To my surprise, I have found myself visualising this image in times of pressure and self-doubt. So here is my challenge for you: Take a pen and a piece of paper. How do you look like when you are leading? ●

### References

- Leadership Foundation for Higher Education, 'Aurora – Developing future leaders for Higher Education': <http://www.lfhe.ac.uk/en/programmes-events/you/aurora/>
- Vitae, 'What does leadership mean to you?' <https://www.vitae.ac.uk/news/what-does-leadership-mean-to-you/>
- Dan Rockwell, 'Leadership Freak': <https://leadershipfreak.wordpress.com/>