



Yvonne Klaue

advisor if you can take over a project or oversee students,” she suggests.

This is exactly what **Yvonne Klaue** did during her postdoc at the University of California, Irvine. When her PI announced he was taking a sabbatical for a year, she offered to run the lab in his absence. Klaue organized regular meetings of the research group, supervised the junior members to ensure they were meeting the lab’s mission and goals, handled group communications with other faculty, and even oversaw inventory and budgeting.

“No one ever told me how to manage a lab,” she says. “I was thrown into it.”

As you look for opportunities to reinforce your management experience, recognize that leadership is not limited to managing people and projects. A great leader is one who has vision and the ability to implement that vision with success. Cournia was able to gain and demonstrate this kind of leadership drive by creating a funding source for postdocs to travel to conferences while at Yale. At the time, there was no institutional financial support for non-U.S. citizen postdocs to present at scientific meetings. On her own accord, Cournia approached the Office for Postdoctoral Affairs and helped launch a committee to write a grant proposal to the provost to support the endeavor. The committee ended up raising \$20,000 that year and the travel fund became a permanent part of the Yale budget. “There are ways you can demonstrate your leadership potential, your potential to be a doer, and that you are really committed to your career,” she urges. “This was essential to my career so I could travel to conferences, so I did it. As an independent researcher, you need to show you can be tough and decisive and that you can take the next step to go forward and be proactive.”

There are other opportunities to be found on your campus that can aid you in your career, says **Leslie Beckman**, senior coordinator of special programs in the Office of Postdoctoral Affairs at the University of Texas Health Science Center at Houston (UTHealth). Consider serving on high-profile committees, like the postdoctoral association, or taking on interdisciplinary or even interinstitutional projects that allow you to be seen as a leader. Furthermore, teaching and informal mentoring can also provide you with critical leadership skills.

Teambuilding

As a postdoc, your research group may seem like a functioning team environment. But more often than not, “work is partitioned off into silos but the staff doesn’t have to deeply collaborate or rely on team members for success,” says **Steven Casper**, Henry E. Riggs Professor of Management and associate dean for faculty development of the Keck Graduate Institute of Applied Life Sciences (KGI). But to transition into a research career where you are the leader, you must have abilities that show you know how to effectively collaborate on and build a winning team. Casper recommends pursuing an internship or a short-term volunteer project in your university “where you have to

rely on a division of labor to reach goals,” he says. You might consider joining a team through the institution’s entrepreneurship program, where students work on business plans and appreciate a postdoc’s technical expertise. “Go outside the ‘all science zone’ and work with highly intelligent people who are in other disciplines than your own,” he advises.

Networking plays an important role in building a unit that can accomplish a goal. **Michelle Fennessy**, a postdoctoral fellow in nursing at the University of California, Davis, works at the crossroads of data management, administration, and safety in hospital environments. She realized that to accomplish her research and acquire funding, she would need a multidisciplinary lineup with major credentials behind her. So she actively recruited thought leaders in the field. It took her six months of networking through conferences and leveraging contacts to assemble her dream team, but it was worth it on so many levels, she says. “As a junior investigator, it is important to surround yourself with experts in the field to help mentor you through the process,” she notes.

Communication

“Everything we do as faculty requires communication skills,” stresses **Wendi Heinzelman**, dean of graduate studies and professor of electrical and computer engineering at the University of Rochester. “You can have the greatest idea but if you don’t know how to explain it, it will fall flat on its face.”

The ability to convince others of the importance of your work and why they should engage you, either as an employer, research partner, funder, or mentor, is paramount. You should seek as many opportunities as possible to practice these skills. Start small where the stakes are low, says Lundsteen. Begin by giving a talk in your research group, then move on to a journal group, the department, your postdoc association, and then to a conference. Volunteer to speak in another department besides your own, says **Michael Hadjiargyrou**, chair of life sciences at NYIT. “It forces you to put together a presentation that’s targeted for a specific audience,” which is vital given that when you interview for an academic job, you may have to give a talk for scientists outside your realm of research or in another department altogether. Hadjiargyrou also recommends seeking out opportunities to address lay people.

Funding

A demonstrated record of finding and acquiring funding is crucial to landing a job in academia, where “you don’t just get handed a sack of money,” jokes Lundsteen. Working on a grant project signals to the prospective employer that “you are cognizant of the funding and where it comes from,” she adds.

So naturally, as a postdoc you should consider applying for grants. Cournia wrote 20 applications and received funding from three. Her hard work and success established to her perspective **continued**

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