

Laidlaw and Leadership: A learning process

As I come to the end of my experience as a Laidlaw Scholar, I have found reflecting on my evolving conception of 'leadership' one of the most interesting and valuable experiences of the entire process. Throughout the programme, alongside other scholars, I have been encouraged to assess and deconstruct 'leadership' through a number of lenses, often putting down in words my personal interests, opinions and priorities on the topic. In comparing these old notes and my initial Laidlaw application to my views today I can see a clear transition, perhaps best described as a development, in the focus of my conception of leadership. I would like to explore that development in this reflective essay. First, I will set out the details of this changed perspective before second, considering how my experiences as a Laidlaw scholar influenced and shaped this development. Finally, I will try to place my assessment of leadership within some theoretical context that I feel give substance and support to my current understanding.

In re-reading and reflecting on my original Laidlaw application, it is clear that my understanding of leadership two years ago revolved around notions of expertise. I wrote about leaders being individuals who knew what to do and when. I identified examples of leaders demonstrating their intellectual ability and I suggested effective teaching was, in my view, the most important form of leadership. This focus on expertise within leadership reflected the type of leader, and likely the career in academia, that I aspired to at the time. I think my logic was that through sufficient expertise in a given field individuals could develop the capacity to manage, organise, inspire and ultimately to lead through their knowledge. Whilst I stand by the sentiment behind many of these ideas, my experiences over the past two years have shown me how reductive and limiting this focus on knowledge was. In fact, I can see that conflating leadership with expert knowledge restricted me from taking on challenging opportunities and developing as a leader myself. So, what has changed?

Where I once thought that leadership was about knowing, I now contend that the fulcrum of leadership is in the ability and desire to *learn*. I admit, this might seem like a trivial distinction at best, or at worst an underwhelming truism! Learning proceeds knowing – *this is surely true*. Furthermore, the ability and desire to learn is somewhat vacuous on its own. Learn what? Learn how? These, among many others, are legitimate and unanswered questions. However, at a personal level my refocused understanding of the central logic of effective leadership has had real and significant implications. With 'learning' at the centre of my conception of leadership I now suggest it is best seen as an ongoing, developmental quality in an individual, rather than an end goal that can be *per se* 'achieved'. From this standpoint leaders are better equipped to respond to the inevitable 'unexpected', to draw on the skills of those around them and, perhaps most importantly, to have the confidence to take leadership opportunities in contexts that push their boundaries of comfort. In this way my evolved understanding of leadership has had implications on the type of leader I aspire to become, the activities I prioritise in leadership positions, and the leadership opportunities I am willing to pursue.

How did the Laidlaw programme influence my understanding? Looking back to my cohort's first leadership training weekend, in the beautiful setting of Arbroath's Hospitalfield House, I

can see how my original ideas were reinforced. As a group, our summer research proposals had just been accepted and there was a contagious sense of excitement to get started. Hearing everyone present their proposals and discussing our work was genuinely inspiring. It was really great to be surrounded by people so passionate about developing their own academic expertise. In the context of leadership training, I think this collective focus on our research questions reinforced my view that if only we developed the expertise to answer these questions we could become leaders in our respective fields. I should say this is not necessarily a criticism. Academic leadership is no doubt an important and legitimate form of leadership. My point is that at this stage my 'ends focussed' attitude to leadership was a little naïve.

Moving on, the research I conducted over the summer of 2020 further reinforced my attitude. I was lucky in how little my original research proposal was hampered by the covid restrictions that upended so many others. Whilst there were challenging moments, I really enjoyed the opportunity to focus on my research as planned and develop a relative level of expertise in my topic. This research experience reflected exactly the type of academic leadership I aspired to and associated with leadership more generally. For example, the opportunity to work with a scholarly expert (my supervisor) who led me through writing my research paper, personified my attitude; leadership came with a sufficient degree of knowledge and perhaps even a job title! Similarly, I enjoyed being able lead informal discussions on political identity (my research topic) and eventually present my work at the St Andrews poster exhibition. All of these experiences served to confirm my conception of leadership as an 'end goal' and specifically a matter of understanding and expertise. Again, I acknowledge that this aspiration and skill set does reflect a legitimate *type* of academic leadership. My mistake was in understanding leadership in these terms exclusively.

My Laidlaw experience over the summer of 2021 has genuinely shaken and remoulded this attitude. The Leadership in Action component of the Laidlaw programme aims at encouraging scholars to take on a real world leadership challenge, with a requirement of being "outside of one's comfort zone" and produce real world positive impact. I must admit to my initial scepticism towards the project. It felt implausible that I could practice 'real world' leadership, produce tangible results and work outside of my comfort zone, all from behind my laptop screen – as unfortunately required by the ongoing travel restrictions. However, I'm pleased to say, at least in my case, my scepticism was misguided. My project not only fulfilled these criteria but has contributed to significantly reframing my understanding of leadership.

