

Cultivating Values-Centered Research Group Culture: Lessons Learned from a Professional Development Initiative for Faculty and their Research Groups

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1. Introduction

Traditional academic training does little to prepare new faculty members for many aspects of the Principal Investigator (PI) role at research intensive universities. Not only are PIs leaders of intellectual direction and innovation, but they also serve as “people leaders” in multiple capacities: team leader, personnel supervisor, project manager, and mentor. Limited training and practice of leadership, mentorship, and management leaves most PIs learning by trial and error and the advice of proximal colleagues [1], [2], [3]. Attention to these human dimensions of research impacts the quality and productivity of research produced and the commitment, skill development, and wellbeing of research group members [4], [5], [6], [7]. Therefore, supporting PIs to implement best practices in research group leadership could have a significant impact on both the professional success of the PI and the educational and professional success of trainees [8], [9]. To that end, we created a novel professional development program centered on the research group: Radical Humanity in Research (RHR). First, we will discuss the RHR program and two critical components of program design: (1) a focus on collectively cultivating a values-centered research group culture and (2) professional development targeting the research group as a unit. Second, we will share lessons learned from the program that can inform the creation of future research-group based professional development activities.

2. Program Design

2.1 Why make values the cornerstone of research group culture?

Whether explicitly acknowledged or not, values profoundly impact the research endeavor. Researchers’ values shape how they seek funding, their focal area and approach, and the application and dissemination of results [10]. Values also impact recruitment and retention, motivation, interpersonal relationships, and guiding policies and practices within research groups [4], [7], [9]. For example, shared values foster intrinsic motivation, leading to enhanced performance and commitment [11]. Generating values-based expectations can improve communication, build trust, and reduce conflict, strengthen the relationship between mentors and mentees [6], [12], [13]. Publicly displaying values can aid in recruitment of people who align with those values [14], and sharing and implementing values improves retention rates [15].

Evidence from the corporate sector suggests strategies for maximizing the benefits of values to group performance. Values should be explicit, publicly shared, and actively practiced to improve performance [16], [17]. Furthermore, leaders and internal structures promoting values-aligned practices increase impact [16], [18], [19]. Thus, we propose that research groups would benefit from (1) articulating values, (2) displaying values both internally and externally, (3) using values to inform expectations, policies, and procedures, (4) reflecting on values alignment and (5) creating action plans to increase values alignment.

2.2 Why develop the research group?

Research groups are the functional units that drive academic research in STEM and yet, professional development for researchers overwhelmingly focuses on individual and cohort-level training [20]. In contrast, group and team development is common practice in the corporate sector, and professional development targeting team functioning or productivity is known to improve outcomes, with the strongest impacts on affective factors (e.g., trust, team potency) and processes (e.g., communication, coordination) [21]. Thus, professional development focused on the group functioning might be particularly effective when offered to research groups.

Developing research groups rather than faculty or career-stage cohorts might have several advantages. Working towards improved group function creates opportunities to foster cohesion and connection as well as practice interpersonal skills, such as communication and consensus building [22], [23]. Because all group members will have shared language, knowledge, and memories of the experience, all members are equipped to implement agreed upon practices and knowingly share in the responsibility for cultivating group culture. Finally, focusing on the research group increases the potential impact to the research community. All members of the group could serve as leaders in academia or industry, and they can apply the knowledge and practices of building an effective team and culture after leaving the group [3], [24].

2.3 Structure of the Radical Humanity in Research (RHR) Program

Radical Humanity in Research (RHR) is a multi-week, team-based professional development program supporting early-career faculty and their research groups to intentionally cultivate a values-centered research culture. RHR applies evidence-based principles (e.g., cultivating a positive environment, explicitly sharing values and expectations, participatory decision-making) to help research groups work together more effectively. Specifically, the program aims to create the foundational conditions for high impact research and meaningful professional connections within a research group by: (1) enhancing cohesion, connection, and collaboration among members the research group, (2) improving communication between faculty and trainees, trainees-to-trainees, and collectively, within the research group, (3) developing or updating a research group handbook that highlights shared understanding of co-created research group expectations and norms, and (4) initiating an ongoing discussion about values and culture in the research group including trust, accountability, making mistakes, and personal growth.

RHR consisted of one pre-program information session, three, two-hour and fifteen-minute sessions led by an experienced team and leadership facilitator, optional executive coaching for faculty, and a closing celebration. The three sessions were held approximately once per month between October - December 2025 and included: (1) generating and defining a set of shared values for research processes using story-telling, (2) applying the values to create and document a set of mutual expectations that guide the behaviors and interactions within the research group, and (3) reflecting and evaluating the impact and effectiveness of implementation of those values and expectations, then setting goals to further improve alignment with the professed values. For more details on program design and structure, see Appendix A.

