

Reflective Leadership Essay

As both a field of study and a practical skill, the inherent ambiguities to leadership have led to a highly contested and ever-evolving field of literature. As leadership is a universal process carrying highly historically contingent assumptions and connotations, it is of utmost importance that our relationship to leadership is at first interrogated. Leadership is often defined as a process of social influence,¹ or as a position owned by a party due to their authoritative role. However, what subconscious notions do we hold towards leadership? How are these preconceptions affecting how we move about the world, as citizens, subjects, employees, leaders, captains, subordinates, and managers? How do informal and formal leadership hierarchies in different aspects of our lives intersect? Leadership can be found at all levels of the institution, within and outside from formal roles, and outside of the institution too. How do deeply systematic political and cultural frameworks affect our understanding of leadership traits, values, and power? In this essay, I will touch on these questions through sketching my leadership journey throughout the past two years.

To begin, I will touch on my initial presumptions at the start of the Laidlaw leadership process. Before Laidlaw, I had long shied away from taking on leadership tasks with confidence. If I did so, I would with the caveat that I would only take on a leadership role if there was no other candidate. I would ask: is there someone who wants it more? Is there a better suited candidate? These were questions I explicitly asked when taking on the role of Minorities and Philosophy undergraduate representative, representing the voices of philosophy students from First to Fourth year, and when volunteering to direct and produce a dance show at the UK's largest student-run arts festival. I was no more or less qualified than any of the hypothetical challengers I imagined, yet I did not feel equipped to take on these tasks.

This was due to my paternalistic, control-based understanding of leadership, typical of the Roman autocratic system. Leadership involved the stresses and positives of having control, over both people and a project. As opposed to the Confucianist attitude of living by example,² or anarchist consent-based participatory horizontalism,³ the notion I had in my head of leadership was traditional, hierarchical, and strict. This required a high sense of confidence and specialist knowledge, as well as explicit power. As I felt I did not meet these criteria, in part due to imposter syndrome and due to the mismatch of these expectations with the roles I was taking, I did not feel qualified to be a leader, and often compensated by trying to do too much. I would micromanage, spend too much time on each element, and hold excessively high expectations of others, myself and the project because I felt so little confidence in my ability to take responsibility. I needed a 'perfect' result to feel justified in my position of leadership.

Moreover, the Platonic 'trait theory of leadership'⁴ has left its mark on Western society – I still had the fixed mindset that leadership required certain distinguishable, innate traits, a presumption that has long boosted the legitimacy of inherited forms of leadership such as monarchies. This is despite my also objecting to this form of leadership; although unpalatable, this embedded structure felt comfortable.

My fixed mindset was implicitly reflected in my Laidlaw interview, where I brought up the notions of 'self-leadership' and leading from behind and/or within a team. I felt that it was safer to tie my own vision of leadership with something less overtly authoritative and rigid due to my past lack of confidence. I preferred focusing on these types in part because there seemed to be less responsibility in these roles – at that stage, I could not see any of the positive personal benefits to leadership. Focusing

¹ Chin, Roger (2015). "Examining teamwork and leadership in the fields of public administration, leadership, and management". *Team Performance Management*. 21(3/4), 199–216.

² Saxena Dr., P.K. (2009). *Principles of Management, A Modern Approach*. New Delhi: Global India Publications PVT LTD. p. 30.

³ Burdge, Tom (2021). "[Anarchist Leadership: needly vanity or intractable phenomenon?](#)".

⁴ Zaccaro, S. J. (2007). "Trait-based perspectives of leadership". *American Psychologist*, 62(1), 6-16.

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on where I could go wrong in my own development, or what I could contribute among the contributions of others, would lead to less drastic ‘failures’ where I affected the results of the project or other people. I did not see myself as being resilient enough to take on the negative consequences of leadership. There was a safety in avoiding responsibility, and thus accountability and vulnerability. Furthermore, at that stage I had little personal experience from which to draw upon. However, two distinct factors changed my attitudes and thus my self-concept: my growing involvement in leadership capacities and attending Laidlaw lectures and discussions on leadership.

