

Summer 2020

Leadership Essay

Reflections on my Leadership Development 2.0

Lottie Doherty

Laidlaw Scholar, 2019 cohort

Introduction

Similar to the leadership essay I wrote last summer – entitled ‘Reflections on my Leadership Development’ – this essay is a reflection on my leadership development over the course of the Laidlaw Scholarship. As I reflected on my leadership development during the first year of the Scholarship program in detail in my previous essay, this essay will focus more heavily on my leadership development over the past academic year. I plan to follow roughly the same format and casual tone as my previous essay, beginning with an overview of that essay and the first year of my leadership development, before reflecting upon what has happened since last summer, where I am in my leadership development right now, how I got here and how I feel about it. Finally, just as I ended the previous essay by looking to the future, I will end this essay by examining how I wish to develop my leadership skills further in the coming years.

An Overview of a Previous Essay

As I prepared to write this year’s reflective essay, I read over ‘Reflections on my Leadership Development’, which I wrote at approximately the same time last year – roughly mid-to-late August. Although I do not want to repeat myself too much, I want to begin this essay with an overview of my previous essay, in order to better reflect upon what has happened since then, and how I have changed.

One of the key points from my leadership essay last year is how the leadership element of the Laidlaw scholarship allowed me to develop the skills I needed to fulfill the duties of my roles on the Labour Society committee, having been elected Women's officer shortly before applying to the scholarship, and then elected Chair shortly after the first leadership weekend. I describe how the Laidlaw scholarship has helped me to better understand myself, thereby improving my self-confidence and my leadership capabilities. I also spend a lot of time covering my DiSC profile – I'm a moderately inclined DC style – and how the stubbornness characteristic of that style means I can get in my own way (I've come to realise that I self-consciously self-sabotage a lot). I finished the essay but talking about how I'm so grateful for the support of those around me, and how over the first year of the Laidlaw programme I came to realise how important support networks are.

At this point last year, I remember being both excited and nervous about the upcoming year; I was about to start Junior Honours and start my first year as Chair of a mostly male political society, with little experience of organizing and chairing meetings. On top of this, my partner was unemployed due to an accident which meant he couldn't use his left hand (pretty important for a chef), and a lot of the financial and domestic burden was falling onto me. I was coping, but I was pretty stressed out at this point in time!

Leadership Day I

The first Leadership Day came pretty early in Semester 1 of last year; I remember that I wasn't sleeping very well at the time, and I drank a ridiculous amount of coffee on the day, which in hindsight probably just made me more anxious about public speaking! We had to take part in several different group activities, and also had an individual task where we had to present a fellow scholar for the next 'Laidlaw poster scholar'. A lot of the teamwork tasks were actually pretty fun, some were quite similar to things I'd done with Scouts in the past, although I do remember getting quite frustrated during some of them. There were a couple of tasks where I knew what to do to solve the puzzle but was not being listened to by other members of the team, meaning that we were wasting time going down the wrong path. Similarly, I know there were times in other tasks – specially one relating to being stranded on the moon – where I had no idea what I was talking about, but because I was talking the loudest, I ended up steering us in the wrong direction. For me, this really clearly illustrated how I can let some of those Dominant-Conscientious characteristics have negative side effects; my tendencies to be quite overpowering, loud-mouthed, and constantly questioning others can cause me to ignore others,

and make them unnecessarily doubt themselves to the point where they're quiet even though they have the best solution. Similarly, if everyone in the room is trying to be the loudest voice – as happened in the gin vat task – they can end up shouting over each other, starting the task without a clear plan, subsequently taking even longer to finish the task at hand.

In the meeting I had with Alex after the Leadership Day, we both agreed that the main area of weakness for me was public speaking. I've always been fine talking to individuals or in groups – I spend so much of my spare time door knocking and campaigning that I've had a lot of time to perfect this – but having to get up and speak in front of a crowd has always triggered my anxiety. Apparently practice makes perfect, so I decided that I would try to take every opportunity I could to practice my public speaking and presentation skills. I did manage to get a few in-person attempts at this before Covid-19 caused everything to be online, mostly at events related to the 2019 General Election. Although the December general election was horrible – it fell right in deadline season, the weather was terrible, and the result was really not what I wanted – getting to speak to crowds about policies which I already knew and had arguments for, was really good practice. I was speaking to a crowd of people about things I was already used to speaking about, things I already knew about and was passionate about, so eventually it didn't seem so scary. I was also asked to speak on a panel about being an activist for the 'alternative university' which was organized during the UCU strikes. This past year really has been hectic, but I made the most of every opportunity I was given to practice my public speaking, and although a pandemic has made it so that for the foreseeable future, I'll be speaking at events and in classes held over Zoom or Teams, I'm still going to try to make an effort to put myself out of my comfort zone and practice public speaking wherever possible (even though speaking into your laptop alone in your room can feel quite awkward).

