

# LIDLAW LEADERSHIP ESSAY

## INTRODUCTION

When I began, the first thing to come to mind when somebody said ‘Leader’ was a no-fun-having, practical, respect-wielding business owner; someone who had workers, and a big plan for the future. As I thought more deeply about it, maybe they would give large, influential speeches to hoards of people, or perhaps they would sit in meetings with other leaders and work out how to all lead cohesively. A leader seemed to have a lot of jobs to do. I wanted to know where I fit in with all these heavy-browed and ultra-serious leaders. I wasn’t one of them, I cared too deeply for the individual, and this didn’t seem conducive to the hierarchical environments where I expected to find a leader. Was there such a thing as a soft leader? Was it possible to take charge, whilst also taking care of the emotions and well-being of absolutely everyone around me? Was that something that could be turned into an effective leading strategy? With all these questions, the best way to prepare for the leadership training was to reflect on what I wanted to gain from it.

## DIFFERENT LEADERSHIP STYLES

In secondary school, I was part of a short leadership training scheme where we touched on the basics of what it means to be a leader and how to interact with a group of people to stimulate a discussion. I saw how the different ways you interacted with a group meant that you would get different results; an authoritarian approach would make people hesitant to speak up, asking individuals what their ideas were gave them time to share, and railroading over people’s suggestions would turn them bitter towards you. From this, it was clear that there were different ways to be a leader, and I wanted to figure out which sort of leader I was.

This information was handed to me on a platter. During the leadership weekend, we each received a DISC profile report that told you which trait defined your leadership style – were you Dominant, Influencing, Steadiness, or Conscientious? I found that I was a pure S, shown to be all about support, and I wasn’t alone. Just speaking to the small number of people found to be in the S category made me feel known, and understood, and we showed our similarities by our comparable approach to things, even though we all seemed to have different reasons for it. I found that we all enjoyed and found value in listening to people. However, I was more likely to take charge of a conversation and ask questions, whereas the others were content to allow the conversation to flow as pleased. Neither approach is necessarily better, but this peculiar Dominant trait may have been what lead me to become the group leader in multiple activities over that weekend. I thoroughly enjoyed it. I was able to host large scale and friendly discussions between the group whilst also keeping us mostly on track, something many S-types can struggle with. I found playing soothing music helped to energise those who would be more likely to listen than contribute, and my probing questions meant that the brilliant ideas people had would be heard by all. I am very proud of my team and how well we got on together, I would say it was what allowed us to complete the tasks as well as we did, but the enjoyment of knowing people was what I truly took away from the activities.

When talking over what being an S-type meant, there was one sentence that particularly stood out to me - “working without clear guidelines [is stressful]”. As soon as I read those words, my brain went through a series of Slumdog Millionaire style flashbacks to points in my life where I have felt anxious about completing a task because I wasn’t sure exactly what was expected of me. One example of this is when I write up a lab report where I cannot check my results, which in turn means I cannot check my explanations, which in turn means I do not know what the person marking wants from me, which in turn makes me very anxious. Now I recognise that spilling deep truths about my anxiousness and insecurities all over an essay is not a particularly professional take on reflection, but there are tentative connections that can be made. I have always found great comfort in grading sheets that explain clearly the items needed to be included in a piece of work to get the marks. I have been known to ask questions, even those that may seem obvious or annoying, to be transparent with the task at hand so I know I am getting it right. These things I do because there is security in knowing I can reliably perform a task. The dependability makes me a good team player, which I find to be one of the most important traits you can have. There are pros and cons to working with guidelines. There is lots of stability, but not much chance to take risks and be spontaneous. When you know your own pitfalls, it becomes much easier to supplement them with help from other people.

## UTILISING DIVERSITY

Every person in this world has a very different set of skills that widely come from their life experiences. Someone who worked as a chef would probably be able to cook a mean burger, whilst my years of working at WHSmith have left me with too much knowledge about poultry magazines. One may argue that some skills are more useful than others. It's when these people and their skills come together that magical things happen. I can tell you how to raise a chicken, then the chef can tell you how to cook it. Completely different backgrounds have allowed us to expand upon what we are capable of doing, at this rate we'll be able to set up a sustainable chicken restaurant in no time.