Pre-tenure faculty in the engineering college at a rural, R1 university of ~26,000 students were invited to apply for their research group to participate in the Fall 2025 RHR program. Eight research groups were selected. Research groups ranged in size from 4-14 members. All sessions included PhD students, postdoctoral researchers (when present in the group) and a PI. Groups varied in the extent was to whether undergraduates, MS, or MEng students were included in the sessions such that 2 of 8 included these students.

3. Lessons Learned

Here, we focus on two lessons learned that were fundamental to the design of RHR and will inform our next steps in administering RHR. First, we focus on whether our program introduced content and processes that are novel to research groups, thereby having the potential to change how groups function. Second, we consider whether the use of external facilitators, a logistical and financial challenge to scaling RHR, are important to program function.

1. Explicit discussions of values, expectations, and culture are rare within research groups. Conversations with PIs, postdocs, graduate students, and undergraduates prior to the first workshop revealed that groups rarely, if ever, discussed values and culture. Expectations were discussed somewhat more frequently, but rarely in a formal or systematized way. Although more than half of the research groups entered RHR with documentation outlining group practices, which could include expectations, policies, procedures, and norms, many group members were unaware or unsure that such documentation existed. Clear expression and documentation of expectations, norms, and policies is considered a best practice in research mentoring [12], [13]. However, simply documenting without regular reinforcement is unlikely to have a significant impact on group culture. We see this here given that the presence of expectations did not translate into awareness, and thus the ability for individuals to practice meeting expectations.

As both the leader and often the only permanent member of the research group, the PI is responsible for seeding and cultivating a group culture through both formal (e.g., documentation, policies and procedures) and informal means (tone setting at meetings, social events) [25]. PIs can manage this through various mechanisms such as taking sole responsibility for culture development or assigning leadership roles to group members. We found that PIs varied in the extent to which they intentionally develop culture, norms, and expectations and in how they approach culture development. For example, a PI expressed not dedicating time into culture development prior to the program, and that luckily, the group working relationships developed naturally and were positive. After RHR, the same PI indicated that they are intentionally blocking time to consider group cohesion. Another PI took a more direct approach, assigning leadership roles related to group culture and norms to group members. This PI also holds both weekly “lab meetings” focused on the research and regular “leadership meetings” focused on operations, group members roles (including a social chair), mentoring systems, and overall coordination of group function. Making PIs aware of a range of strategies for culture cultivation, including creating ongoing group discussions of values, norms, and expectations, while also giving them the space to try these out could influence how research groups function long-term.

2. External facilitators were important to program effectiveness and were critical in initiating conversations, identifying unspoken assumptions, and progressing the discussion through difficult moments.

RHR facilitators served several roles: group process expert, activity leader, upholder of community agreements, arbiter, and facilitator of reflection and discussion. The power of a facilitator to support group performance in part comes from being separate from the group. The facilitator neither reports to nor has authority over group members, has no inherent reason to favor particular group members, has no power to make decisions about the group’s future or

function, and is not personally connected to the group. The nature of being outside and having a level of neutrality can help put participants at ease and enable a facilitator to ask questions or share observations that could go unobserved or be seen as judgmental or critical if made by someone entrenched in the group. In addition, the facilitator can support an environment for productive, respectful conflict and respectfully challenge existing group processes and norms [26].

In a survey immediately following the conclusion of RHR, all consenting respondents agreed that facilitators enabled conversations that would not naturally have occurred among participants and all but one group member agreed that facilitators created space for important conversations that are typically avoided or overlooked (PIs: $n = 4$, group member: $n = 13$). One PI indicated that a facilitator with expertise in leadership and team dynamics were important, *“The program created the space for us to have these conversations. It is very different to know what matters in a research group and to actually practice it. I generally had an idea on what we should improve, but did not have the tools to start these conversations or effectively communicate the importance of these discussions with my group members.”* Another PI highlighted the program’s role in creating a psychologically safe space supporting productive conversations, *“we would not have had these good discussions without RHR giving us the environment to do so safely and productively.”* Group members pointed to the importance of staying with difficult conversations, which a PhD student described: *“Sometimes it can get a little awkward, but we did learn from each other a lot. Overall, RHR did give us a space to talk about stuff that we do not often talk about.”* An undergraduate appreciated the presence of a facilitator who *“created a welcoming atmosphere and helped our group stay focused and open-minded during the workshops.”*

The importance of the facilitator, and potentially the skill of the facilitator (we used professional team & leadership facilitators) presents a challenge for scaling RHR. Facilitator availability currently constrains research group participation. Testing the effectiveness of facilitators with varied training and experience in addition to examining self-facilitated sessions will allow us to better understand possibilities for scaling up the program.