So, how did this happen? This summer I have been privileged to work for the Ugandan women's human rights NGO - WORI (the Women's Rights Initiative Uganda). WORI are a women led, action-oriented NGO that aim at responding to the devastating scale of poverty and denial of women's rights in Uganda. Through a variety of programmes ranging from legal advocacy, to health education, to sheltering survivors of gender based violence, WORI have and continue to provide invaluable services to vulnerable Ugandan women and youth. My task was to examine how NGOs can construct their image and international messaging in a way that rejects neo-colonial and 'white saviour' narratives. With these narratives in

mind, I was then asked to explore channels for new, sustainable and 'decolonised' funding opportunities and ultimately produce a report for WORl that assessed their current practices and offer suggestions for future development. These questions certainly interested me and of course the importance of such work was plain to see. And yet there was a glaring and inescapable concern facing me. Whilst I had past experience working for NGOs, some experience studying decolonial political theory and had researched the political identity of marginalised people in my research the previous summer, there was no sense in which I had expert knowledge in these or the more practical dimensions of this task. It felt conceited, sometimes even negligent of me to assume that I would be able to produce the 'organisational development' report asked of me without the experience I felt was necessary for such a leadership role.

Yet again, I'm pleased to say I was wrong! In my most recent Laidlaw Network blog I write about this realisation in terms of the value of 'adaptability' in leadership. The point here is much the same. In applying the research skills I have developed in academic work to these more 'practical' questions I surprised myself in how fast my initial concerns washed away. With an attitude open to learning, and a lot of hard work, I was able to produce the report and develop my understanding of leadership in the process. Of course, there is still little sense in which I claim to have expert knowledge on these issues. What has changed however is my attitude to learning in leadership roles. I can recognise now that I should not expect myself to go into these positions having all the answers, knowledge or experience to respond to the challenges of leadership. I can see that leadership and learning can, *and must*, go hand in hand, and furthermore that I must come to trust in my ability to learn. From this standpoint leadership becomes a dynamic and open-ended endeavour in which aptitude is emphasised over qualification. This understanding, I believe, helps bridge the gap between academic leaders and effective leadership in general.

This conceptualisation of leadership has foundations in some of the earliest theory in the field. Plato's 375BCE work 'The Republic' explores, amongst many other things, the meaning of individual and political justice through analogy to an ideal city: the Kallipolis. In constructing this ideal City, Plato examines the qualities required of its 'ideal leaders' and is explicit about the role of learning. Book V of 'The Republic' argues that only the lifelong 'lovers of learning' have access to knowledge, rather than opinion, that is required of just and effective leadership. More recently, both Forbes and the Harvard Business Review have published articles echoing Plato's message. For example, in her Forbes article "Why The Best Leaders Are Full-Time Learners", Kelsey Meyer explains how leaders that prioritise learning employ the intellectual curiosity needed to challenge assumptions and continuously develop themselves, as well as those around them (Meyer 2013). Keating et al. similarly explain their research finding that leaders who prioritise learning strategize more ambitiously and are better equipped to "glean useful insights from the results of their experimentation" (Keating et al. 2017). The central role of learning in leadership thus has support out with my experience and should be embraced by would-be leaders as a key to success as well as a comfort in moments of uncertainty.

In sum then I can confidently say that my understanding of leadership has evolved since my application, most notably in the sense explored in this reflection. Where I once saw leadership as primarily a goal that could be achieved through learning, I now recognise this learning as a core element of leadership itself. I'll finish by expressing my sincere thanks to everybody that has made this leadership journey and my entire Laidlaw experience possible. To the St Andrews Laidlaw team for their patience and organising of our programme, to WORL for their support this summer and finally to the Laidlaw foundation and Lord Laidlaw himself for their funding and giving me this opportunity.

References:

1. Meyer, Kelsey. 2013. "Why The Best Leaders Are Full-Time Learners". Forbes. Accessed 03/08/2021. <https://www.forbes.com/sites/85broads/2013/06/10/why-the-best-leaders-are-full-time-learners/?sh=6f7385273a0c>
2. Keating Lauren, Peter A. Heslin, and Susan J. Ashford. 2017. "Good Leaders Are Good Learners". Harvard Business Review. Accessed 03/08/2021. <https://hbr.org/2017/08/good-leaders-are-good-learners>.