To exemplify, studies such as Stogdill and Mann’s demonstrated that although there may be some traits that are common across leaders, overall evidence suggests that those who lead in some situations may not be leaders in others.⁵ This reflects the composition of our Laidlaw cohort, who all sorted with different DiSC profiles in our first Leadership weekend together. Leadership has no common denominator and no enduring individual trait; rather, it is a situational approach that ought to be taken. I realised, in part thanks to the different Laidlaw presentations, that there was nothing special about these other hypothetical candidates that I assumed were better suited. They simply had the bravery to acknowledge their desire and ambition, although that could result in failure. Much of what makes a leader is being motivated to pursue a goal wholeheartedly.

Situational leadership theory suggests that because the people you are surrounded with changes from task to task and that projects differ, different roles arise, which according to behavioural theory simply requires different forms of behaviour, not innately different people. These different leadership roles include the ‘Shaper’, ‘Monitor-Evaluator’, ‘Completer-Finisher’ and ‘Co-ordinator’, to borrow from the Belbin Team Role Inventory that we were introduced to during one of the Leadership weekends. One project may only require a ‘Co-ordinator’ who may behave more similarly to a paternalistic chairman, but most projects will require other forms of leadership behaviours. For this reason, a leader with detail-oriented planning and execution may not be at an advantage in a certain situation if the situation does not require their behavioural style, or if the roles and behaviours of other members clash or eclipse their own. For example, a teacher will differ from a sports captain in their leadership, despite their similar goal of helping their charges develop personally and professionally.

This behavioural approach to leadership tallies with my own experiences. To exemplify, during one of the Leadership weekends, I behaved like a ‘Plant’ and ‘Shaper’ during a group project, but the project also required ‘Co-ordinators’ and ‘Completer-Finishers’. Without those forms of leadership from others, the project would have been at a disadvantage. Moreover, my tendency to supply ideas and shape projects may very well not be considered as a leadership role if the project changed, and in certain situations I may not behave like a ‘Plant’ at all.

This was the case in my Leadership in Action project this summer, where I did behave more like a ‘Co-ordinator’, ‘Implementer’ and ‘Completer-Finisher’, roles that are more task-oriented than I have been in the past. I chose to take on larger, more complex tasks that required more oversight and coordination, over smaller, more short-term tasks which involved writing and research, which I had previously considered two of my biggest strengths. Correspondingly, I chose to delegate creative tasks to other people, in contrast with my previous behaviour. This partially reflected my own intuitive – and unexpected – attraction to certain tasks. This welcome shift was to the point where I reconsidered career paths, now being drawn to operational as well as research roles. It now seems clearer to me that certain individuals may be more effective in one situation over another because of how they cohere with the rest of their group and the project demands over other factors. Their effectiveness will boost their confidence as well as increase trust from others, leading to greater trust in their leadership ability and being given more leadership tasks. This cycle then perpetuates through positive reinforcement;

⁵ Stogdill, R. M. (1948). "Personal factors associated with leadership: A survey of the literature". *Journal of Psychology*. 25, 35–71.; Mann, R. D. (1959). "A review of the relationship between personality and performance in small groups". *Psychological Bulletin*. 56(4), 241–270.

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leadership is situational, not static. To extend this further, it may simply be that because Western society is taught to recognise the ‘Big Five’⁶ traits as signs of good leadership, we are more likely to follow and thus reinforce ‘Big Five’ behaviours in a case of confirmation bias, rather than genuinely believing them to be good signs of leadership.

This approach of leadership as a sum of evolving behaviours, not traits, is something that also was reflected in my own leadership journey. In the last two years, I have taken on a number of leadership positions both informally and formally, and at the root of these positions was simply a willingness to act in a certain manner appropriate to the situation. For example, I took it upon myself to create a resource for potential Laidlaw applicants, as the application process can be especially daunting for those from backgrounds that have historically been excluded from academia. The process did not require any inborn traits, merely a willingness to contact other scholars, create the resource and see it through to the end. Having self-confidence and a high self-esteem certainly helps at being *effective* in your leadership, and thus encouraging it further – a finding in the behaviour taxonomy of the ‘managerial grid model’⁷ – but there was nothing essential to my taking on this project that I needed to inherently have. I did not have to inauthentically emulate any great leaders to get the project done – simply inspire others through who I am and what I seek to achieve, honestly and genuinely.