4. Conclusions

Radical Humanity in Research (RHR) suggests that values-centered, research-group-based professional development can make the often-invisible “people work” of research more explicit, shared, and actionable. We found that conversations about values and culture were rare, and that written expectations (when they existed) did not reliably translate into shared awareness or daily practice. RHR created structured time and a common language for groups to surface assumptions, co-define values, and convert those values into mutually understood expectations and next-step commitments. PIs play a major role in whether culture work is sustained, yet many PIs lack practical tools for initiating these conversations. External facilitators emerged as a critical enabler: their neutrality and process expertise helped groups engage productively with difficult topics and maintain psychological safety, but this reliance also raises a central scaling challenge. Future iterations of RHR will focus on identifying which facilitation competencies are essential, testing lighter-touch and train-the-trainer models, and evaluating whether self-facilitated adaptations can preserve core outcomes while expanding access to research groups.

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Appendix A: Radical Humanity in Research Program Guide

What is Radical Humanity in Research?

Radical Humanity in Research is multi-week, team-based professional development program supporting researchers to intentionally cultivate a values-centered research culture, with the goal of enhancing group performance via the human dimensions of research—motivation, recruitment and retention, interpersonal relationships, and guiding policies and practices. Radical Humanity in Research applies evidence-based principles (e.g., cultivating a positive environment, explicitly

sharing values and expectations, participatory decision-making) to help research groups work together more effectively.

Program Objectives

Create the foundational conditions for high impact research and meaningful professional connections with a research group, including:

- Enhanced cohesion, connection, and collaboration among members the research group
- Improved communication between faculty and trainees, trainees-to-trainees, and collectively, within the research group
- Developing a research group handbook that highlights shared understanding of co-created research group expectations and norms
- Initiating an ongoing discussion about values and culture in the research group including trust, accountability, making mistakes, and personal growth

Program Structure

Kick-offs

Brief events during which the program director described program goals and structure, asked participants to share hopes and concerns for the program, and provided an opportunity for Q&A.

- 1-hour kick-off, faculty only
- 30-minute kick-off for research group members

Coaching

For PIs, optional coaching around research group leadership and personal development from the institution's executive coaching program with seasoned coaches trained to work with faculty.

Coaching includes 3, 1-hour coaching sessions scheduled based on faculty & coach availability, approximately once per month for three months.

Workshops

- Three, 2.25-hour facilitated workshops for faculty and their research groups (including all group members, such as undergrads, grad students, postdocs, staff) in which research groups will:
 - Generate a set of shared values that drive the research group
 - Apply their values to create a mutual expectations document – the basis of a research group handbook
 - Reflecting and evaluating the impact of developing and implementing the values and expectations.
- Facilitators were professional facilitators with experience in leadership training. The facilitator's role was to guide research groups through activities and discussion including skill building, creating shared understanding, or building documentation. If at all possible, the same facilitator led all 3 workshops with a single research group.
- Workshops were scheduled on an individual basis between the research group and the facilitator, most often by extending already scheduled research group meetings.

Workshop 1: Introduction & Values Identification

Objectives

- Collaboratively identify & define a set of 3-5 values that underlie the research group's work together.
- Group members will practice active listening to support others in articulating their values in the research work space.
- Group members will connect with each other by sharing personal experiences.

Run of Show

1. Icebreaker question (at the discretion of the facilitator, for example: *If you really knew me you you would know...*) - 5 minutes
2. Hopes & Concerns: What are your hope and concerns related to RHR? - 5 - 10 minutes
 - a. Small group/pair discussion
 - b. Whole group discussion
 - c. Facilitator response to hopes & concerns
3. Community Agreements 5- 10 minutes
 - a. Either group generates their own community agreements or start with RHR general agreements and adapt (facilitator choice).
4. Levels of Listening 10-15 minutes
 - a. Facilitators shares and leads discussion around the Levels of Listening, modified from the Coactive Training Institute.
 - i. Level 1: Internal Listening (Focused on Self)
 - ii. Level 2: Focused Listening (Focused on Other)
 - iii. Level 3: Global Listening (Extends to broader context, what is and is not said, how it is said)
 - iv. Generative Listening: Connecting with the speaker to generate questions, ideas, and create something together. (Scharmer 2016, Theory U: Leading from the Future as it Emerges).
5. Identify Values via Storytelling, 90-115 minutes
 - a. Storytelling:
 - i. Organize into group of 3, dedicating about 15 minutes per person to share stories that reveal their values in research work. Include 6-10 minutes of storytelling, 2-3 minutes for listener processing, 4 minutes to reflect back to the storyteller, including the values heard.
 - ii. Storytelling prompts:
 1. Please describe 2 key experiences you have had as a researcher (or a team member), if possible, describe one positive and one negative experience. These could be research experiences where everything “just felt right,” challenges that were overcome or not, “a-ha” moments, or other impactful research experiences:
 - a. What was the experience? Why was it challenging, impactful, or pivotal?
 - b. What does this experience mean to you? What are you taking away from it? (Why this experience?)

