

Laidlaw Leadership Reflective Essay

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My view of leaders and leadership has changed dramatically from the start of my entering the Laidlaw Program, to completing the first summer of research. Each element of the process has opened my mind to a wider range of skills and concepts that I had never considered. These then had to be incorporated into my changing views. By the end of the first summer of research, I have come to accept a very much changed idea of what constitutes a leader and what leadership consists of.

When I first applied for the Laidlaw Scholarship, I had a very narrow, even possibly stereotypical view of what a leader should be. A leader, when I thought of them, was the image of a person who leads the rest – the boss, the manager, the person in charge at any variety of group activity. Leaders led from the front and were quite an obvious symbol to look to for direction. I did not view myself as a leader. A lack of confidence and belief in myself meant I never looked at the obvious roles of leadership, such as a society president, as being ones that I could fulfil and be successful at.

Therefore, I never felt that I had been a leader or had much leadership potential – I didn't fit into my narrow view of a leader, so I didn't begin to think I could become my view of a leader, but I was willing to try and develop my skills.

From the start of the interview process, my ideas of leadership and what made a leader were challenged. The questions asked got me to consider how, at various times, I may have employed leadership qualities that I had never thought about before. For example, I worked at McDonalds during my gap year before university, just as a Crew Member. What I had never thought about was how I had actually employed leadership skills in this role. Despite being a Junior Member of the team, I was full-time, and had a lot of experience in what I was doing. This meant when other colleagues struggled, I could help them, and teach them. Furthermore, when needed, I could run my station and direct others, and ensure a cohesive and consistent working environment. When questioned about my experience at work in the interview, I suddenly realised that I had been employing leadership skills that I had never thought I had, and that there may be more to leadership than just the traditional image I had conjured up. This made me wonder where else my views on leadership could be expanded and

redefined. From the interview onwards, the Laidlaw program had started to get me to question my ideas of leadership, and what I myself could potentially achieve.

The first leadership weekend was extremely helpful in opening my eyes to the new ideas and styles of leadership that were unlike my stereotypical view. One of the key things I learnt during the week was an understanding of my own style of leadership. We were introduced to DISC profiles, which had analysed our answers to questions on our personality and what we were more likely to do in certain situations. Whilst some found that they only loosely recognised traits of their profiles in themselves, when I read more into the qualities and style of my profile, C (Conscientiousness), I found that I identified quite strongly with it, particularly with it being “stressful to make a decision when the outcome is unpredictable” and being “hard on yourself for being wrong”.¹ This led me to a higher understanding of how I worked as a person, and in a group, and the potential pitfalls I could fall into, such as becoming a “roadblock to progress” if I let myself labour for too long over a point.² I found the group activity regarding analysing the opposing style to ours very illuminating. By analysing the I (Influence) style, we found that we could see how the two styles, whilst opposing and possibly fractious at times, as they might misunderstand the intentions and direction of the other style, could create a highly balanced team. Listening to the other styles talk about their thoughts made me realise how all the styles could complement each other, and offer a key perspective in a group that ensured a group covered all the angles, and approached problems with focused creative ideas.

The activities we worked on were all done in groups, with members across all types of DISC profiles, which allowed for a practical experience of how the different types of DISC qualities could work in harmony to create a productive and cohesive team. For example, as a C (Conscientious), whilst working in the group, I could see how I had a tendency to steer the group back on track if we were starting to lose sight of our end goal. I remember employing this on the last presentation we produced, on Horizon Scanning, where we spent slightly too much time on the first part of the task, to steer us

¹ John Wiley and Sons Inc, ‘Everything DISC Workplace Profile: Emma Porter, provided by Catriona Wilson’, (Personal DISC Profile Analysis, Wiley, 2019), p. 4.

² Ibid.

back on target. However, I could also see how another member, who was a DC, helped to contribute to the group taking charge to offer new ideas and open new lines of thought. The give and take of the groups helped realise that part of leadership was knowing when to take a step back and follow someone else's lead. We each had our role and specialties, but we had to respect other people specialties as well and understand that we had to follow them as well as they had followed us. This was incredibly useful in seeing how we complemented each other and offered valuable input in our groups, regardless of our style. It stimulated thoughts of how we could possibly use this in the future, in committee meetings, or even further ahead in the workplace.

