

The Many Facets That Make a Good Leader – Thoughts from Two Years of Discussions, and My Hope for the Future

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When applying to the Laidlaw Research and Leadership scholarship, I thought of leadership as a linear process. Throughout your life, you either put yourself, or are put, in positions of authority and gradually progress up the ranks until a finishing point; a head of a division or ultimately, retirement. However, on looking back I have realised that this idea of leadership is ultimately flawed. This may be the process that many famous “leaders” may often follow, but that however is not a representation of the many ways that people can find themselves becoming leaders.

There are many theories that have been developed to characterise leadership techniques; with the three most prominent being Great Man Theory, Behavioural Theory, and Management Theory. Each focuses on a different aspect of a ‘traditionally’ good leader.

Firstly, there is Great Man Theory, which suggests that the best leaders are born with skills that will naturally take them to positions of authority (*Cawthon 1996*). This theory is commonly observed in daily life – a person can be targeted for their natural abilities and given opportunities to lead, and flourish as a result. However, this leadership style is far from accurate, as it suggests that people are unable to learn and develop as leaders. Whilst some people may have a natural affinity to positions of authority, important characteristics can be taught.

Secondly, there is Behavioural theory (*Davis and Luthans 1979*). This counteracts the Great Man Theory by suggesting that leaders have an ability to choose what type of characteristics they would like to impart on the rest of the team, thereby suggesting that leadership is a skill that can be taught. This is a far more flexible method towards leadership, as good leaders can adapt their ‘style’ dependent on the specific group member.

Finally, there is Management Theory, sometimes referred to as Transactional Theory (*House and Shamir 1993*). This focuses on a more hands-on approach towards management, where success is defined based on achievable measures. This takes advantage of positive reinforcement but puts added pressure on the ‘need to achieve’ which can be detrimental to group wellbeing. In the current climate, it is often all too easy to assume that people can only become leaders once they have achieved – be that through promotions or publications. And yes of course, these attributes are often one of the many features that make good leaders even better, but it is by no means exhaustive. Reading back on my application to the scholarship, it really struck me quite how often I associated a position or title as an example of good leadership. In reality, that was far from the truth – being in a position of authority is not indicative of being a good or successful leader.

More than anything, a good leader should be one that inspires their co-workers. I believe that a good leader should be able to focus in on the weakest parts of a group, and work with the members of the team to make that weakest part, the strongest. From my experience in teams, both in an academic and university society context I have found that the best leaders in my life were the ones that could be empathetic to problems, and work with you to find a solution, an example of Behavioural theory. This was something I first noticed in an academic context, working in my research group last summer. My supervisor was great at letting me draw my own conclusions from my work, but also helping me work through problems. He never at any point just told me the answer, it was a more of a “I like this direction for the work more so than the last”.

This attribute is also clear with the most popular lecturers in the department, who work through problems and suggest ideas, but never just say “you’re wrong, this is the answer”. It is this ability to steer students without coming across as patronising that can be rare but is so powerful to creating a good working dynamic.

Furthermore, in an extracurricular context, I have found that the best leaders were the ones that were not necessarily the most qualified, but were able to listen, and think creatively with other committee members to reach a solution. This is something I have spent the past year and a half trying to implement in my work in university committees. When in positions of authority, my default reaction to being told a problem, is to try to provide a fix. This is meant with the best intentions, but it is not necessarily constructive to the dynamic of the team. It can build an odd power dynamic, which stops people thinking creatively for a fix. I found by trying to tailor my responses to the specific person I was interacting with, this technique worked very well and has resulted in a more coherent and ultimately productive and successful team.

Despite learning about the theories behind good and bad leadership from the lectures and seminars provided as part of the leadership weekends from the Laidlaw Foundation, my largest personal leadership growth has been through the other scholars on the programme, particularly on the first leadership weekend held at Hospitalfield. It was the first time (and sadly last) time my cohort spent significant time with each other, and it was the first opportunity for long discussions about the theories associated with leadership. Each scholar has a very personal definition of leadership, produced from their own experiences with both good and bad leaders – but one attribute was brought up by several of the scholars in various conversations over the weekend.

That attribute is passion. Without passion, the most organised and adept leaders come across as ‘nagging’, ‘forgettable’ or even worse ‘dull’. As a cohort the conclusion was drawn that people rarely paid attention to boring leaders – people who had good ideas that could benefit the community in which they were focused, but who were incapable of inspiring people with their words. This intertwines many of the theories discussed, taking the positive aspects of the Great Man and Behavioural theories. The natural charisma and passion of a ‘great leader’ can only be a successful attribute if it is combined with the empathy of a ‘behavioural’ leader.

This idea, as with many opinions raised over the weekend, were contentious to some as after all inspiration is highly subjective. One of the many positives of the Laidlaw Scholarship, and one that I particularly enjoy, is this friendly debate and is personally an attribute I would link to many of the most influential leaders. The ability to listen to alternative points and come up with counterarguments is a skill that can be heavily dependent on the subject studied.

Within the arts lively discussion is welcomed, but all too often only the louder voices in a room end up being heard regardless of whether the statement made has any validity at all. Contrastingly in the sciences, the pressure on data and facts (albeit vital for a good and persuasive argument) can end up overshadowing the point being made, and the speaker can end up being seen as dry and uncharismatic. Being able to sit in a group of people who could combine the best attributes from the sciences and arts, putting their ideas into words so eloquently, was incredibly inspirational to me.

This was one of the reasons for my application to the scholarship. I knew that one of the ways I could improve my leadership skills was to learn off other people – my fellow scholars! Throughout university, and during the application process to the Laidlaw Scholarship, a personal goal of mine was to push myself out of my comfort zone in debating situations. In these settings, by the time I had formed my argument, the louder more outspoken people in a group had shouted their point home and closed off

the discussion to others. However, I felt the complete opposite with my fellow scholars. Both in person (and through teams), I observed a shift in discussions away from the people that could shout the loudest, to the people who considered all the points made, and were able to make their opinions known in a far more impressive way.

When sitting in a room with the rest of my cohort, it is clear to see the respect each scholar has for the others in the room. I would argue this is the ultimate attribute to a good leader. Despite differing opinions, a group of well-rounded leaders can listen, discuss, and take away information from a meeting. This is important in a group of equals forming a team, such as group work at university. However, the higher up in a field you reach, the more important this becomes. Humility to realise that a junior in a research group may have an insightful comment that was not necessarily apparent at the first go around is a skill that is so important for a leader to have. This creates an environment of mutual respect that is so vital to a cohesive group but can be very rare to find.

After nearly two years as a part of this scholarship, my overall career goals have not changed. I have a huge passion for chemistry and want to spend my working life in research discovering more about the fundamentals of science, and what makes the world we live in as remarkable as it is. However, I have also realised that as much as the advance of science is important, it is not only the job of a supervisor to work on the forefront of their field, but also to foster an environment that allows for such developments to be made.

The best work, in any field, comes from a group where the leader is dedicated, empathetic and aware of their impact on co-workers. This produces a sense of community and cohesion within the rest of the group. In my opinion, a leader should not be feared, or demand respect, a leader should deserve the respect given from the remainder of the team. To me, the way to do that is by active communication with colleagues and tailoring the way you lead them to each person. This idea is based on Behavioural Theory but taken to the next level. Instead of the leader imparting their leadership techniques onto the rest of the team, each team member alters the way in which the group leader operates, therefore creating the ultimate environment for productive thought. I hope that in the future, if I am lucky enough to supervise a research group, I can use the knowledge I have gained from the Laidlaw Scholarship to build an environment where independent thought, collaboration, and fundamentally, respect is of equal importance.

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