However, the project did require me to behave in a task- and socially-oriented way – two dimensions noted in a 1945 Ohio State study⁸ – such that I would build interpersonal relationships and mutual trust as I strove to complete the project. Better interpersonal dynamics would increase task efficiency, and vice versa. It is important to note that a certain project may favour either task- or relationship-oriented leadership over another, an insight from the Fiedler contingency model. During my Makesense volunteering last summer where I took on a Leadership in Action project a summer in advance, the main criterion for leadership success was strong interpersonal skills. As a mobilisation-style project, the willingness to create and implement a helpful project was necessary, but what created and fulfilled the success requirements was the ability to get others on board, and to communicate to them in such a way that they would not only join your project and help facilitate your idea, but also go on to start their own mobilisation campaign. To do so, involving your group members as leaders from the start was essential. Participative behaviour, rather than controlling types of leadership, only stands to benefit the leader and the wider group, in part due to cycles of positive reinforcement. The most effective form of leadership, which also coheres with my own experiences, seems to be the furthest from the Roman paternalistic sense.

Not only are there multiple interpretations of leadership, but it is also the case that leadership can generate different results and thus levels of reinforcement depending on the people in the team; it is not enough to simply examine the varieties of leadership and determine that any effects are the result of different attitudes by leaders. A static, structural approach to a leadership will nevertheless affect different people in different ways, in part influenced by who and *what* we are perceived to be according to societal norms. Our experiences are embodied, and standpoint epistemology tells us that according to where we stand along the margins or peripheries, different people’s experiences of the same event or process can help us glean more information that we would otherwise gain. This indicates the extreme importance of considerate, consent-based and communicative styles of leadership, where shared and participative leadership can often be more suitable when task-oriented or agentic leadership is not the obvious choice.

However, although it is important to be conscious of your impact as a leader, it is also important not to stray too far into authenticity/honesty. Although a degree of perceived authenticity is welcome, there

⁶ Rothmann S, Coetzer EP (2003). "The big five personality dimensions and job performance". *SA Journal of Industrial Psychology*. 29.

⁷ Blake, R.; Mouton, J. (1964). *The Managerial Grid: The Key to Leadership Excellence*. Houston: Gulf Publishing Co.

⁸ ["Ohio State Leadership Studies Explained with Examples"](#)

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are other competing ideals such as diplomacy, flexibility, and withholding strong opinions that can also prove effective and useful. Setting boundaries for yourself in your relationship with the team and with work in general is also important to ensure a sustainable effort. To put too much stock into authentic leadership and to use confirmation bias to seek out good effects may lead to a romanticised version of the good leader, cementing a myth impossible to realise and may lead to false expectations.⁹ This form of wishful thinking is also less practical for those looking for leadership guidance. Overly relying on self-based conceptualisations of the idealised leader may simply be re-dressing the trait theory of leadership, centuries later.¹⁰

In sum, these two years helped me realise that my growing stock of experiences did not match up with my self-concept. I do indeed tend to gravitate towards taking charge, and my past experiences indicate that depending on my relationship to the project (such as whether obligation is involved¹¹), I take on different forms of leadership behaviours, which nonetheless are not universally appropriate. In the future, I look forward to approach potential leadership situations with more flexibility and optimism due to this awareness, and I will draw on various forms of leadership theory for the most informed and balanced approach. As leadership is a muscle that must be flexed, our only real gains will be in practice – despite the scary unpredictability of dealing with the unknown. However, confidence and self-assurance can lead the way – in fact, savviness, confidence, and self-belief are more important than acquiring the skills themselves. To conclude, leadership is a conversation with others *and* with yourself.

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