

On the challenge of management in academia:
Reflections from managing a firm
- by Nir Waysbort

A casual train ride to work at the Weizmann Institute of Science offered me the opportunity to engage in a conversation with a young PI about the challenges facing an individual pursuing a career in the academia. Several of the issues brought forth have struck me as familiar from my days in the high-tech industry, in which I've served in different managerial roles, culminating in owning a small firm. I've been asked to share my insights from these days and compare them to life in the academia.

The most striking difference between heading a research group and managing a firm lies, in my opinion, in the way a person relates to his or her job. While both are expected to achieve a myriad of goals and are associated with their firm or research group, the firm will always remain a separate entity. This entity is associated or linked to its owner and executives by reputation or resume, but in the aftermath of business affairs companies can be closed at will, and in case of failure, a chance for redemption in a new company is readily available. Therefore, there lies within the good executive an understanding that he is not his company.

Heading a research team, however, creates a permanent link between the team and the scientist heading it. This

is evident in the most primal way by the convention which names the group after its PI. This link runs deep and naturally tends to impact the researcher's sense of well being and self perception. Since the academic world is reputation-based, and we all have but one name (some not even that – e.g. the singer Prince), achievements within the group tend to boost our self perception, while when things don't go that well – we immediately project the transient failure of the group on ourselves and tarnish our perception of ourselves as successful people.

When this equation (work=me) occurs in the industrial world, we can see situations in which a manager who did not fully realize the dissociation of himself and his firm drags a dying company through the mud, resulting in a frustrated and undercompensated workforce, bad publicity, and usually a grim ending. This is almost unavoidable – since in his perception the company is the manager and the manager is the company, closing it is unbearable and unthinkable. A good manager, however, knows that the company is merely a tool to achieve goals, and once it is no longer viable – after assessing future projections and its financial state – it should be shut down gracefully, its workers should be compensated and plans for building a better tool in the future should be laid.

This is a non-option for scientists, since the equality of name and group is embedded within the infrastructure of the academic world. However, total failure of a research group is a rare, extreme event. Most of the frustrations a scientist may encounter rise from the fluctuation of mood and of feeling of self worth within a normal, successful scientific career. Here, “good” and “bad” days are a function of the achievements of the group, which radiate into areas of the psyche in which they should not play that big a part.

As for solutions to this issue, I can only offer what has helped me deal with the pressure of management. In a nutshell: exercise awareness and constantly zoom-out. Listen and accept the feelings that rise within you and try to find their source, and most importantly – remember that you are not your work. Layer your life both in your micro-environment and in your macro-environment. In your microenvironment – engage in multiple activities both within your workspace and outside of it, so that you have a broader, more complex range of activities your unconsciousness can

measure success by. Within your group – diversify the projects you undertake, assess constantly their expectation to success and act accordingly. Furthermore, participate in activities outside of your group – pedagogic, social and administrative. In a broader view of life – remember always that it is a long haul, and rise above the daily noise, while realizing the long term positive trend. Acknowledge the traits that have brought you to this position, and realize that they will be there for you no matter which avenue of life you will find yourself in. Cherish your family and friends, lean on them and allow them to give you a sense of what is truly important in life.



"Everybody's getting together after work to do some more work. You in?"