The first leadership weekend also helped to develop other traditional skills which were useful to help employ these new ideas. Two of these main skills were time management and presentation skills. The weekend introduced us to various tools we could use in the future, such as Trello and the Pomodoro technique (25 minutes of work and 5 minutes break), we could help us organise ourselves, and ensure the correct tasks were done. We also had to prepare lots of presentations to help build our public speaking skills. However, I realised that the presentations and time management skills worked to help introduce me to, and consider further, a new idea about leadership, which was that of self-leadership. There was a workshop during the weekend which helped us express ideas of leadership, and what we thought about leadership, but then also introduced us to the concept that we didn't just have to lead groups – there was also the element of self-leadership, and leading ourselves in our own productive tasks which we employed every day, but hadn't yet considered in depth. This was a concept that really struck me, and made me truly realise that being a leader didn't have to always be about leading a group, you had to be able to be motivated and lead yourself to achieve your goals.

Time management was also built into the tasks that helped develop our presentation skills. Usual presentations at University are highly prepared for, consulting lots of books, having a memorised worked out script but are usually quite long. However, during the weekend, we had to prepare a lot of short, quick presentations after either as little as 30 minutes to up to several hours of preparation time. I personally found this task quite daunting. Presentations have always been something I have struggled to conquer as nerves got the better of me. However, the activity got us to start thinking

critically and creatively to tackle tasks. For example, in the final Horizon Scanning activity, we had to think of a way of presenting our future political leader. Rather than a normal presentation that we had done previously, standing and explaining a poster, we managed to create a small sketch which showed the key points of how the leader would act, what policies would be enacted in the future, and what they would advocate. This enabled us to further our leadership skills by encouraging us to think outside the box, and be a bit more confident and daring, as we were the only ones to deviate from the traditional presentation format. In turn, I believe this gave me a bit more confidence, as our plans worked, and our leadership had brought about a successful result. The leadership weekend in this regard was extraordinarily successful and stimulated more thoughts on leadership.

The summer sessions sparked thought as well. One summer leadership lunch got us to consider how leadership works in a more traditional workplace environment. Mr Jim McGregor from Heineken talked to us about different types of leadership he employed during his job, and the moments when it was required to switch to get the best out of the group.³ The awareness of the fluid nature of leadership, and the need to respond to situations, and not be afraid to change your leadership style was a point that struck me during the session, and which I felt I needed to employ more often when working with my committees.⁴ Adaptability was also emphasised in the response of companies to the digital age, and how they grew or suffered depending on how well they responded to it, such as Sears, who became bankrupt despite 150 years in business, but Macy's succeeded because they responded to the positive age.⁵ This highlighted the importance of being adaptable in thought and behaviour in leadership and was a strong message to take away.

Another point made during the session was about culture and behaviours. There was debate on whether culture affected behaviour, as new people assimilated to the norms, or whether the behaviours created cultures. This was an interesting point and raised awareness of the dangerous effects a negative culture could have on a group. However, it also pointed out that at moments you

³ McGregor, Jim, 'Laidlaw Summer Leadership Lunch Lecture', (June 2019).

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid.

have to respect another culture, and take that into account when responding and interacting with them, as Mr McGregor encountered when communicating with an office overseas. Respecting and responding to others in a positive way was a great point made in the session and highlighted this facet of leadership to me.

In conclusion, my ideas on leadership and what makes a leader have changed dramatically from the start of the Laidlaw process, to the end of my first summer project. I have been challenged to think about self-leadership, complementary leadership styles and how we may already be leaders in our everyday life. I have gained some confidence in my abilities (though I would like to gain a bit more), and feel that I have become a much better leader than I was, though I still have much to learn. The leadership weekend and the leadership lunches were a great way to develop my thinking on leadership, how I employ these methods, or how I could employ these methods, and how it works on a larger scale, and in working life.

Through the rest of my Laidlaw journey I want to try and become even more confident in employing leadership skills. I still feel I can be hesitant with taking charge from the front of a group, even if I have become more confident employing the skills I've learnt in self-leadership and whilst working within a group to complete a project. I still feel that I hesitate to put forward my ideas as having less value as others, even if they have the same weight and thought behind them. I want to gain more confidence in contributing to discussion. A possible way to gain confidence is to push myself in my tutorials – even when I doubt myself, if I try to answer open questions and contribute more, with time it may become easier, and I could add more value to discussions, and gain more out of them as well. A way to feel more confident leading a group would be to become more proactive in my role on a committee. Helping the committee enact new ideas and shore up membership would enable me to practice leadership in a small group. Furthermore, I feel I sometimes forget when to delegate activities, forgetting when to employ self-leadership and recognise that another would be more effective at a task that I would struggle to do in the required time frame when busy. I wish to be more aware in this regard and notice when I would do better to follow than lead, gaining more confidence and awareness in the impact and effect of my and others leadership.