

Laidlaw Leadership essay.

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The inclusion of the Leadership component in the Laidlaw programme was something which when I applied to the programme was something of a great unknown to me. The 'common sense' approach to leadership which I had absorbed from my environment prior to completing this year's leadership activities as part of Laidlaw was that the skills of leadership were something which one could only truly gain through 'jumping in the deep-end'. This essay will consider the state of my leadership skills at the point of applying to the program, before reflecting on how I have developed these skills through the Laidlaw Leadership sessions, and briefly looking at my ambitions in the realm of leadership.

When I first applied for the Laidlaw Scholarship, leadership skills were not particularly on my radar. Over the preceding year at St Andrews, I had put myself into various positions of leadership: Class representative, Treasurer for a Student Society, and Wellbeing representative on my Hall Committee. In these positions I found myself able to achieve targets, but this was largely through individual remit of my committee position, rather than through developing and coalescing a team. Where this did happen, it was largely by accident rather than design. Rarely did I set out with an understanding of broader targets beyond keeping things 'ticking along', and where I did have these targets, I found it difficult to transform these into realistic aims and objectives. Quite fundamentally, I didn't really know what 'leadership' actually meant, and what it actually looked like. When completing the interview activities, I can remember finding it exceedingly difficult to name and explain examples of 'good' leadership in the world today. Perhaps my understanding of leadership was too closely tied with politics and the corporate world, fields where we tend to hear more about 'failures of leadership' rather than 'successes', but I found it much easier to pinpoint examples of 'bad leaders' – those who bullied, derided and divided - compared to 'good leaders' – those who supported, facilitated and unified. Hence, I know what I didn't want to be, and I vaguely understood the effect a 'good' leader had, but I didn't know how to affect good leadership.

Prior to completing the first leadership weekend, we were asked to complete a questionnaire in order to produce a 'DiSC profile', which we received once we had arrived at the residential centre. According to the 'profile' provided to us, I was identified as having a 'DC' style of leadership, focused on results, accuracy and challenge, as well an emphasis on stability. These results were not particularly surprising – I knew already that I found it easier to do tasks myself rather than delegate them, especially if I wasn't sure that the delegate would do an appropriate job. I already knew that working towards challenging goals whilst maintaining a stable environment were important to me, but the profile highlighted things about my self that I didn't already know or recognise, such as highlighting working with illogical people was a stressor to me. Yet there were also elements of the profile's description which didn't seem to truly reflect me on first reading. For example, it placed me as not being particularly people focused, which may have reflected my somewhat tired mood on the evening when I took the questionnaire. However, the profile provided some interesting points for pondering, and some pointers for how to develop better teamworking skills.

The discussion and presentations during the leadership weekend were also stimulating in my consideration of leadership. They helped me question how leadership could move beyond the 'heroic' role of the appointed leadership, and how as an attribute leadership could be shown in all roles within a team. These discussions helped me see that leadership was fundamentally

affective: based around improving other's skills and performance through your presence in a lasting way. The leadership activities also helped me distinguish management from leadership, and allowed me to understand that though in order to affect leadership a degree of management is required, management in itself was a neutral tool of leadership, and that good leadership required more than controlling the outcomes of various tasks, and organising work towards a single goal. Hence the presentations offered over the leadership weekend allowed me to reconsider my approach to leadership, so I must now reflect on the extent to which this enabled me to improve my application of leadership in practice over the past summer.

The long research period of the summer provided a challenge of leadership in a number of aspects. Whilst I did have a supportive and helpful advisor (Dr Alex Woolf), I found that maintaining focus and developing my research project required a good deal of leadership. The direction of the research was entirely within my hands, and the definition of the bounds of the project was did not offer particularly strong bounds of confinement. I had to take self-leadership of the project, deciding on the texts to be read, the critical angles to be followed, and the secondary literature to be considered. Continually the question of leadership had to be addressed, as the research was only worth me doing if I could develop approaches which developed upon previous readings of the scholarship. This can be considered as analogous to leadership – rather than having a lasting positive impact on other people in a team, the purpose of self-leadership in scholarship is to have a lasting positive impact on other scholars. However, in reality, this is exceptionally difficult, especially in the product of five weeks of research. Self leadership in the scholarly context could hence be considered as having another (perhaps more reasonable) ambition: that the act of aiming to produce leadership, to affect a positive contribution to scholarship, will have a lasting positive impact on myself and my skills. In this aspect the summer research project can be classified as more of a 'success'. My skills of research were definitely improved, and reading sources without the confines of a focused essay question forced me to think more deeply about what I was reading, and how it related to the aims of my research project. Therefore, my research project can be considered as providing an opportunity for self leadership.

