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Becoming Your Best Advocate

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What is self-advocacy?

Self-advocacy involves speaking up for yourself, your worth, and your needs. The concept of self-advocacy transcends disciplines and its' mastery is critical for the career development and promotion of scientists at all stages of training. Self-advocacy requires you to bring attention to yourself and your needs, which may be a particularly uncomfortable task for trainees from disadvantaged backgrounds. Under-represented minority scientists are often the only person from a particular background in their group, department, or institution, and thus they may not feel a strong sense of support in their current position. Unfortunately, under-represented minority scholars often feel as though they are responsible for carrying the weight of their communities as they complete their training, and this will not be corrected until dedicated efforts are put forth by the scientific community to support diversity and inclusion. For example, under-represented minority scientists may not want to garner attention through self-advocacy for a fear of being labeled as difficult or demanding by colleagues, which could negatively impact how scientists from similar disadvantaged backgrounds are perceived in the future. However, by acknowledging our needs and worth, under-represented scientists are less likely to be passed over for opportunities such as promotions, collaborations, or professional recognitions, all of which can significantly impact our career trajectory. To initiate self-advocacy, we suggest that the advocate seek advice from past mentors about how to best convey their worth and needs in their self-advocacy efforts. Furthermore, we encourage mentors to provide constructive and supportive advice about the phrasing, tone, and content of the trainee's self-advocacy undertaking to build confidence and promote the success of their activities. To improve the diversity of scientists in the cell biology workforce, we need to build a community of allies that supports self-advocation through support from mentors, colleagues and most importantly, yourself.

How can I support self-advocacy?

Upon self-reflection, I realized that self-advocation was a major contributor to my research and career

development as a postdoctoral fellow. Had I known that I was capable of this powerful form of communication sooner in my training, I may have been able to harness this skill earlier during my scientific journey. Whether it was about resource allocation, authorship, or experimental design, I became diligent about documenting my needs and contributions to provide data to support my ideas and worth. For example, in addition to my lab notebook, my experimental contributions are clearly documented and annotated on a calendar, which allows me to easily quantify my contributions to a particular project or collaboration. This helped immensely to convey the importance of my contributions, and to enable my inclusion as a co-author on publications. Additionally, by documenting the time required to complete physically demanding experiments, I acquired the necessary data to support a request for technician support. I describe these examples of self-advocacy as first-hand self-advocacy, where I directly communicated my needs to someone that could directly enact change. These are just two examples of how advocating for myself has supported my scientific development, but self-advocacy can also help scientists gain assistance with limiting administrative duties that may deter from research productivity, negotiating teaching responsibilities to align with career goals, or gaining access to necessary resources to support the development of your research program.

While first-hand self-advocacy is the most direct form, it may not always be appropriate or useful for scientists to use this form of communication for their needs. I define second-hand self-advocacy as when you self-promote to your mentor, team leader, manager, or anyone else, who then advocates on your behalf to a person who is capable of making changes for your benefit. For example, you may want to be considered for a research honor that requires a nomination from a mentor. We suggest that you hold a conversation about this topic with a mentor to ask for their support in this endeavor. In order for second-hand self-advocacy to be successful, you have to clearly articulate why you should be considered for a particular opportunity or specify why you need a specific resource, as to ensure that the message is received by the person in charge. As second-hand self-advocacy can be incredibly valuable, it is important for scientists to think carefully and creatively about who has the ability to make changes that may impact your scientific development.

Know your worth.

To practice self-advocacy and self-promotion, it is necessary to communicate your worth, which requires self-confidence and self-assurance. One way to gain confidence in practicing self-advocacy is by surrounding yourself with a supportive network of scientists. If you are considering an opportunity, talk it over with your research network to get their opinion. Your colleagues may be able to help you phrase your self-advocacy to ensure that you are giving yourself the appropriate credit, while making your self-promotion clear. Additionally, if you see an opportunity that might not align with your training, share this with scientists and encourage them to pursue the opportunity. This type of community also helps to set an example for rising scientists that self-advocacy is important for career development and accepted within

the scientific community.

For those from disadvantaged backgrounds, self-advocacy can be even more difficult to implement as these scientists are in incredibly vulnerable positions. For example, women are far less likely to self-nominate themselves for awards (https://www.nber.org/papers/w26345), while women also use more passive language in grant applications (https://www.sciencemag.org/careers/2019/05/scientists-grant-writing-styles-vary-gender-can-lead-bias), which can diminish the perceived value of their work. I initially felt uncomfortable asking for more resources than what I had been given, which felt like a gift already. As one of only two underrepresented minority postdocs in my Division, I already felt out of place making such a request. However, overcoming this discomfort was necessary for me to take full advantage of the benefits that self-advocacy can provide, such as my consideration for resource allocation, conference participation, or employment. I eventually realized that if I did not self-advocate, I would not be given the same resources as others, and this could stunt my personal and professional growth and career prospects. By connecting with a community of other underrepresented minority postdoctoral scholars to learn from their experiences with self-advocacy and negotiation, I gained the necessary confidence to move ahead in my own pursuits. As such, I believe that self-advocation is necessary, not supplementary, to achieve scientific success in any discipline.

If you are in need of resources or feel as though you should be considered for an opportunity, do not limit yourself. If your scientific success is on the line, it is worth engaging in self-advocacy to gain support and recognition for your work. You are your best advocate.

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