It has always been clear to me that 'teamwork makes the dreamwork', but the opportunities of being able to actually apply these ideas of diversity and analyse their effect are not as common as one would like. When we received our DISC profiles, we also saw the results of the other Laidlaw scholars, and were able to compare them to our own. Written in front of us was a complete list of the general skills they brought to the table, as well as where their weaknesses lay. This allowed me to assign tasks based upon my teammate's strengths, as well as being able to work through their weaknesses (and of course my own) together. I find this part of team interaction to be vital. It is my belief that the main role a leader should have is to aid in the growth of the team. Knowing people's character, even in vague terms, makes cooperation so much easier. It is my hope that I will take these ideas into future projects and teams where I can effectively utilise the diversity that is in front of me. Of course, it's not realistic to think that I can make everyone I meet take the DISC profile quiz and get some sort of intricate knowledge of the psyche, but what I do possess is knowing what signs to look out for. I know what type of people appreciate compliments, who like clear guidelines, who wants accuracy and details. I can work with this, and I can adapt my strategy of how I approach them accordingly.

It used to make me frustrated that not everyone is as concerned about team dynamics as I am, but now I know that it is because they have different priorities and expectations of teamwork. A better understanding of people's perspective and motives has made me into a better communicator, and I would say also a better person. Having empathy with others drastically reduces confrontation risk, and I feel a lot more comfortable with managing my perspective of others.

## DEALING WITH RISKS AND RESPONSIBILITY

Another key thing that a leader must deal with is the act of crisis evaluation and taking responsibility in the face of adversity or obstructions. In my opinion, this is where the leadership role is thrust into reality and application. I was not sure where I would learn how to apply the theoretical leadership knowledge I had gained from our training, but it surprised me when it came from the Leadership Lunches we went to during our summer research project. Here, members from industry would come and talk to us, explaining how they used their leadership skills and what the company found useful in their employees. One of our guest speakers came from Heineken, the German beer company, and one particularly interesting subject he touched upon was how the brand coordinated with and "absorbed" other smaller, lesser known beer brands. He talked about the importance of giving them their individuality and ability to make business decisions, which comes across as a lighter and more laidback form of leadership. They have taken responsibility over this smaller brand, as more of a guiding and financing position, but the day to day tasks of running the business and decision-making is still down to them. This reminds me a lot of delegation, but on a much larger scale.

It is clearly a risk for Heineken to take on this business, but it is also a risk for the smaller company to put their trust and financial dependability towards Heineken. There has obviously been a lot of research into one another's business practices to make sure they are compatible, which is akin to how teams work best when you know and trust one another. This showed how risks are worth taking, as long they were well thought out and agreed upon by the majority. As an S-type, this is clearly one area in which I need to work and grow, so this lesson was a very critical one for me. The application for leadership skills is more fraught with dangers and a necessity for strategising in the practical world than I initially thought, but I feel prepared to deal with the high-stakes and decision-making that will greet me there.

## DELIVERING FEEDBACK & CONCLUSION

In future, I hope to learn how to deliver feedback in an effective manner. So far, I have already taken a step towards this goal by distinguishing between those who would take compliments well and those who care little for them. This method of differentiating my positive feedback based on personality of the recipient is only one half of the goal. The next half is changing my method of giving negative feedback and put into practice these skills.

Moreover, I would find use in learning how to take a more laid-back approach with a group. It's harder to let people just get on with a task. It requires trust that the person can achieve the task well, as well as the ability to let go of your control in the situation. This is something I can struggle with, but the Heineken talk gave me the confidence that this type of arrangement can work out well for both parties. It is something I hope to try before the course is finished, and of course it will require a group of people that I have full faith in. This would work well with the Laidlaw entourage because I feel like I know their work styles; I feel comfortable around them and fully believe in their ability to work through a situation without a large or overbearing input from a leading figure.

Overall, I am incredibly excited to continue. I find myself leaps ahead of where I began, and I can see myself bounding forward even more. As the training days fly by, the experience and insight given to me will very clearly be a strong part of my skillset. Day by day I find myself to be becoming a more capable leader. I have already been in authority positions in my career, and I hope to apply for other jobs in a more academic field that give me the chance to be a leader. It all looks bright from here.