

## **My Future as a Leader- Steph Coulter**

The summer of 2020 will be remembered as one of the most exceptional of our times. The Covid-19 crisis has completely altered the lives of most across the world and has brought pain and turmoil to many. However, it has also provided a unique context for reflection on leadership and personal development. In this essay, I am going to elucidate on how Covid-19 has affected myself and how it has altered the way I see leadership and intend to use my newfound knowledge of leadership in the future.

Covid-19 has been one aspect of an incredibly difficult summer for me. I had to return home from university, detached from my girlfriend and friends and confined to my family home for months while the lockdown was in force. During the summer months, I also had to deal with my grandmother becoming incredibly ill, my grandfather dying and a close friend of many years losing his battle with cancer. These experiences were dismal and resulted in a great deal of anxiety and soul-searching as I had to deal with them under incredibly peculiar circumstances. However, they also provided me with an opportunity to reflect on what was important in life and consider how I could help others feeling the same way in the future. Any form of trauma or grief can be used to reconsider aspects of one's life and make positive changes to their lifestyle. I see this as a true form of leadership- the ability to overcome challenges and become more adaptable in the process. Throughout my time as a Laidlaw Scholar, self-reflection and adaptability have been highlighted by professional and fellow scholars are intrinsic to the practice of good leadership and, whilst at times terrible, this summer has allowed me to practice these skills. From herein, I am going to talk about three particular changes I am in the process of making that build on the personal lessons I learned this summer, as well as the Laidlaw sessions on leadership.

Having experienced significant levels of grief and anxiety over the summer, I am conscious to make lifestyle changes that mitigate against such mental health problems in the future and help others from feeling the same. Therefore, this semester, I am beginning an initiative called PintsForGolf, an online blog that is designed to raise awareness of alcohol abuse and mental health issues. I have considered giving-up alcohol for many years, but recent events have given me a greater impetus to do so, given the detrimental effects it has on mental and physical health. I have therefore begun the process of cutting alcohol out of my life- a difficult challenge given the nature of student life but one I feel I am up to the task of. In line with advice I have consulted on how to quit drinking, I have taken up a new hobby in golf and plan to invest the time saved drinking into getting proficient in this new sport. However, taking

inspiration from the varied media capabilities of my fellow Laidlaw scholars, I have decided to begin a blog detailing my travails in going sober and beginning a new hobby, in a bid to raise awareness of issues and a bit of money for charity. Having seen first-hand the effects alcohol can have on mental health, I want to demonstrate to others that it is possible to live alcohol-free and still have an enjoyable student experience. I am also in the process of thinking of innovative ways to raise money for charity via the blog and have pledged to donate money for every par and birdie I make over the course of the semester. Prior to becoming a Laidlaw scholar, I am unsure if I would have been creative or confident enough to begin such an initiative but have drawn inspiration from my fellow scholars and the leadership professionals I have been fortunate enough to engage with over my time as a scholar. I have also become more appreciative of the power of new media to spread information and have also realised that small ideas can become wider movements over time- making the first step is often the crucial part. I feel that PintsForGolf is demonstrative of my growing leadership capacity as I am exhibiting self-leadership in removing a toxic habit from my life but am also seeking to educate others via spreading awareness of a prominent societal issue.

My summer's research has also made me consider ways to reorganise my academic life so as to increase productivity and happiness, two concepts that do not exist in a zero-sum vacuum as I previously thought. The issues I have dealt with this summer have taught me that being kind to oneself, taking adequate time off and being able to switch one's mind from work are powerful tools in increasing happiness *and* academic results. Whilst I feel I have become a better worker since my first research summer, there is still a lot to be done until I achieve the optimal level of work/life balance. This semester, I am striving to not only achieve high academic results but also to become an individual less affected by stress and worry over academic matters. This summer, I made a great decision in shortening my Laidlaw work week (whilst still completing the requisite hours of research). I found that, through working four days instead of five, that my weeks were as productive (if not more) than my first summer's research and that I also had much more time for personal pursuits as well. This prompted me to do some reading on the psychology of study and educate myself on the science behind good grades. I learned that, to some extent, less is more and that pursuing hobbies is just as important in generating success as hitting the books. This is part of the reason I have committed to learning golf and to greater engaging myself with other hobbies such as weight training, poker, running, cooking and hillwalking. I know that good organisation and an ability to switch off will allow me to enjoy all these hobbies whilst still remaining academically successful. I have generated a plan for a more structured week, making Saturdays and Thursday mornings study-

