

Leadership and a sustainable career

Build influence, boundaries and a working life that can last.

- ✓ 18 min reading
- ✓ Full teaching, practical next steps and reflection
- ✓ Six practice questions with answers and explanations
- ✓ Complete source list and jurisdiction notes

Prepared for SAS, locally employed and other UK doctors

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Using this module

Independent education

This is general professional information, not individual clinical, legal, employment, immigration, regulatory, tax or pensions advice. Current official instructions and the circumstances of the individual case remain controlling. Practice scores do not establish professional competence or accreditation.

The short answer

Leadership is not only a title. It is making decisions visible, improving systems, supporting colleagues and using authority responsibly. Sustainability is part of good professional judgement, not an optional reward at the end of a career.

Three next actions

- Choose one service problem and one developmental contribution that fit your role and available time.
- Agree the authority, resources, measures and review date before accepting a major responsibility.
- Review whether the rota, household, health, finances and professional aims can work together for the next year.

Learning objectives

- Identify leadership entry points available without waiting for a formal title.
- Secure appropriate authority, time and accountability for wider responsibilities.
- Use an annual career review to balance contribution, health, household needs and succession.

Begin with a real problem, not a title

Doctors lead whenever they influence decisions, coordinate care, improve a process, teach, speak up or help a team make sense of risk. A formal role can provide authority and time, but useful leadership often begins by defining a problem clearly and involving the people affected. Choose work connected to patient care, professional development or organisational purpose.

Avoid collecting responsibilities because they are offered. Ask what outcome is required, what authority you will have, how much time is allocated and who is accountable for the final decision. Leadership without boundaries can become invisible extra work or responsibility without control.

- Patient pathway or safety problem.
- Education and supervision need.
- Quality-improvement opportunity.
- Team culture or communication issue.
- Workforce and career-development gap.

Match responsibility with authority, time and support

A role description should state purpose, decisions, reporting line, term, time and review. If the work is significant and predictable, discuss how it appears in the job plan or work schedule. Goodwill can start a small project, but enduring organisational responsibility should not depend indefinitely on unpaid labour.

Clarify access to data, administrative support and senior sponsorship. If you are expected to influence across departments, a title alone may not provide the necessary authority. Agree how disagreement or unresolved risk is escalated. This protects both the doctor and the organisation.

- Purpose and deliverables.
- Decision rights and limits.
- Allocated time and resources.
- Sponsor, reporting and escalation.
- Measures and review date.

Build credibility through delivery and fairness

Credibility grows when decisions are evidence-informed, communication is honest and commitments are followed through. Include people who hold relevant knowledge, especially those affected by the change. Explain what is fixed, what is open and who decides. Psychological safety does not remove accountability; it allows concerns and uncertainty to be raised before harm.

SAS and LED doctors may have deep operational knowledge without automatic access to formal authority. Make contribution visible through outcomes, written terms and appropriate representation. Do not imitate hierarchy by withholding information or dismissing challenge. Fair process is part of effective delivery.

- Reliable follow-through.
- Clear reasons and decision ownership.
- Inclusive participation.
- Proportionate challenge and candour.

- Review of intended and unintended consequences.

Design a portfolio career deliberately

A sustainable medical career may combine clinical work, education, leadership, improvement, research or writing. The mix should support rather than fragment professional identity. For each component, define why it exists, how it is resourced, what evidence it produces and whether it remains worthwhile.

Review conflicts between roles. A person advising colleagues may need to step aside from later formal decisions about the same case. An operational leader may also need independent support when organisational and professional duties pull in different directions. Clear declarations, recusal and alternative decision-makers protect trust.

- Clinical core and competence maintenance.
- Wider roles and allocated time.
- Outputs, learning and impact.
- Conflicts, boundaries and indemnity.
- What will stop when something new begins.

Treat sustainability as a safety discipline

Persistent fatigue, overload and moral distress affect judgement, relationships and health. A sustainable plan accounts for nights, on-call recovery, travel, caring responsibilities, chronic illness, financial needs and the emotional weight of leadership. Resilience should not be used to make an unsafe system an individual problem.

Use leave, occupational health, flexible working, job planning, supervision and professional support before a crisis where possible. Identify early warning signs such as sleep loss, irritability, cognitive errors, withdrawal or inability to recover between shifts. Urgent health concerns need clinical care, not only a career-planning exercise.

- Workload and recovery.
- Health and reasonable adjustment.
- Family and caring responsibilities.
- Financial and pension implications.
- Support, leave and boundaries.

Complete an annual career and succession review

Once a year, step back from appraisal evidence and review the career as a whole. What work provides value, what drains capacity, what capability is developing and what has become an obligation without purpose? Compare the actual week with the intended job plan. Choose a small number of priorities for the next year and identify what must stop or be delegated.

