

### LEADERSHIP REFLECTION ESSAY

In February 2019 I was accepted into the Laidlaw Leadership and Research Scholarship Programme. Initially, I had been more interested in the opportunity to pursue research outside of my degree, however I quickly realised how much I needed the Leadership training and how important and insightful the process would be. Very quickly, my perception of leadership changed from a skill people either had or had not, a skill that seemed totally associated with the world of business and politics, to the understanding that it could be learned. At the start of the project I understood 'leadership' as a role within an organisation. In this essay I will outline how I saw myself as a leader, what I needed to learn, what skills I learnt and how I learnt them, and where I still need to go in the future.

Due to my lack of understanding of what leadership meant at the start of the scholarship, I did not have a very good understanding of myself as a leader. When I first began the leadership programme, I would have defined leadership as a job description – a position in a company and not something that was necessarily linked to skill. This definition was quickly challenged by the programme and it is important to outline how I now understand leadership as this is the model I will use for the rest of my essay.

I quickly learned that leadership is not a **skill** it is an armoury of skills that helps a person motivate people towards a goal. Leadership is also not a hard and fast definition and it is possible to lead without being a leader. Not all people would argue that you have to be able to motivate to be a leader and not all people would argue a leader needs to have integrity. For me, a leader should be both of those things. I began to realise that leadership in many ways is about being an ideal leader – someone who not only leads but can lead well. Ultimately, I came up with a working definition of leadership along with my group of other scholars at the first leadership weekend. We defined leadership as “directing and

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supporting others towards a common goal whilst continuously reflecting and adapting the strategy to suit the goals of the group.” This is an acceptable definition, but it is quite group and goal oriented. Leadership can be as much about leading yourself and about defining a goal when one does not seem obvious. The fact that this definition still does not feel perfect illustrates the ambiguities of leadership.

With the definition of leadership, I was working with made clear, I want to reflect on how I saw myself as a leader at the start of this process. Although I definitely did not understand the concept of leadership, I could identify in myself skills that I now see as leadership qualities. I have always prided myself on my communication skills and going into the project I feel that this was my strongest area. However, over the course of the last few months I have realised that communication is not just about how you say things, it is about what you are saying as well. Working for extended periods with teams of people at the first leadership weekend helped me to understand that when communicating it is important to be sure of what it is you are trying to say in order to have any hope of saying it clearly. I realised I had been making communication harder for myself by constantly thinking aloud instead of taking time to consider my arguments and ideas more carefully.

I also saw myself as a very good at self-reflection. However, I quickly realised that again this concept was more difficult than I realised. Whilst I can now reflect and recognise within my past self a person who was very good at analysing my actions and understanding why things played out the way they did. I have been taught how to reflect more carefully through the reflection exercises offered at different points of the programme. Now, I understand that reflection is as much about the future as it is about the past. It is useful to know why things happened, but it is even more useful to use that data to improve and to understand how one can do that.

I needed to learn how to be less self-critical and more self-aware, and how to develop a leadership style that was future focused instead of oriented on past achievements or failures. Secondly, I wanted to work on my time management to introduce greater discipline into the way I approach goals so that I am able to hold myself accountable when working with a team. Finally, I wanted to continue to develop my negotiation skills in order to take my communication to a new level. In the second half of this essay I will outline how I developed each skills at various points of the programme.

Along with my communication skills I had always been proud of my ability to accept my own failings, however throughout the Laidlaw leadership process I started to realise that this was not quite the asset I thought it was. I had been approaching self-reflection in a very binary way. What went wrong and how was it my fault? I rarely considered what I had done right and even when I was correct in identifying short comings on my part I often failed to then consider how to move forward, instead wallowing in my-self-righteous acceptance of my own failure. This sounds dramatic and that's because it was! My whole approach to self-reflection was skewed to the dramatic and the fatalistic. The Laidlaw programme has taught me how to be self-reflective in a way that is always positive because it is always focused on moving forward. Instead of getting stuck in my own failings I can now productively strategise how to move forward.

