

The Three Self's of Leadership

In any leadership venture, self-leadership plays a vital role throughout the entire process. At times, leaders must be able to look inwards in order to reach their fullest potential. The ability to reflect on one's goals and attributes, accounts for a large part of any leader's roles. Throughout my Laidlaw project I have learned much about the role of self-leadership in everyday research and how a leader is able to learn from their own experiences. This journey has made me realise some qualities are more vital than others and these fall into the 'three self's': Self-confidence, self-sufficiency, and self-assurance.

Self-confidence is to be able to wilfully rely on one's own abilities to solve problems and to progress in the face of adversity. This quality is of vital importance when conducting any sort of research. At the start of my project I felt mutually overwhelmed and excited to get started and I found it was quite easy to lose that confidence that you have at the outset. This is a common issue and was a key point of discussion of many of the leadership talks and events I attended over the last two years. Even through regular discussions with my fellow Laidlaw scholars, I found that lack of confidence was part and parcel of the learning experience. In the second half of the project, the Covid-19 pandemic had brought this feeling on in a wholly new and unprecedented way. The uncertainty caused by the fallout and the general inaccessibility of key resources made research difficult at best if not completely impossible. My project was affected, like many others, and I knew I had to change the focus of the project itself if it was to survive this crisis. After speaking with my supervisor, we decided that I should pursue a more 'reigned in' version of the project which would focus on toy modelling, a common concept in computational physics. This task seemed easy to begin with and I felt quite comfortable in starting it, but this feeling quickly faded as I realised that this was uncharted territory for me and was far outside my comfort zone. Ultimately, the oh-so familiar feeling of confidence slipping away crept in and progress began to grind to a halt. Researching a multitude of books, I began to wade through the material and this experience of slowly regaining some semblance of control gave me the inspiration to continue. Looking back on this moment now, with the clarity and calm of retrospect, I understand I was learning the importance of self-confidence. I believe self-confidence in one's abilities is a core trait required for any leader and is an essential component of the leadership structure itself. Any leader who is confident in themselves can help teach others effectively and can execute tasks with great precision, adding to the group's overall efficiency. A leader will stand out as the most knowledgeable member of a group for others to follow, however that knowledge, and the effort put into acquiring it, becomes meaningless if that leader does not have the confidence in their own abilities. Like a pillar, if poorly constructed, a weak leader will lose followers and the whole structure will crumble. If there is one main take-away from my experience in the Laidlaw program, it is that self-confidence is a continual learning process. You never stop improving your ability to believe in yourself and as your abilities themselves morph and improve so does your confidence in them. They are an ever-changing aspect of your personality, and so you must be patient to allow it the time to grow and mature as you gain new experiences. I look back at the start of this journey when I applied for the program, I could see the areas of my life that were lacking in confidence. I lacked good public speaking skills, I would actively avoid such occasions and this unfortunately meant a serious inadequacy in my ability to communicate my ideas with others in a manner that would be both effective in delivery and simplified in method. The leadership weekends and talks were, at first, daunting as they

forced me out of my comfort zone. However, slowly they began to chip away at the doubts and I am now much more confident in my abilities to talk to crowds; I have since taken part in outreach events for incoming students in the maths department which have shown me how fulfilling such experiences can be.

Self-sufficiency is the ability to work on your own, generating new ideas, motivations, and solutions to problems as and when they occur. This skill is essential when undertaking any sort of project, especially academic work which is normally based on the output of a sole individual or a small group of people. Every researcher should be able to troubleshoot issues that arise and at least attempt finding a solution before consulting others. This not only builds resilience; it increases efficiency and is a well thought after skill in any workplace. I found this to be a skill of great importance during my project as, particularly with the pandemic, access to a large amount of resources were vastly reduced and everyone is busier than usual. So, one has to quickly develop some degree of self-sufficiency in order to progress. I found that, more often than not, when something was not working as intended, although I knew exactly what the problem was, I lacked the knowledge of what needed to be done in order to get the help required. I feel this was due, in part, to my limited knowledge of the subject to start with and the fact I had not spent sufficient time tackling the problem itself. In the beginning, I felt completely out of my depth and was depending on my supervisor quite heavily, however this waned quite quickly as I found myself consulting the literature more and more when a stalemate arose. Issues in the code were common, although such issues are usually mundane and miniscule, they played a massive role in slowing the progress of the project. Usually, it is a problem that is only approachable by the writer themselves. The experience of spending days on code that would never seem work and hours reading forums and books helped me develop a sense for finding errors before they could cause major issues. This taught me a profound lesson in the importance of having the relevant toolkit available to solve problems and I believe I have learned a great deal about the skills required in research that help in being more self-sufficient. One thing I found particularly helpful was a daily objective log. I laid out each day what I wanted to achieve on a page and stuck it to my wall. This simple task cleared my mind and helped me focus on the task at hand. I found it was too easy to be distracted, even when reading for research. You can end up travelling down paths that are not useful whatsoever and this leads to a large amount of time being wasted. I believe the log allowed me to ascertain where I was coming up short in my research, where I was not achieving my goals quickly enough. The process afforded me the ability to redirect my focus on the things that mattered, and I believe I ultimately ended up achieving more than I expected as a result.

