

Don't Panic

For direction and advice on all matters, I choose to look to the depository of off all intergalactic wisdom for answers: *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy*. Upon the subject of leadership, *the Guide* provides the following insights:

“To summarise: it is a well-known fact that those people who most want to rule people are, ipso facto, those least suited to do it. To summarise the summary: anyone who is capable of getting themselves made President should on no account be allowed to do the job.”

Douglas Adams so eloquently summarises that principal problem I have experienced through my own observation of leadership, especially a role as prolific and influential as President. By the time I got to midway through my university career, I had decided that I had had enough of being lead by arrogant and incompetent people that I should really try to step up as it were and do something about it. I was therefore immensely excited to gain my acceptance into the Laidlaw Scholarship Programme, as finally I had the opportunity to take the first step in further my own leadership proficiency, whilst affirming whether a future career in research was for me.

This is not to say that I came into the Programme with no personal leadership experience whatsoever. During my final year of high school, I was elected as Head Boy by my peers. As a sort of “School President”, I grew a greater appreciation for the wise words of Adams, as I quickly felt immensely out of my depth. A key difference however: I did not want to rule. It was only through the nomination and encouragement by my peers and teachers that I chose to stand for election and initiate my short campaign. During this, I gave a speech to my peers detailing why I thought I should be their voice for the school. I realised that I was a very good listener, and a tirelessly hard worker whom got along very well with both student and staff, enabling me to be a very effective liaison between them. As Head Boy, it was my responsibility to listen to my fellow classmates and voice concerns to senior management whilst also being the student representative for my school at community and educational events. Quickly I was forced to develop acute skills in time management along with being given ample opportunity to grow my confidence in public speaking and interaction. By the end of my sixth year, I engaged in duties ranging from meeting Royalty, to presenting new initiatives to local councillors and even hosting a Christmas charity concert.

The second great arena of leadership for which I have spent time engaged in is as a core member of the kayaking club at the University of St Andrews. Here my responsibilities have ranged from holding a variety of committee positions, from Treasurer to Vice-Captain, alongside organising and coaching on kayaking trips across the Scottish Highlands and French Alps. I was able to build on leadership attributes developed through my tenure as Head Boy, whilst experiencing a new set of challenges to overcome. Crucially, I was given the opportunity to learn from a range of new role models from the club. Over the last three years, I have experienced the joys of effective leadership as I watched those I coached build their skill sets and conquer rapids that they dreamed of doing when they joined the club. Through these role models in the club, I have also come to realise the leadership attributed that I admire in them and wish to develop next, namely effective decisiveness and confidence.

Whenever a leadership position has opened up before me, I am often hesitant to take it. I always question, why should it be me? Not because I selfishly think that it isn't my responsibility to take charge, but because I question the right I have to stand out and say that I am the best to lead under these circumstances. This isn't something I view negatively, in fact I think that a key starting point for effective leadership is being sure that you have a solid foundation to lead from, and quite a few

prominent leaders could do with recognising that they are not necessarily the best person for the job. However, what I do struggle with once I realise that I have a strong claim for leader is having the confidence to back it up.

Through the DiSC profiling I undertook during my first Laidlaw leadership weekend, I was categorised as an S-type leader. When I perused the bullet pointed list of attributes associated with this particular “steadiness” brand of leadership, I was pleasantly surprised to see that several of the traits I admired in those whom have previously lead me were included. Even tempered, patient, tactful; these were all qualities I had inspired to integrate into my own style of leadership. As I read on, further character traits highlighted themselves to me. Humility and the likelihood to downplay performance yet crave spontaneous recognition. Being accommodating to win and maintain the approval of others. Having empathy and the ability to understand a situation from another person’s point of view. As the list continued I came to the realisation that these were indeed attributes I aspired to, even on a subconscious level. There too were lists of traits associated with other alternative styles of leadership. I thought it fitting that the Dominant style of leadership contrasted with my own, as a forceful, results-orientated, power hungry leader sounded like just the sort of dictator Adams tried to warn us about. However, there were several traits I admired from other leadership approaches that I wished to adopt into my own. The enthusiasm, outgoing nature and optimism of the Influence style leader provided something to aspire to, along with the directness of the Dominant approach. In summary, the DiSC profile gave me a reassuring base to build from and a confidence boost, as I realised the many of the traits I aspired to incorporate into my leadership style were already ones I possessed, along with some direction of the attributes I’d like to develop next.

