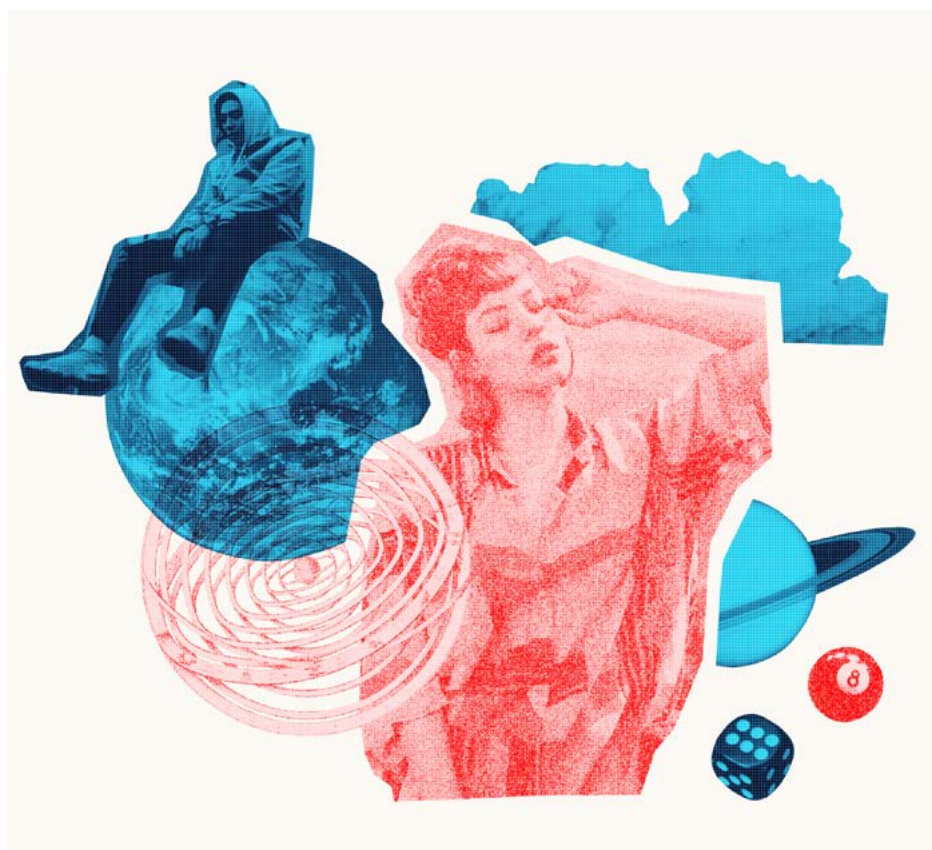


# A Reflective Guide on Ethical Leadership in Precarious Academic Life

## What this guide is

This guide was developed from consultations with precarious academics about ethical leadership.<sup>1</sup> It is based on the view that leadership should be understood broadly, not only as a formal management role or a position of authority. In these consultations, many participants described forms of leadership that are already present in their work under precarious conditions. These practices are not always named or

recognised as leadership, but they could and should be. This is a reflective guide, rather than a traditional leadership development assessment tool. It has been designed to assist you, as a precarious academic, to recognise practices that you already engage in, think about what matters to you, and identify what support or change would help you to sustain and develop your leadership attributes.



## How this guide understands ethical leadership

Ethical leadership is connected to wider questions of research cultures, collegiality, recognition, and ethical practice. It should be understood as closely linked to the conditions in which academic work happens.

There are many things individuals can do to support and develop their own and others' leadership, but the structural conditions of higher education also strongly shape and, in some cases, limit possibilities for ethical leadership.

This guide can be used on your own, with peers, or as a conversation tool with a PI, manager, or head of department.

<sup>1</sup> This document summarises the findings from the 2025-26 research project 'Ethical Leadership Amid Precarity', funded by the Wellcome Trust via InFrame. The project involved 28 participants in precarious academic positions from The Universities of Edinburgh and Glasgow, who contributed to in-depth interviews and focus groups exploring their conceptualisations of ethical leadership, the challenges they encounter in precarious roles, and their support needs. Project team: Enrico Galvagni, Jen Ross, Yuemiao Ma, Simon McGrath, Joanna Royle, Nicola Cuthbert, Cécile Ménard. Graphic design: Elspeth Maxwell.