Other opportunities for the development of self leadership were also offered through the summer program of the Laidlaw Scheme. The action learning set activities are perhaps a prime example of this. Within each Action Learning Set group, two individuals would present difficulties they were having with their research, and the rest of the group would then discuss the problems and try to come up with a few solutions or pathways towards solutions for the presenter. This process of discussing a problem with the person struggling to find a solution for themselves, and working in consultation with them, actively developed our skills of leadership. By providing new perspectives on problems, and asking questions, the group acted collectively as leaders, providing a positive impact on the situation the presenter was struggling with. However, this wasn't 'traditional' 'heroic' leadership, but rather a more dynamic and receptive approach, which encouraged growth amongst all parties involved in the action learning set. Indeed, the act of presenting to the Action Learning Set was one of self leadership: the discussion that was prompted by the problems brought to the discussion table were transformative in a way which allowed a lasting positive impact on all members of the group, through the process of problem solving.

The leadership development lunchtime talks during the summer also provided interesting material for the development of leadership ability and skill. The first of these focused on getting Laidlaw Scholars contributions on the University's policy for skills development among students.

The activities largely focused on how we would 'sell ourselves' to potential employers, and how we would show that we had developed certain groups of skills during our time in St Andrews. The session provided a good starting point to the research period, focusing our minds on the potential for skills development through the research work, as well as the research itself, and enabled us focus on how we had developed leadership already, and where we could do so in future. The second session which I attended was provided by a member of the Heineken company, who spoke to us about various aspects of leadership in the cooperate environment. As a historian, who's largely interested in cultures, the discussion of how the cooperate culture (in quite solid terms) both shape, and is shaped by, individuals and their leadership, and how leadership can promote both positive and negative change in cooperate culture. I found this discussion interesting, as reflecting on the agency of individuals to shape cultures and communities fits closely with the gender and social history which I'm studying. I also found it interesting to consider how much a good workplace culture of self/communal leadership could overcome poor management.

My summer on the Laidlaw program hence provided me with ample opportunity to develop my leadership skills and apply them in new collaborative contexts. However, it also provided me space to think about leadership, both as a Laidlaw Scholar, and in my future career. During my time as a Laidlaw scholar, I would like to take advantage of the skills which I have gained to help transform the student bodies which I'm a part of. In many ways this requires overriding my natural inclination to take over tasks in order to ensure completion and replace it with a focus on facilitating the development of other team members skills, whilst seeking to shape the direction of projects and development. Looking beyond my time as a Laidlaw scholar, I would like to continue to develop my leadership skills to allow me to take on positions requiring leadership over others, as well as self-leadership. However, I think that continuing the development of my self-leadership, especially if I succeed in forging a career in academia, will help me develop my productivity whilst fulfilling my need for professional autonomy. In this sort of role, I would able to show leadership through facilitating both the development of the discipline of my research, but also through developing the skills, and indeed the leadership ability, of my students and colleges. But ultimately, this sort of leadership doesn't really require a position of 'authority' to be exercised. In any teamworking situation this form of transformational leadership can be applied, supporting others and attempting, where possible to shape the direction of the development of projects. This is in direct contrast to how I felt prior to embarking on Laidlaw: I considered leadership something that I couldn't do unless I was in a position of power. The Leadership component of the Laidlaw programme has hence given me both a transformation of my leadership abilities, but also of the scope in my future for application of these leadership skills.

To conclude, the introduction to leadership training which I have experienced through the Laidlaw programme has had a significant impact on how I view both the relevance of leadership and my ability to lead. It has equipped me with new skills, and enabled me to view leadership in a new light. The research project and action learning sets have given me scope to deploy these new skills, and allow me to see their real world application. Looking forward I will seek to apply what I have learnt during this programme to my studies, career and personal life. I am truly grateful to Lord Laidlaw, and the whole team at St Andrews, for providing this opportunity for me that I might be able to explore these themes.