Leadership Day II & The Summer

During the second leadership day, we focused on different styles of leadership, and different roles that individuals can have within teams. This topic also came up over the summer, as alongside conducting my Laidlaw research, I was taking part in a Summer Team Enterprise Programme (STEP). As part of this programme, I was put into a team with individuals I had never met before, in order to consult on the university's Public Engagement projects during the past few months of lockdown. This was a good opportunity to practice both the research and leadership skills I had developed as part of the Laidlaw scholarship, as well as improve these skills through additional workshops and by undertaking a completely new project.

In one of the workshops for STEP, we covered similar material on leadership styles and team roles as we did in the second leadership day. In this session, there was time for discussion within our STEP Team, and we spoke about which of the leadership styles we felt most comfortable using. I know that I can tend towards a pace-setting style; I want to get things done quickly and effectively, and often tell people exactly how I want things to be done, I want people to keep up with my fast pace and high standards to achieve the end goal. Because of this, during STEP, I made a conscious decision not to take one of the main project managing roles, to allow someone else to have the major team leading roles so that I could focus on developing the qualities required for the affiliative and coaching styles. During the project I tried to focus on building relationships within the team, who had only ever met in online meetings, trying to keep us motivated and making sure that we had a good working relationship. In the team discussion part of this workshop, I spoke to other team members about what I was trying to do, and how I was trying to use different leadership styles. It was really useful to have feedback from other team members, who said that they had noticed how good I was at coaching the team, and how I was a positive and motivational member of the team. For me, this showed that when I put in a conscious effort, I really can develop my skills and improve my leadership, and the lessons from the Laidlaw Programme have been key for this.

Looking to The Future (Again)

Right now, I'm sort of in a similar anxiety-inducing position to where I was last year. I'm starting the final year of my degree during a pandemic, with little to no in person contact with my lecturers and supervisors, and going into my second year as Chair of a political society who are not allowed to have any in person events or go campaigning due to the current restrictions. Obviously, I want to keep everyone safe, and I think having everything online is what is best for everyone, but right now is a really strange and unusual time for everyone. I do think that the Laidlaw Scholarship Programme has helped me prepare for this though. Completing this summer's research in lockdown has allowed me to focus on my self-leadership; instead of working alongside others in the library where we can motivate and encourage each other, I've had to work at home, sat at my desk, reading articles on the internet. To do this effectively, I've had to be very organised, and find ways to motivate myself, getting myself to work efficiently and effectively when there is temptation to just sit on the sofa and watch Netflix with my partner all day. There were times this summer when Covid-19 related stress, anxiety and boredom has meant that I needed to take a break, and finding ways to do that when you can't

really leave the house has been difficult. The Laidlaw programme has taught me about myself, which has been incredibly valuable in these strange times. I've figured out how best to use my time, when I need to take time off, how I can research effectively without physically being able to go to the library or another workplace, and how I can use leadership skills and styles to keep myself and others on the right track; all this has been essential over the summer, and will continue to be essential this academic year as I enter my final year of my undergraduate degree and lead Labour Society for another year.

Concluding Remarks

It's evident as I look back over my reflective essay from last year, my short paragraph about my leadership challenge (public speaking), and my Laidlaw application, that I have come a long way since starting the scholarship. I've gained leadership and research skills which have been invaluable in both my personal and academic life, and have learned how I can keep improving myself to be the best person I can be. I would like to thank the Laidlaw team and my supervisor, Dr Nevader, for all their wisdom and encouragement on this journey. Finally, I would like to thank Lord Laidlaw, as without his generosity, this scholarship would not exist, I would not have had the chance to undertake the scholarship programme, and I do not think I would be where I am today. I look forward to continuing to work on projects related to my research, and to continue developing my leadership skills in the years to come.