Self-assurance was a skill I shall wilfully admit was a trait lacking this summer. Imposter syndrome is a severe problem and it afflicts more people than I could ever fathom. I found myself questioning whether I could even carry out what I set out to do. Was I smart enough to tackle this? Did I have the abilities required? Over the 5 weeks I worked on the project, I found that these questions are utterly pointless and even dangerous. It was quite common to fall into pits of a despair that would fog my mind and cause me to get nothing done for hours. Looking back on this, having carried out much of what I set out to do, I was very foolish. However, as it is said 'hindsight is 20-20' and it is easy to judge your prior character with today's vision. This way of looking back with embarrassment and frustration is such an unpleasant way of looking at yourself, I would argue that it provides you with the most unsatisfying and unenlightening view of your own progress. You gain absolutely

nothing doing so and leaves you with no recourse for improvement. Looking back, I find that my way of approaching the problem was wrong. I went in head-first and bit off more than I could chew. This led inevitably to me crashing and burning out quickly and dissatisfied with everything. I found it hard to reassure myself that things would be okay and to just keep pushing on. Like the earlier summer I had ground to a halt, with my pride in my abilities taking a hard blow. It took a week of convincing myself to eventually crawl out of the pool of negativity I had surrounded myself in. I eventually began to make progress and with it came more motivation to keep pushing on and finish the project. During the project I experienced the loss of a close loved one and it had a tremendous effect on my ability to function. I took a well-needed break from the project and switched my mind off in that time. I found when I eventually returned to the project, I had a new-found clarity which allowed me to think about what exactly needed to be done and what were the most optimal ways of approaching each task. Now, in retrospect, I believe this experience taught me a valuable lesson in being able to reassure myself as I would not have been able to keep going otherwise. I needed those moments that I told myself to push on even when the task seemed insurmountable. I am now a better leader for it as I am now stronger-willed and have become more accepting of change. A leader that can reassure themselves can reassure their team by projecting an aura of strength that will with no doubt boost morale. My experiences at the leadership lunch events and the regular meetings with fellow Laidlaw scholars helped immensely with this. I realised that the issues I faced regularly were common amongst us all, this simple notion allowed me to push forward knowing I must be doing something right, even if the progress is slow and the output does not always work.

Now as my Laidlaw journey is coming to an end, I am starting to reflect on the different and diverse experiences that I have taken part in. I feel I have come a long way from the beginning, and I am a wholly different person from the one that applied to the programme in 2019. I feel I've grown in so many ways, particularly in my abilities to communicate with others. Overall, I am a stronger person who is more perceptive and welcoming of change and many aspects of my life are far better off for it. I believe my time as a Laidlaw scholar has given me a unique and invaluable toolkit that will serve me for the rest of my academic career and has provided me with the confidence to use it effectively. The many leadership events and talks have given me the assurance that my experiences and trials are part of the learning process and has provided me with a network of wonderful people that will no doubt be an incredibly helpful resource in the future.

In the near future, I intend to take on the lessons I have learned and hopefully pursue a PhD. The confidence that the Laidlaw program has given me, in both research and leadership, will no doubt aid in this process.

As a final word I would like to take this opportunity to thank Lord Laidlaw and the Laidlaw foundation for this opportunity, it has been truly transformative and has provided me with valuable skills for my future endeavours.