


PEOPLE & IDEAS

Jen Gommerman: Leadership is not a one-way street

Lucie Van Emmenis 

Jen Gommerman is a Canada Research Chair in Tissue Specific Immunity, and a professor and newly appointed chair for the Department of Immunology at the University of Toronto. Her lab is interested in the underlying mechanisms of immune dysregulation in autoimmune diseases such as MS, mucosal immunology, and the role of TNF family members in immune cell biology. We spoke to Jen about the importance of authenticity and openness in leadership, and her goals as she begins her tenure as department chair of Immunology.

Tell us a little bit about what prompted you to apply for your new role as department chair for the Department of Immunology, and how you started to think about leadership roles for yourself.

Back in 2012 I made the decision that I wanted to be involved in academic leadership, and I approached my chair at the time, Juan Carlos Zúñiga-Pflücker, to let him know that I was interested in directing the graduate program, which comprises over 120 students. I saw significant potential for innovation within the program, and I wanted to hold a leadership position where I could actively engage with students throughout their educational journey. Being involved in graduate education, and being a graduate program director, allowed me to see how the university functioned at many different levels, and it was a great opportunity to “cut my teeth” in the world of academic leadership. During this time, I discovered my affinity for academic leadership. I relished the opportunity to drive change on a broader scale beyond my laboratory and impacting the entire department. Building connections with students and their mentors was immensely rewarding, and I felt integrated into the department’s fabric in a new and fulfilling way.

What do you hope to achieve during your tenure as department chair, and what does success look like in this role to you?

The Department of Immunology at the University of Toronto is not only large

(>65 faculty members) but also diverse—spread across campus and hospital research institutes. This is both a challenge and an opportunity: A challenge because leadership is needed to keep everyone pointed in the same direction, and an opportunity because our size and diversity means we can tackle multidisciplinary problems. To be a successful department in the 2020s and beyond, a department must be poised to interact with multiple disciplines to secure large team grants. This isn’t to undermine the value of operating grants, but rather to emphasize the importance of a diversified approach. Therefore, my success as a chair will be measured in our ability to win some of these grant calls. My hope is that such larger funding opportunities will help our department grow in translational immunology.

The pandemic has underscored the significance of immunology, creating a unique opportunity for immunologists to influence government policies. As department chair, I hope to harness this potential. By making our presence known and engaging with the broader national conversation, we can advocate for changes and resources. Given our size and diversity, I want our department to be a part of these national-level discussions and decisions. That would also be a win.



Jen Gommerman.

Now, more than ever, it’s important for students and postdocs to see that there are women taking on senior leadership positions. Throughout your career, how important has it been for you to see women in positions of leadership and to act as mentors for you personally?

Female leadership has been of immense importance in my journey. It’s crucial for students and postdocs to witness female leaders enjoying their roles, because leadership should be enjoyable; otherwise, why would anyone pursue it? A leader needs to be able to derive satisfaction from enacting changes that enrich research productivity, improve the lives of trainees, or influence university policy to better serve scientists. For leaders to demonstrate that enacting these changes is *fun* and not always a burden is crucial. There are times when it’s

Lucie Van Emmenis: lvanemmenis@rockefeller.edu.

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certainly not fun, but I think we must convey the *why* we would do this—why it is personally satisfying to do this job, because otherwise no one is going to step up and do it after you. When I was a student, I had some great examples of female leadership where I could tell they were having fun in their roles. For example, as a student observing the director of our graduate program (Dr. Gill Wu) balance her leadership role with raising a family and managing her lab, demonstrated to me that it was possible to enjoy leadership even amidst various responsibilities. Witnessing her champion students and derive personal fulfillment from their work was a powerful example. I believe it's crucial to convey that while leadership brings challenges and requires hard work, it also offers substantial personal growth. Leadership is not a one-way street; it provides both satisfaction and opportunities for learning from diverse colleagues.

Are there any particular styles of leadership that you enact yourself that you have learned from people you have met during your career?

I embrace a leadership style akin to Ted Lasso's—a readiness to seek help, collaborate, empower team members instead of micro-managing, and maintain transparency and authenticity. Being authentic and transparent is very important to me. I openly acknowledge my personal commitments in my calendar because people need to understand that I have a complex life, and by association that it's okay for them to have a complex life too. I find that this leads to having a more inclusive working environment, where people will respect your time, whoever you are. Having good examples of these types of qualities (authenticity, transparency, etc.) in leadership is extremely important.

Many more women are actively participating in efforts to achieve gender parity in science, often involving substantial, albeit sometimes unrecognized, work. What are your thoughts on this “invisible work,” and have you noticed an increase in requests for such efforts in recent years?

First, it is important to state that I am in a lot of meetings where I'm the only woman—we have not yet achieved gender parity in scientific leadership. Second, it is hard for me to disentangle whether the uptick in “invisible work” that I experience is due to a maturation of my role in the university or due to an effort on behalf of the university to achieve gender parity.

Having said that, I find that 70–80% of the tasks I am asked to do are incredibly worthwhile, and the remaining 20–30% are tasks that I would have preferred to decline. While it's important to learn how to say no to some requests, saying no is not always possible at that particular juncture in one's career, and we shouldn't beat ourselves up for NOT saying no. The bottom line is that you must choose your commitments with care and be ready to do some work that is not what you relish. There will come a day when you have earned the right to say no to the latter.

But...you also must be very careful about burnout. Determining your own internal metrics for recognizing when you're too busy is essential. For me, it's when I become irritable with people who typically don't provoke such reactions. Recognizing these signs and being honest about them with yourself and others is vital. People need to hear that you're willing to give back but that you also have boundaries.

I know I have given a “hedge” answer to this question—that's because it is an ongoing learning curve for me.

What advice would you give to early career researchers, particularly women, who are looking to gain independence?

Most important is to know thyself. Know what your potential is so you don't undersell yourself, but also what your threshold is so you can cultivate a resiliency reserve for the next unknown challenge. I would also advise getting some strong mentorship, and this could take the form of multiple people. The mentors you seek out may be different for each question or situation you have. It's nice to have a consistent mentor as well, but I've always liked the model of seeking out the right person for a specific inquiry. Also, be kind to yourself; the journey to becoming an independent scientist does not happen overnight.

It seems that recently there have been improvements regarding inequality, and that leads me on nicely to the final question. Do you feel optimistic and positive about the future of women in science?

I do feel optimistic. Although we do not yet have gender parity, there is much more female representation and leadership now, and our awareness of diversity, equity, and inclusion is so much better. We still have lots of work to do, but the trajectory in terms of attitudes and awareness is going up. I'm the first female chair of my department, and I am seeing more women in leadership roles in different academic settings, so there is certainly change happening. We have an opportunity now to shape our academic culture; if we can capitalize on what we have learned so far, we can make academia a better place for all.