

Why Leadership?

I have a small confession to make. When I first started the Laidlaw scholarship, I wasn't particularly interested in Leadership, and especially not the Leadership in Action project. In my mind, I only wanted to be a mathematician, so what was the point in gaining these skills and taking the time to develop these other attributes? Why should I learn to be a leader?

In my mind, leadership was something fixed. I couldn't see how one could go about trying to get better at it: it seemed too intangible, too difficult to describe and get a handle on. When faced with these uncertainties, how could I become a leader?

I think it would also be disingenuous to say that I had some great epiphany as soon as the first leadership weekend started, or that my eyes were immediately opened to the idea of leadership as some skill to try to develop. Although I definitely found the session interesting, I still had a nagging sense that the ideas we were discussing couldn't possibly be related to my own experiences.

What started to change my mind was when I found myself approaching leadership challenges in my day to day life, and noticing that ideas and concepts we had discussed in our sessions were incredibly helpful. There were often times where I would come across other students in my time in various leadership roles and, instead of just dismissing them as difficult, I tried to find ways to better understand them through the lenses suggested by the Laidlaw programme. Although I still think that tools like Disc profiles can be overly reductive (and lacking some evidence), it became very hard to ignore them when they described aspects of my leadership that made a lot of sense in hindsight. By simply being aware of my own biases, it became much easier to recognise where they appeared in my day to day life, and I started to notice times where taking action against them dramatically improved my outcomes. Maybe all of this "Leadership malarkey" wasn't so useless after all.

Another shift in my mindset that I grew to find incredibly useful was treating my personal leadership development more systematically. I really enjoyed identifying aspects of myself as a leader that could be improved upon, and taking concrete steps to try to do this. Although this is a mindset that I often bring to many other

issues in my life, identifying leadership not as some intangible and abstract thing, but instead as something to improve and get better at has been a great shift in my thinking. It might appear obvious, but taking leadership as a skill to be trained has greatly benefited me.

Leadership In Action Project

However, I had some reservations that I simply wasn't willing to give up. Although I greatly enjoyed the taste of research provided during the first Summer, I was very sceptical of the LiA project. How could I be arrogant enough to think that I could make some important change to the world in 5 weeks, or simply contribute anything at all besides annoying my more senior colleagues?

For me, the challenge was clear: try to find a field where there was impactful work to do whilst making sure that I, as someone with little experience, was in a position to do it. Although this might seem obvious, I think it actually leads to some counter-intuitive conclusions. For example, it means that I might be better placed to avoid more obvious areas like climate change, because a lot of the impactful work that I'm capable of doing is likely to already have a lot of people focussing on it.

This is why I decided to look further afield, and focus on animals for my project. The field of animal welfare is in many ways deeply neglected, as very few people focus on improving the lives of animals in factory farms when they think about helping animals.

However, in my mind the most important reason to look at this problem is its sheer scale. Around the world, billions of animals are killed in factory farming each year. Whatever your thoughts on vegetarianism, it's impossible to deny that reducing the suffering of these animals would be incredibly impactful, due to just how many of them there are. Coupled with the fact that organisations such as Open Cages have already had a huge impact on the lives of millions of these animals, it seemed like a great opportunity to help.

Despite my excitement about this project, I was aware that it was not what was initially expected by the Laidlaw team. There were certainly simpler alternatives, and part of me wanted not to cause a fuss and to simply take one of these. But

once again, I recognised that this was a bias I had to overcome: I knew this could be a great project, and the right thing to do was not to crumble at the first resistance, but instead to convince others of my vision and stand up for my beliefs. Ironically enough, it was thanks to Laidlaw that I was able to have the courage to have frank discussions with the team, and carry out this project. At this point, I was pretty convinced about the power of taking leadership seriously.

Even once I had decided to work with Open Cages, I was still sceptical. How could I possibly do anything of value when I had never worked in the field before, when I needed to be trained up, and when I was simply naive about the world of work in general?

I really dislike bragging about my achievements, but I think it is important that people are able to understand what they can achieve if they take the time to find a great opportunity. I wrote blog posts which were shared 100s of times on social media. I communicated with tens of thousands of people. I was highlighted as a key part of our fundraising team that smashed our expectations for our campaign, securing essential funding to grow the organisation. I undertook crucial research to enable future international campaigns. I am incredibly proud to have helped an organisation that is genuinely changing the world in a meaningful way, and I think this will be the single thing that I'm most grateful for the Laidlaw scholarship for providing me with: the opportunity to make positive change in the world, and the knowledge that it is possible for the future.