This was a key take away from the first leadership weekend. The weekend started by learning the results of our DISC profile which framed the whole weekend in such a way that encouraged reflection. My profile really struck home, highlighting that as a 'dominant influencer' I tend to lead from the front in a way that can make me impatient and that I tend to get others on side by encouraging friendly collaboration. What struck me most about the DISC profile was that its highlighted flaws and strengths and encouraged me to assess things

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I sometimes saw as neutral characteristics in a more positive way. This carried through into the activities with other scholars. By considering our different disc types I started to think less – “what am I doing to make this exercise more difficult” and more “what’s the best way of using our different strengths to make this easier”. This led to me forming coalition’s with other scholars and working together on solutions that moved us forward as a group.

I could sense that something was changing in my approach to self-reflection but was struggling to articulate this change. Then over the summer I read *Creativity, Inc.*<sup>1</sup> Ed Catmull’s autobiographical account of how to foster creativity and lead within an organisation as innovative as Pixar changed my approach to failure and self-reflection. The book lays out how companies should be solution focused avoiding thinking of problem solving as a punitive burden for a person to bear once they have got into trouble and more as a positive and ongoing focus as a team. This taught me a lot about how I would want to lead in a difficult situation, but also made me realise how my approach to self-reflection up to now had been punitive – something I only did as a form of punishment once I was already in trouble. This was reinforced by watching the documentary *Fyre: The Greatest Party That Never Happened*<sup>2</sup> during the first Laidlaw Leadership weekend. Billy McFarland the troubled organiser of the festival told an employee “We’re not a problems-focused group, we’re a solutions-oriented group,”<sup>3</sup> a quote which had new meaning to me after reading *Creativity Inc.* McFarland failed to take accountability for problems arising indeed refusing to accept in many ways that these problems could even exist. Although he claimed to be “solutions-oriented,” by failing to accept a problems legitimacy and by painting a problem as a totally

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<sup>1</sup> Edward Catmull, *Creativity, Inc.: Overcoming the Unseen Forces That Stand in the Way of True Inspiration*, (London, Bantam Press, April 2014)

<sup>2</sup> ‘Fyre: The Greatest Party That Never Happened’, directed by Chris Smith, produced by Jerry Media and MATTE projects, Netflix, 2019

<sup>3</sup> Billy McFarland as quoted in “Fyre...”

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negative experience McFarland failed to actually act to solve the problem as the task quickly became too overwhelming. I realised that if I was not open to bumps in the road happening, I would be a lot less likely to be carrying a spare tyre, thus making a “solutions-oriented” approach more difficult. This was crucial to my leadership development as it redefined my expectations of myself, but also changed how I would manage my expectations of a team.

The second skill I have developed over the last year has been my time management. Time management has always been a major weakness as mine as I find myself relying too heavily on my ability to “wing it” in a variety of situations. Struggling to complete the epigeum courses in June due to a technical difficulty really brought my time management problem to the fore. Although a technical difficulty was partly to blame for why I found myself completing epigeum at the last possible moment – this problem was heavily exacerbated by my poor time management skills. If I had been proactive in starting the courses, I would have had more time to notice the technical fault, fix the technical fault, and finally complete the course. Once again Laidlaw has primarily helped me to change my attitude to a problem. Whereas I once saw time management as a mythical skill good planner are born with the leadership weekend taught me to that I could build time management into my leadership strategy. The CAPOD team equipped me with tools such as a priority quadrant which helped me to separate out tasks by urgency and importance. tools like this made time management seem more manageable and I was able to apply them and try them during my research period. Approaching tasks as a project that needed to be managed helped me to consider my goals more clearly and work out the steps, I needed to take to achieve them. By breaking up my research in this way I was then able to more easily assign deadlines to ensure I stayed on progress in a time sensitive project.

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Although I feel I have improved significantly as a leader I am excited to see what I will learn next. I hope to develop my negotiation skills as I see this as a new level of communication that can help me to increase my teamworking skills with colleagues. I also hope to improve my networking skills as this is an element of professional life that currently feels completely alien to me.

In conclusion the Laidlaw leadership programme has helped me to realise that leadership is a set of skills and an attitude, not just a mysterious congenital quality. Through this understanding, and a series of challenges, workshops and talks I have been able to hone certain skills in order to ultimately become a better leader. My confidence in myself has grown immensely, alongside my ability to assess my strengths as well as my weaknesses. My whole approach has become more goal focused, allowing me to use past mistakes, failings, experiences and successes as building blocks for the future. I know that I am going to continue to grow as a part of this programme and look forward to improving my negotiation and networking skills in the coming year.