

By Lucka Bibic

Learning to lead

About a year ago, I took on the best imaginary job out there: CEO of CryoThaw, the finest company that never existed. I had come across a tweet announcing the 2017 Young Entrepreneurs Scheme competition, sponsored by the University of Nottingham with partners from the U.K. government and industry, in which teams form hypothetical startups based on feasible scientific ideas. As a graduate student unsure of my career plans, I was excited to explore outside academia. I also saw it as a way to develop my leadership skills. So, with the support of my supervisors and funders, I decided to give it a go. I recruited three other students, and we chose to focus on improving organ transplantation. I thought I had everything under control. I couldn't have been more wrong.

They say successful teams are part art, part science. Initially, we were neither. We were just four students with remarkably different personalities struggling to work toward a shared goal. I had allocated tasks based on each team member's skills, but I confused delegation with leadership and failed to motivate the team to work together. Our initial meetings went in circles—repetitive conversation with no clarity and a lot of time wasted rehashing previous decisions—and frequently ended in turmoil. As a result, the project started with frustration and animosity. The tension between being perceived as my teammates' competent CEO and who I actually was—their grad school buddy with no prior leadership experience or training—became intolerable. I considered opting out of the whole thing.

After a few weeks, a teammate confessed to me that he found our meetings stressful, too. I finally grasped that this culture was unsettling for everyone, not just me. "Oh boy, I suck!" I thought. Something needed to change.

I turned to my go-to tool for working through my thoughts and seeking clarity: I wrote in my notebook. I reflected on our performance and how each team member was an asset. I articulated examples where everyone, myself included, could do better. I thanked them for pushing me. When I saw that what I had written actually made sense, I decided that there was nothing to do but email it to my team as what I called an "open letter from your CEO." Maybe it would help us find a way forward, because otherwise we were going nowhere.

For a day, I could hardly bear to check my email. Then I cut myself some slack and decided I could feel proud of this appreciative, frank, vulnerable email. It felt like progress.



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Soon, my teammates called and thanked me for what I had written. They were relieved to learn that they were not the only ones struggling. Ultimately, the email served as a bond. And it taught me that being a leader is all about authenticity.

From there, team chemistry took off as we spoke our minds, good and bad. I found my voice as a leader, fostering an environment where we acknowledged our individual strengths and weaknesses, and where I wasn't expected to have all the answers but could nevertheless provide guidance. We read and watched everything we could find about heart transplantation, learned from webinars about startups, networked with experienced entrepreneurs, contacted national health services for data, and arranged consultations with medical experts.

Then, one day, a teammate entered the meeting with his hands full of papers and his breath shallow with excitement. "This cryopreservation thing is wicked!" he exclaimed. Soon after, we came up with CryoThaw Heart, a gold nanoparticle and laser-based approach to rapidly freeze and thaw hearts. We put together our business plan, pitched it, got selected for the finals—and won our division as well as the people's choice award.

Looking back, it wasn't just a matter of how successful we turned out to be; it was also how far from successful we were at first. Our initial failures made me realize how being a leader starts with being your better self. Heartbreak doesn't have to be the end of the world. In many ways, it can be a beginning. ■

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