In my work at Open Cages, I really feel like I was able to make the positive contribution I was hoping for, alongside developing as a leader. As I discussed during my Action Learning Sets, the core of the job was communication. Whether it was communicating information to colleagues which they could use for later campaigns, writing blog posts, or emails directly to supporters, every day I was writing texts for a wide range of people. A challenge I initially overlooked was how to change my language to suit different people, and how to inspire them in a range of contexts. However, I eventually realised that this was the entire challenge, and is in many ways the entire challenge of leadership: recognising the context we are in, and acting accordingly. This was something I had maybe glimpsed before in various roles, but I am very grateful that I was given such a clear opportunity to confront it.

Another aspect that I developed during my LiA, and more widely throughout my Laidlaw career, is confidence. When I think back to the first leadership weekend, one of my main memories (besides the incredible food) was undoubtedly feeling somewhat intimidated at the thought of having to reach out to new people. Although this is definitely something I still need to work on, in general I feel much more comfortable in these situations now than I used to. During my hours of time calling, presenting and discussing with my fellow scholars, I have noticed how anxious these things have made me decrease a great deal, which made my work with Open Cages much easier. In terms of transferable skills, it's hard to think of anything that will help me more than that.

Broadening My Horizons

At the start of my Laidlaw experience, my experiences of leadership were limited to a few very narrow domains. I had a sense of how to lead on the sports pitch, but past that I was frankly clueless. Laidlaw has helped me find other approaches for specific roles such as leading societies, but more importantly it has given me the tools to assess new situations as they come. Rather than providing some narrow ideas about how to lead others, it helped provide me with a framework about how to develop tools for each new situation that presents itself. Wherever I find myself, I'm confident that what I have learned through Laidlaw has placed me in a better position to deal with it than otherwise would have been possible.

This was a skill that was especially developed during our second Leadership weekend. Being presented with successful leaders from a range of domains showed me just how diverse leadership could be, but also how diverse it had to be: you cannot simply take one leadership style to a different domain and expect the same results. It also helped dispel some myths I had around leadership in organisations like the military, which is always fun.

Another aspect of the Laidlaw journey I really appreciated were the constant opportunities to reflect on my previous experiences as a leader, to think where I could have done better in order to improve. I think a common theme of my Leadership journey has been applying a growth mindset to my abilities as a leader, so explicit opportunities I had to do this are definitely experiences which have stood out to me.

The Future

Looking towards my future leadership journey, I think one really important thing I want to achieve is to get a better grasp of how I present myself to others in different situations. Although I believe that I am generally quite self-aware, I think that this awareness can definitely be flawed when I am talking to others, as when I have asked for feedback I have sometimes been surprised by the responses. I'd love the opportunity to get this feedback before I finish my time at St Andrews, but it's definitely something I will try to improve of my own accord.

I'm very aware that this could come across as navel-gazing, but I will indulge myself in considering what I might do after Laidlaw. At the start of my Laidlaw experience I was pretty set on becoming a pure mathematician, and I leave it now being pretty sure that this is no longer what I want to do. Although I loved my taste of research and I plan on doing much more in the future, my current priority for my career is to have as much positive impact as possible, and I think that's something I could achieve elsewhere. Again, although I loved doing my LiA project, I'm not convinced that my comparative advantage lies there either. Although I would love to help animals in whatever way I can, and I think I definitely improved at writing persuasively as my time went on, I think my strengths lie in my quantitative skills. So, my next stage is to find a career that marries these two together: positive impact through using my skills and maximising my strengths. I'm currently exploring options in pursuing machine learning research or going into finance with a view to earning to give, and I really believe that the skills I have gained through Laidlaw will help me to achieve that.

So, should I learn to lead? I don't think it's particularly controversial to say yes. How can I learn to lead? Honestly, I still don't know. But I know that there are answers, and that trying to find them will help me change the world for the better. If I've learned anything from my Laidlaw experience, it is this.

I would like to thank the entire Laidlaw team for all of their hard work these past few years, and my supervisors Peter Cameron and Connor Jackson. I would also like to thank Lord Laidlaw for providing me with this once in a lifetime opportunity: I hope to pay you back by doing my part to change the world for the better.