And so this was the position I was in when I initiated my summer of research. I am looking at 3.5 billion year old rock formations from South Africa to understand how the geological record could preserve evidence of ancient ocean chemistry, and how this, in turn, may have impacted the evolution of complex life. This involved fieldwork in the Barberton Greenstone Belt and sampling from the Council for Geoscience geological core shed with a Laidlaw colleague, Lot Koopmans. To achieve this, I approached a lecturer, Dr Rosalie Tostevin, from the University of Cape Town whom is an expert in this particular field of geology. Coordinating with an international scientific partner provided a new set of leadership challenges. To bolster my confidence in our correspondences, I familiarised myself with the relevant scientific literature to equip myself with a scientific vocabulary prolific enough to both understand her valuable insights and pass on my options and ideas. Throughout this I was conscious that I had to manage both Dr Tostevin’s expectations and my own for what we could achieve. I was terrified of asking stupid questions, frustrating my international partners and feeling like I’d wasted their time. These fears came foremast during our time in the core shed when we encountered problem after problem as our carefully thought out plans were laid to waste. From the geology saw blade braking to a limitation in the number of geological specimens we could collect, I was concerned that this crucial sampling wouldn’t work out. Every moment, a new issue seemed to present itself that needed to be overcome, and adaptivity proved to be key. For someone as used to forward planning as I, this approach to organisation was initially very frustrating. With time though, this strategy proved most rewarding. Instead of having a rigorous program set out, we had to constantly adapt and improvise whilst keeping our overall goals in mind. This planning in the moment proved to be the key to our success in South Africa.

The principal issue with trying to achieve anything in Africa is that if there is a job to do, then someone I employed to do it. Although this sounds fantastic, it generally has the consequence that so many people are employed to do so few tasks that communication breaks down, people pass off responsibility and in summary not a lot gets done. Therefore, when everything started to go wrong in the geological core shed, in order to achieve what we wanted to during our tight time constraints it was left to us to find a solution. This involved numerous phone calls to head offices and various managers until persistence would find someone who would listen to us. The confidence I gained in international logistics along with clearly and firmly conveying exactly what I needed to happen proved

to be the ideal experience for me in order to address some of the leadership attributes I had identified that I wished to develop.

Adaptivity was indeed one of the more crucial skills I refined during my research campaign. Whilst planning for South Africa, I struggled with aspects of self-leadership such as motivation and directionality. Consistently, I would return from a day in the library thinking of how little I had seemed to achieve. To overcome this, I developed a new strategy for planning and organisation. By setting a larger objective then thinking about the stepping-goals that would enable me to achieve it, I felt like I was achieving more which proved key to overcoming the barrier of self-motivation, along with providing a clear overall direction for my research. I continued this ethos whilst in South Africa which provided me with the adaptivity both overcome unexpected hurdles and embrace new opportunity that presented themselves.

I was fortunate enough to have a fantastic leadership role model accompanying me on my work in South Africa in the form of my friend and Laidlaw colleague, Lot. Being the cohort before my own, he could give greater insights into certain aspects of leadership such as confidence and self-belief which I had been struggling with. With the motto “Fake it till you make it”, he demonstrated to me time and time again his effective leadership strategy in situations ranging from gaining a better deal in the rental of our hire car, to gaining permission to get access into a privately owned geo-heritage site. Through observing him, I could feel my own confidence growing, to the extent that quickly I found myself engaging with members of the public and staff we encountered along the geology trail. One group I approached proved to be a company of geologists, ranging from local masters students to influential professors who were world experts on the rocks we were studying. This conversation led to a field excursion where we showed them some geological locations we had found, and in return we had a personalised field trip to key localities for our research. This chance encounter proved to be a highlight of our research in South Africa.

To summarise this summary of my leadership experiences thus far, I will return to *the Guide* – fountain of all intergalactic wisdom. Thinking about its take on leadership made me realise the major reluctance that I have faced when given the opportunity to lead – that of qualification. If those who are meant to lead from the top are, by definition, the worst for the job, then why should I strive to become one of them? This ties in to the issue of confidence and believing in oneself, which has been the biggest hurdle I have faced along my leadership journey. I strive towards the brand of leader who is inspiring and understanding, who provides clear focus without alienating or frustrating my team. I hope to apply this to scientific communication, to ensure that everyone gets the chance to enjoy the wonders of nature and gains a greater appreciation for the pale blue dot we live on. To achieve this, the principal skill I will continue to develop is confidence. And in the famous words of *the Guide*, the best way to build confidence is simple – DON'T PANIC.