free times when I can readily pursue other interests or relax if need be. This strategy has been informed by the reading of books by the world's leading businessmen and politicians, such as Phil Knight, Barack Obama and Bill Gates, who were all incredibly single-minded in their respective fields but made time for hobbies that kept them mentally sane and allowed ideas to flow. The leadership talk delivered by Professor Kishan Dholakia a few months back was instrumental in this, as it was he who first informed me of the values of reading about successful leaders, as their strategies for success are often transferable into one's own life. I plan to continue reading such autobiographies so as to further enlighten myself on how great leaders manage their lives and hope to steal some of their techniques and some of the success that comes with them!

Covid-19's effects are far-ranging and have brought to light issues that are previously given less air-time. One of these is educational inequality, which was laid bare in both the Scottish and British government's decision to deliver grades based on the previous performances of schools. Over and above the unfairness of such a decision, a wider issue was brought to the fore; the massive gaps between different schools in our country's education system. Via my younger brother, I received news that students at my old school, St Kentigern's Academy, had been greatly affected by the government's policy, which prompted me to consider ways in which I could do my bit to help. In co-ordination with my older brother, I decided to form a St Kentigern's alumni network, an initiative that we hope will help inspire students at our old school to perform better and aim for good jobs in professional sectors. Through the alumni network, we hope to engage with ex-students of St Kentigern's to deliver mentoring and work experience opportunities and to give many of the students an insight into the professional world that they would otherwise be deprived of, given the stagnant existing work experience programmes in place and the low socio-economic income of the school's catchment area. Upon arrival at St Andrews, I realised the power of networking and lamented that I never had the chance to do so when at school, as opposed to many of my peers from better-performing schools. However, even amongst St Kentigern's alumni that I know personally, I identified several who had the capacity and willingness to deliver high-quality, professional work experience so as to give pupils the role models and sectoral knowledge to attain work in industries such as banking, finance, law, politics, journalism and academia. We are currently in the process of ironing-out details with the headmaster of the school, creating a steering committee of alumni to ensure the network is used efficiently and building up a database of alumni who would be willing to help. I know already that it won't be an easy task to create an alumni network comparable to those in more well-funded and established schools

and I have already identified potential problems further down the line in the form of communication with the headmaster, tracking-down older alumni who don't use social media and creating work experience programmes under current economic conditions. However, I derived great inspiration from the leadership talk delivered by Ejaj Ahmad during the summer, which highlighted the importance of non-state educational initiatives in generating greater equality and growth within society. Like my own project, Ejaj started small but was able to build something sustainable that helps thousands of young people better themselves. It also highlighted the importance of taking the first step and not being preoccupied with how things may go wrong down the line. Through my alumni project, I hope to emulate Ejaj and give back to my local community.

In conclusion, this summer has undoubtedly been a difficult one but one that has shaped my leadership capacity massively. It has allowed me to reflect on what I have learned so far as a Laidlaw scholar and make changes in my life to become a more accomplished leader. I feel that I now go into fourth year as a far more competent leader than I was when I began my time as a Laidlaw scholar, having been suitably influenced by not only the professional leaders I have had the opportunity to learn from as part of the programme but also my fellow scholars, whose innovation in pursuing their passions has inspired me greatly. I believe I have adapted into a more confident leader and am now more willing to try new things, having previously been worried about failure or about what others would think of me before embarking on new initiatives. Part of good leadership is having the confidence to follow one's convictions, which I believe myself to be doing through the creation of PintsForGolf and the formation of the alumni network. I have also learned that good leaders are not single-minded and enjoy engaging in hobbies and plan to attain a greater work/life balance this semester that at any time previously at university. The lessons I have learned this summer will be carried with me through fourth year and beyond and will hopefully allow me to live a more balanced and productive life.