# 5 Attributes of Ethical Leadership in Precarious Contexts



## Generosity

Helping others grow by sharing knowledge, expertise, time, and opportunities where possible.

- sharing calls, funding opportunities, or useful information
- bringing others into relevant conversations or projects
- offering mentoring or peer support

## Responsibility

Being proactive in helping things move forward, especially where support is unclear or where other people may be left out.

- initiating conversations, peer support, advocacy or practical solutions
- inviting collectivity while making decisions
- raising issues that affect others, not only yourself

## Adaptability

Working and communicating with others in ways that are consultative and flexible, and open to adjustment rather than being rigid or one-directional.

- inviting discussion rather than imposing decisions
- adapting how work is organised when circumstances change
- making room for different working styles or needs

## Care

Having empathy and sensitivity to other people's needs. Paying attention to how different people are affected by various situations, such as precarity, workload, life circumstances, and unequal access to support.

- checking what others need rather than assuming
- listening carefully before responding
- demonstrating care for the people you work with, rather than just the project
- offering mentoring or peer support

## Empowerment

Recognising and advocating for what you need to work sustainably and making those needs visible in ways that support both your own development and the quality of your work.

- asking for clearer expectations
- requesting time for career development or writing
- raising concerns about workload or unpaid labour
- asking for access to opportunities, mentoring, or funding

## Reflecting on where I am now

This diagram is a reflective exercise rather than a measurement or assessment.

You could mark each axis to show how present or possible the attribute feels to you now. Closer to the centre suggests less present or more support needed; closer to the outer edge suggests more established.

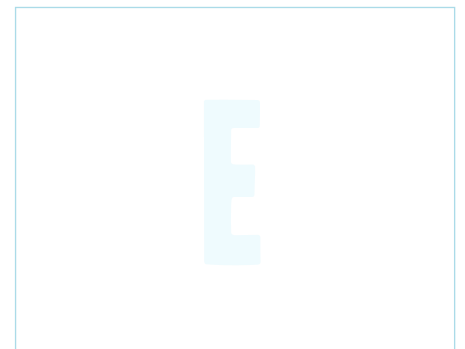
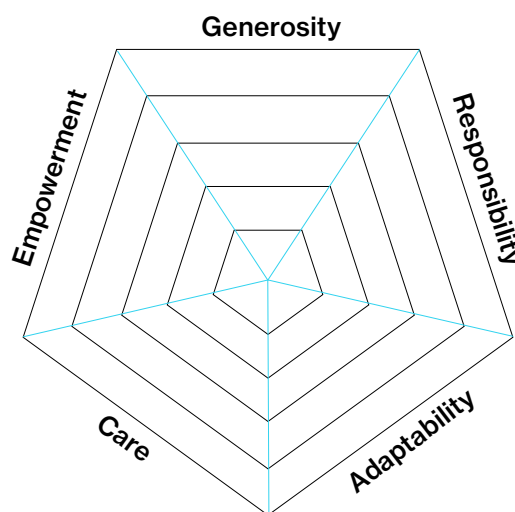
You could use the examples from each attribute as guides to fill in the boxes with your own practices.

The four statements below can be used as an optional guide to help you decide where to place your mark on each axis.

- This already feels like part of my practice
- I do this sometimes, but inconsistently
- I would like to strengthen this
- I need more support or space before this feels possible

Which of these attributes are already embedded in my practice, even if they are not formally recognised as leadership?

## My Ethical Leadership profile



## A note on context

Everyone's situation is different. People demonstrate leadership attributes in different ways at different times.

These practices are shaped by various things including time, resources, relationships, workload, and institutional conditions. Some forms of ethical leadership may already be part of your work but remain informal or unrecognised.

If some of these feel difficult or inaccessible, this may point to the need for support or structural change.

## Reflective Prompts

Which of these five attributes feels most important to me right now, and why?



What gets in the way of practicing these forms of leadership in my current context?

## Reflective Prompts

What kind of support do I need to make the biggest difference?



Who could support my development right now: peers, a PI or manager, a mentor, or the institution more broadly?

## Final note

These five attributes are not intended to be exhaustive. You are encouraged to reflect on other attributes that may be present in your work but are not covered in this guide.

This guide can also be used in conversation with a PI, manager, mentor, or head of department.

You might use this guide to discuss: access to opportunities, time for development, recognition of leadership-related work, mentoring or support, expectations and boundaries, and many other areas that support your development as an academic.