

Operational empathy in research administration

2025 SRAI SO/NE SECTION MEETING
MAY 7, 2025

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OUTLINE

- Defining operational empathy
- The importance of empathy in research administration
- Implementing empathy
- Integrating empathy
- Future steps

DEFINING OPERATIONAL EMPATHY

Operational empathy is the practice of *integrating* empathetic values into our everyday work within a team for the purpose of improving relationships, motivating colleagues, and providing a supportive environment.

WHAT'S THE DIFFERENCE?

Empathy is the ability to understand and share the feelings of others

VS.

Operational empathy is the ability to translate and *integrate* traditional empathy into practical work experiences and work environments

WHO ARE WE?

We are both the front line and back end of the labs.

On the front line, we field questions, we prepare materials, we provide administrative support; we act as gatekeepers to principal investigators (PIs) and their labs.

On the back end, we ensure compliance with policy, monitor finances, and protect our stakeholders from unnecessary workloads; we keep the lights on and the wheels turning.

But let's ask ourselves: who else are we?



THE SUPPORT SYSTEM

Many labs are made up of young, early-career scientists who seek mentorship from their PIs -- often, we may end up as the middle-man in this relationship. How do we balance our professional careers with this niche role?

Our primary responsibility:

- To support our stakeholders and ensure the wellbeing and success of the institution or individual lab

Our *not-so-obvious* responsibility:

- To provide support in less tangible forms, such as emotional support
 - To provide an open door for people to reach us with questions
 - To be available when needed, even if it's not convenient for us
- **To build trust**



THE SUPPORT SYSTEM

1. *Improving Relationships*

- a. Building trust

2. *Motivating Colleagues*

- a. Encouraging creativity and boldness

3. *Providing a supportive environment*

- a. Creating space for researchers to work without being overburdened



THE IMPORTANCE OF EMPATHY IN RESEARCH ADMINISTRATION

Empathy in research administration empowers researchers to excel in their work by providing a **safe space** for them to explore their creativity and boldness.

WHY IS IT IMPORTANT?

For many of these young researchers, this is their first foray into independence in the research space -- they are the ones making decisions everyday, designing experiments, etc.

Part of our responsibility is to ensure that they are doing this in a safe manner, meaning they are in compliance with research subject protection policies, abiding by animal care best practices, spending money appropriately.

But we also have an implicit responsibility to provide safety in the form of creating a space for free thinking, a place where no questions are dumb -- an environment that researchers feel they can fully explore their potential.

WHAT IS THE PI'S ROLE?

Some of us may work with young PIs who are fresh in their career as the head of a lab. This can be equally scary for them as it is for the young researchers joining them.

We can support our stakeholders by helping build and integrate empathy into lab practices.

It's the PI's job to oversee the lab and it's our job to help maintain the structure around it, giving us the perfect opportunity to integrate empathy early on.



IMPLEMENTING EMPATHY

We implement empathy by
being **explicit** in our actions and
showing up.

WHAT ARE THE BARRIERS?

- Limited time and bandwidth
- Lack of support
- Cultural differences
- Lack of training in practicing empathy
- Gap between research administration and scientific research

SO HOW DO I ACTUALLY DO THIS?

- Actively listening, avoiding HR jargon
- Watching for signs of burnout
- Showing sincere interest, being open to new perspectives that could change your own
- Being compassionate
- Collaboration across departments

Remember: These are not just employees or resources; these are individuals with their own motivations and relationships, and we can empower these individuals by practicing empathy with them.



IMPLEMENTING VS. INTEGRATING

Implementing means putting into practice, executing.

VS.

Integrating is incorporating something into our everyday operations, making it an integral pillar of our work.

INTEGRATING EMPATHY

We integrate empathy in our everyday operations by codifying best practices and demonstrating these practices on a daily basis.

WHAT DOES EMPATHY LOOK LIKE FOR US?

Broad Institute Institutional Statement of Values:

We believe every Broadie -- everyone who works in the Broad community, whether they are employed at Broad or at one of the partner organizations, researchers and administrators, those with long experience, and those who are just starting out -- is an important part of our scientific mission. To succeed, we need everyone's creativity, commitment, perspective, and determination.



OUR NUMBERS

6 years *in operation*

Our lab began in fall 2019 at the Broad Institute of MIT and Harvard, where my PI, Dr. Xiao Wang, is a core institute member and associate professor in the department of chemistry at MIT.

19 *graduate students*

Our graduate students come from diverse backgrounds, such as chemistry and computational biology.

8 *postdocs*

Our postdocs excel in various fields like neuroscience and microscopy.

1 *operations specialist*

My role is to support the lab holistically -- working directly with Dr. Wang to ensure the lab maintains smooth operations every day and maintaining relationships with each and every lab member.



WHAT DOES EMPATHY LOOK LIKE FOR US?

- Guidance listed in our lab's official statement on values and culture:

Values:

Respect: We treat others with dignity

Well-being: We support the health and safety of ourselves and others at all times

Inclusivity: We speak and act in ways that welcome all

Integrity: We are honest about our own actions and those of others

Culture:

Self-driven: We are motivated by our own curiosity, enthusiasm, and ambition

Originality: We think creatively and independently

Mutual mentorship: We learn from each other

Making friends: We came here to connect, not to compete

Healthy lifestyle: We explore and enjoy good food

WHAT DOES EMPATHY LOOK LIKE FOR US?

Operational Lab Policies

- **When my door is open, feel free to come in and talk about anything**
 - Need to talk about something private? Closed-door conversations always remain completely confidential
- **Soliciting feedback**
 - More than just “Did you like this?”
 - How did you feel about...?
- **Including others in decision-making**
 - What would you like to see and how can we make it work?
- **Physically showing up**
 - Daily pass-throughs in office and lab spaces
- **Lab refreshers and training**
 - All new members must go through training, including learning lab values and culture
 - Yearly refresher for all lab members

FUTURE STEPS

What does the future of research administration look like through the lens of operational empathy?

HOW DO I BEGIN TO IMPLEMENT THESE PRACTICES?

Start the conversation. Depending on your relationships and dynamics, this could be with your PI, with your group, or even with yourself as self-reflection.

Explicitly say these practices. Write down your steps for empathy, what you plan to do. Share these practices with others in your daily work circle.

Solicit feedback. Ask yourself and others: is it working? Do I see changes among work culture and relationships?

Be patient. This isn't something you can implement overnight and expect to see results right away. Be patient with yourself as you work towards your goals.

Plan for integration. Set your goals with the mindset that these new practices will become a pillar of your daily work, continue to keep this end goal in sight.

HOW DO I AVOID BURNING MYSELF OUT?

Empathy isn't easy.

Just like our team members, we are individuals too, with our own motivations and relationships; we only have so much bandwidth in a given day.

It's important to balance practicing empathy towards others with practicing empathy towards yourself.

HOW DO I AVOID BURNING MYSELF OUT?

Tips for avoiding burnout:

1. Be straightforward in your expectations and abilities.
2. Be honest about your bandwidth.
3. Protect your time.
4. Check in with yourself.

WHAT DOES THE DATA SAY?

86%

report good work-life
balance

76%

report more engagement
with their leaders

61%

report they were more
innovative

Thank you!