2. Describe an experience in a research context when someone or something motivated or inspired you. Who were they and how did they inspire or motivate you?
3. If you could influence or change the research work-environment in any way, what would you do and why?
- iii. Reflecting-back prompt: *Identify at least two values that you observed. If these experiences connect to other actions or behaviors that you have observed in your work together, share those too. For each value, name the value and describe the actions or behaviors that enact or do not enact that value?*
- b. Small group values: within the small group, identify and define the values that the group discovered they shared. This might lead to new values that did not come from any single person.
- c. Whole group: spend time observing and reflecting on the values generated and guided by the facilitator, identify & define 3-5 values that resonate for the group.
6. Closing - 5 minutes
 - a. Facilitator choice, for example, share one takeaway or one word that describes how you are feeling as the workshop ends.

Workshop 2: Expectations & Accountability

Objectives:

- Articulate mutual expectations for research group members that can be included in a research group handbook.
- Practice communicating with group members about group processes and how work is accomplished (process rather than content).
- Group members build connection by sharing what they need and expect from each other, and recognizing what they do to support each other.

Run of Show

1. Icebreaker (at the discretion of the facilitator) - 5 minutes
2. Revisit community agreements - 5 minutes
3. Revisit values (approach varies by facilitator) - 30 minutes
 - a. Review and make any changes/adjustments to values or definitions.
 - b. Identify examples from the past month where group or individual actions have been in or out of alignment with values.
4. Expectations: Collaboratively identify expectations for all group members and for specific subgroups, (e.g., PI, PhD students, undergraduates). An approach for identifying expectations could include:
 - a. Identifying the groups or roles to which expectations apply. For example: all members, PI, Postdoc, PhD students, MS/MEng students, undergraduates.
 - b. Write the name of each group/role on white boards or giant sticky notes.

- c. For each group/role, everyone individually writes expectations on small sticky-notes, including one expectation per sticky note. They can write as many expectations as they like. For example, for the PI, “Helping us network within our field,” or for everyone, “asking for help when needed/don’t get stuck for too long before seeking help.” Add the sticky-notes to the the board associated with the group/role.
 - d. Split the research group into small groups and assign them to one or more roles. Each group is responsible for identifying themes and creating a list of expectations for that role.
 - e. Each group shares their expectations for their assigned role and the whole group examines and revises.
5. Accountability: As a group discuss how members hold themselves and each other accountable. What works well and where is support needed? For which expectations is accountability the hardest. Brainstorm strategies for improving accountability. Select one new or updated accountability strategy to put into practice in the next month.
 6. Closing

Workshop 3: Cultivating & Maintaining Culture

Objectives

- Reflect on values and group/individual alignment with values.
- Create a personal and group action plan to improve alignment with values and meeting of expectations.
- Create a plan to continue discussion and work on values and group processes after RHR concludes.

Run of Show

1. Icebreaker (at the discretion of the facilitator) - 5 minutes
2. Check for values alignment - 25-30 minutes
 - a. For each value, use “finger voting” to indicate value alignment on a 1-5 scale where 1 = This value has little visible impact on our group’s work or is absent from our day-to-day actions and 5 = This value affects everything we do and we enthusiastically uphold this value in all situations.
 - b. Record the results of voting and use this as a discussion about what areas is there strong alignment and in which is there weaker alignment.
3. Group Reflection & Goal Setting via 3 - 2- 1 - 30-40 minutes
 - a. In the context of group values and expectations, for your research group, come to agreement on:
 - i. 3 Strengths
 1. What does your group do well?
 2. What are you most proud of in how your group works and what you accomplish?
 - ii. 2 Opportunities
 1. Where can your group improve?

2. What expectations or values does your group struggle to meet?
- iii. 1 SMART Goal
 1. Specific: What will you do? Who is involved? Why is this a goal?
 2. Measurable: How will we measure success? How will we know we have achieved the goal?
 3. Attainable: What will we do to achieve the goal?
 4. Relevant: Does the goal fit match our needs and values?
 5. Time-bound: When will we accomplish this goal?
4. Individual Reflection & Goal Setting via 3 - 2- 1 - 15-20 minutes
 - a. Each person repeats 3-2-1 for themselves, in the context of: *what do I do that supports the group alignment with values and expectations?*
 - b. Individuals share their goals with the group.
5. Maintenance Plan: Keep your values alive - 20 minutes
 - a. Values, Expectations, Accountability
 - i. How often will we review our values and expectations?
 - ii. When will we do it? Set a date for the next visit. You will get an email a week before with activities you can do with your group.
 - b. Short-term Goals (from 3-2-1)
 - i. Set a progress check date
 - ii. Set a completion date
 - iii. Create reminders (calendar invitations, autosend emails)
6. Closing 10-20 minutes
 - a. Reflect on RHR and share program take-aways.