

Leadership Essay: Michael Sutherland

Even before joining the Laidlaw Scholarship I always strived to better myself. As a teenager, I had the opportunity to complete many leadership and teamwork programs dedicated to improving the employability of young people, such as DofE, Outward Bound, and the Community Leadership Award. These programs taught me a lot about myself, but never fully taught me the essence of leadership. The most valuable lesson on leadership I had was when I failed a coaching qualification. I knew the theory well and the coaching session I took for the exam was technically on point – but I was not truly leading the session. ‘If someone was to ask an observer “who is the leader here?” they might have struggled to pick me out. That was the first time I realised the difference between having an official role as a leader and actively leading. I later sat the examination again and passed with flying colours; I had learned that in order to lead a group of people, I had to acquire a leader’s presence. For coaching, that means one must consistently be interacting with your class and not simply barking commands. This failure is now an experience I am proud of, and I wear like a badge of honour; it helped me to grow as a person and as a leader. I ended up speaking about it during my Laidlaw Scholarship interview and it aided me in securing a place in the program, where I could further develop myself and my leadership skills.

The first leadership weekend introduced several ideas and allowed the scholars to interact with each other. Before the weekend we were all asked to fill in a DiSC profile which asks each scholar various questions to determine what kind of leader they are. There were four categories that a scholar could be in: dominance, influence, conscientiousness, and steadiness. A scholar could also be a combination of these categories, for instance di – in the dominance category with some influencer qualities. Of course, this is not a perfect metric, but it can give one a rough idea of what type of leader you are and how to interact with different types of leaders. I found myself in the influence category, which was initially a surprise to me: I had thought I was more of an analytical thinker as I had a STEM background. However, it did make sense. Around that time I was becoming more confident, so it is not unexpected that I was changing in other areas as well. The essence of being an influencer is being friendly with the team and being enthusiastic in general. There is certainly a level where I would agree that I fit into this category, although certainly not in all circumstances. For instance, when I am by myself, I go towards an analytical style. The key lessons I learned from the DiSC profile were that all leadership styles are equally important and that some leaders change their style depending on whether they are around friends or at work.

The next section of the program was the research project. My project was with the school of mathematics and statistics, and was titled, “Enumeration, Symmetry, and Classification of Fractal Carpets”. During this project I overcame numerous challenges and produced an academic poster. The first part of the project focused on the enumeration and symmetry of carpet fractals. I was given a research paper written by my supervisor to read through; this contained the method required for enumerating fractal carpets and accounted for their symmetries. Normally when I do maths, I solve one problem at a time, ensuring that I understand everything. I found that this strategy did not work for this project, as I struggled to fully understand the method from the research paper – I understood *how* it worked but not *why*. To deal with this, I worked on more than one problem at a time: I applied the method to some constructions, while also trying to figure out why the method works. After a few days doing this, I finally managed to find out why the method works, and because I was also working on constructions I was much further along the project. Another important skill I developed was my perseverance. This most notably occurred when I was working on producing a poster for the project – I had decided to challenge myself and make the poster with LaTeX. It was

particularly challenging to use LaTeX as I could not find a poster package I was happy with. I ended up using several packages, and I managed to complete the poster in about a fortnight, having read through numerous online sources.

During my time doing the scholarship I attended many webinars, most notably during the summer of 2020. I got the chance to listen and ask questions to real-world leaders from all around the globe with careers ranging from academia to law. The webinar that stuck with me the most was about 'Identity Leadership'. The presenter was Robert Lord, a professor of Leadership at Durham University, and he discussed how one's identity changes in different circumstances. For instance, a teacher may act differently in the classroom than when they are at home with their family or around friends. Even though this is something we are all loosely aware of, this talk proved to be very insightful; It was an excellent example of how an imperfect model can lead to some fascinating and useful conclusions. As the talk was focused on leadership, Robert went through examples of how understanding identity can be used in this area. The first step to using this knowledge is to understand how your own identity changes. In doing this you can acknowledge how you interact around different people and how your mindset changes. This can be useful when making important decisions. For instance, during negotiations people may try to get you in a more agreeable identity when it is not in your favour to do so (e.g. they may try to intimidate you). Of course, this works the other way around as well. This lesson on identity has had a profound impact on me and it is one I often find myself sharing with other people.

Another idea that stuck with me was cultural differences. This was introduced on the first leadership day and discussed how different cultures desire different types of leaders. Despite differences in cultures being common knowledge, it had never occurred to me that one should change their leadership style depending what culture they are in. For instance, in Japan your age plays a larger role on the respect you are due than it does in the western world; so if you are a young leader in Japan you may need to lead your team with a more decisive approach than you would have to in the UK. However, determining the leadership style to use is not always straight forward. This was made clear during the presentation with a lieutenant colonel from Fife. He discussed the essence of leading in a crisis and the key leadership lessons they teach in the army. Contrary to Hollywood's portrayal, the army is against authoritative leadership, instead preferring more healthy and supportive forms. It is, therefore, a reasonable conclusion that if the army considers authoritative leadership as inappropriate form of leadership, then there is no place for it — if it is not appropriate in a time of war, then it surely never is.

During the second leadership weekend, we went over how to deal with conflict. Dealing with conflict is something I struggle with, just like many other people. From disagreeing whose turn it is to do a chore, to deciding how to tell an employee that their work doesn't quite cut it, conflict is an inevitable part of life and all leaders need to know how to deal with it. One of the talks we had was from a Laidlaw alumna who had considered herself a laid-back leader. However, on her first job after graduating university she found herself leading a team who were not good at dealing with deadlines and maintaining good standards. For her to lead the team successfully she found the only solution was to tackle the problem head on and to deal with conflict. Having been in a similar situation myself, this was a useful story — sometimes conflict is necessary for progress.

For the 'leadership in action' project my job was to set the groundwork for a charity to expand one of their projects in Leeds. As the company wished to expand the project in other areas too, I ended working with two other Laidlaw scholars to produce and distribute a survey. This involved virtual discussions where we delegated parts of the survey and then had a video call where we compiled a final draft ready for distribution. Unfortunately, we received no responses from our survey, most

likely because the survey was distributed close to the school holidays. We decided to give the survey to the charity to distribute later and contacted several political stakeholders in hopes to make some amends for our lack of data. I was fortunate in this regard and managed to arrange a video call with the director of ObesityUK and learned a lot of useful information in regard to Leeds and how to change people's minds. He is a professor of psychology at Leeds University and one of his research interests is to tackle stigma associated with obesity. Given the wide applicability of his research, I found this discussion inspiring — if we can figure out how to reduce stigma in obesity, perhaps we can also reduce stigma in other areas, such as mental health. Most of the project involved using Google to find out information. I found this project useful for developing my ability to make decisions when there is an abundance of information. As we are in the information age, this will prove to be a useful skill for the future.

Doing this scholarship has taught me a lot about myself and leadership. I got the chance to do research with a professor renowned in his field, and to undertake a project with a charity that is working to make change throughout the UK. I've had the chance to hear stories from leaders around the world from a range of backgrounds, and I have been given the opportunity to lead throughout the scholarship. I extend my deepest gratitude to the Laidlaw Foundation and to Lord Laidlaw himself for giving me the opportunity to be part of this excellent program.