Succession is a leadership responsibility. Document key processes, develop others and avoid making a service dependent on one individual's unpaid memory. A planned handover protects patients and allows the doctor to change role, reduce hours or retire without unnecessary guilt. Sustainability is not withdrawal from contribution; it is the design that allows contribution to continue.

- Contribution and impact.

- Energy, health and household fit.
 - Development and next role.
 - Activities to stop, simplify or delegate.
 - Successor, handover and institutional memory.
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Continue with Leadership in Practice

The Leadership in Practice programme on this site provides twelve modules on authority, style, communication, culture, difficult conversations, delegation, safety, improvement, organisational decisions and sustainable leadership. Use this chapter as the career gateway, then complete the relevant module or the full sequence.

The programme's knowledge checks support reflection and revision; they are not accreditation or proof of competence. Progress is stored only in the reader's browser. Use the editable worksheets to turn learning into a decision record, project plan or portfolio reflection.

- Start with the module that matches today's pressure.
 - Complete all twelve in order for a structured pathway.
 - Use the practical worksheet with a real, confidential situation.
 - Seek supervision or formal development for responsibilities beyond self-directed learning.
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Common mistake

Avoid this

Do not use unpaid, unsupported extra work as the main proof of leadership. Good leadership also protects capacity, fairness and the quality of the work.

Pause and reflect

What should you stop, formalise or hand over this year so that your contribution remains safe and sustainable?

Takeaways

- Leadership begins with purpose and consequence, not title.
- Responsibility needs authority, time, support and review.
- Annual career design and succession protect both the doctor and the service.

Knowledge check

Choose one best answer. These practice questions support reflection; they do not assess a real case or confer accreditation. Answer positions match the browser edition.

1. What is the best reason to accept a leadership task?

- A. It addresses a defined need with a credible outcome and support.
- B. It can be done invisibly after work.
- C. It adds a title.
- D. No one else wants it.

2. A significant recurring role has no allocated time. What should happen?

- A. Hide the work.
- B. Delegate without authority.
- C. Continue indefinitely unpaid.
- D. Discuss formal time, responsibilities, resources and review.

3. Which behaviour builds credibility?

- A. Keeping authority ambiguous.
- B. Avoiding disagreement.
- C. Promising every request.
- D. Explaining decisions, involving relevant people and following through.

4. You advise a colleague and are later asked to decide their formal case. What may be required?

- A. Nothing, because expertise removes conflict.
- B. Keep the advice secret.
- C. Decide more firmly.
- D. Declare the prior involvement and consider recusal or an alternative decision-maker.

5. What is an early warning sign that work is becoming unsustainable?

- A. Regular recovery.
- B. Persistent sleep loss, errors or inability to recover between duties.
- C. Asking for supervision.
- D. Using annual leave.

6. Why is succession part of leadership?

- A. It is only relevant at retirement.
- B. It preserves safe continuity and prevents dependency on one person's memory or goodwill.
- C. It avoids documentation.
- D. It makes the current leader less important.

Answers and explanations

1. A — It addresses a defined need with a credible outcome and support.

Purpose and deliverability should come before status.

Write the problem, outcome and boundaries before agreeing.

2. D — Discuss formal time, responsibilities, resources and review.

Predictable organisational work should be recognised and resourced.

Prepare a role-and-time proposal using actual activity.

3. D — Explaining decisions, involving relevant people and following through.

Transparent, fair delivery supports trust.

Review one decision for clarity, inclusion and consequence.

4. D — Declare the prior involvement and consider recusal or an alternative decision-maker.

Role conflict can undermine actual or perceived fairness.

Map your roles and the circumstances requiring declaration or recusal.

5. B — Persistent sleep loss, errors or inability to recover between duties.

Persistent functional change can signal health and safety risk.

Identify health support and one immediate workload protection.

6. B — It preserves safe continuity and prevents dependency on one person's memory or goodwill.

Services remain safer when knowledge and responsibility can transfer.

Choose one process to document and one colleague to develop.

Official and professional sources

Confirm the current source version and applicable nation, contract, scheme or specialty. A source list is not a statement that every rule applies to every reader.

RCP: SAS Leadership Programme

UK / nation-specific · <https://www.rcp.ac.uk/events-and-education/education-and-professional-development/leadership-cpd-courses/sas-leadership-programme/>

NHS Employers: SAS resources

UK / nation-specific · <https://www.nhsemployers.org/sas>

HEIW: SAS doctors in Wales

UK / nation-specific · <https://heiw.nhs.wales/education-training/a-z/sas-doctors/>

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