

Leadership Essay

A popular definition of leadership which I encountered most often during my Laidlaw Programme was... that leadership means many different things to different people in different contexts. Therefore, in this essay I will talk strictly about my experience, which, while subjective, definitely fits the “definition” above. I am glad to admit that I see great progress in my understanding of leadership, although the greatest changes, as perhaps usually in such cases, took place where I least expected them. I am also humbled by the fact that there were aspects in which I did not see much room for improvement, but I managed to grow tremendously. I hope to deconstruct this process and analyse the factors that brought me to the place where I am today.

Me, myself and I

When I first found out about the scholarship, I thought to myself “I have what it takes, I am good with people” and soon after I wrote my application based on the assumption that I am, indeed, good with people, giving many examples from my previous projects and extracurricular activities. Pretty quickly it turned out that my category of “people” did not include... me. I was capable of running a team, giving others advice and support, however I was doing really poorly when it came to leading myself. This way, what I thought would be a more interesting and deeper management course, turned out to be a journey of self-discovery and self-improvement.

During the first summer it quickly became obvious that all the good qualities that I can be proud of, such as my patience, indulgence and kindness, are not used towards myself when I work independently. During the most intense part of the pandemic, when the research part of the programme started, I promised myself (demanded from myself) that I will give this project 110% of my attention and effort. And then, barely 2 weeks into work, I broke. I do not like exaggerations, so I believe myself when I recall this time as one of the hardest in my life. It took a mental breakdown and a medical leave for me to understand that I am pushing myself too hard and I am not able to show myself any compassion or understanding. The revelation was so big, my Laidlaw post from that summer was centred around one simple statement:

Self-leadership requires self-compassion.

For a girl who always had it all under control, it was really hard to admit I was not able to accomplish something. I have never asked for an extension, my parents have never written me an excuse from any assignment in school, I was simply the one to always be prepared. One of the greatest challenges in the whole programme was to ask for help; to admit that I am not doing ok and that I will need “special treatment” in order to finish the project and regain full health. Asking for help was my first step to self-compassion and, as it later occurred, to a long struggle with my toxic perfectionism.

Perfect, but at what cost?

Part of the problem, as I quickly diagnosed, were my unrealistically high expectations for the quality and efficiency of my work. A general rule that I have followed for far too long, was to do it perfectly, or do not bother at all. Such mindset was not only putting a lot of pressure on myself every time I started a project, it also took all the joy out of it, because I could never be satisfied with what I have achieved. Asking for help during my first research summer and asking for more time to complete it (when I signed for a programme myself and convinced everyone I would be a great candidate) initiated a slow but progressive change. I still struggle with admitting that I do not know something, but occasionally I allow myself to be human and ask someone to explain the issue I might be struggling with. When in doubt I repeat:

Progress over perfection.

Taming my perfectionism also made me think about my leading style and resulted in the most important goals that I set for my leadership in action project: to stop micromanaging people I am working with and to set more diverse targets, not only based on quantitative results. For the longest time I would be the one in the group to double-check every action that was required, I would supervise every phase of the project with a strong undertone of “fine, move aside, I will do it myself”. Observing myself and admitting the flaws to my behaviour I matured as a leader and practiced “responsible leadership”, where I am still really involved in every project I do, but I let other people express themselves and do their part to the best of their abilities, not mine.

Acknowledging my previous struggles with excessive expectations, as well as taking into account my leading style, I also put a lot of effort into finding new ways of evaluating my work. As I am quite confident in my competences, I made a conscious decision to move my attention away from the measurable outcomes of the project and to focus on the atmosphere in which the work was carried out and the lack of burnout when the job is done. This new approach guided me in choosing my priorities and was a source of comfort when some things were not going as smoothly or efficiently as I expected.

Summer of changes

In my initial application I wrote that I cannot wait for the second summer of the scholarship to utilize the skills I acquired during the course of the programme. I had no clue what the year would bring and how many of my plans would require change. Regardless of the situation, I could not imagine my leadership in action project to be remote and I put a lot of effort into finding a role where I could interact with people, form a team, and truly be able to make a difference.

I helped to design and deliver summer camp programmes for children; although I had some experience in volunteering with kids, spending the whole project in the character of a coordinator was a completely new project for me. I realized that it was a perfect opportunity for me, because with young participants one has to react quickly to changing circumstances and I wanted to try myself in the situations where I cannot control everything.

The structure of the programme required that I work with new groups of people each week. Such organization made it a really diverse experience and accelerated the team building process. Each week I was interacting with different people, their different working styles, and different ideas of leadership. One of the most interesting part of the process that I noticed quickly was my eagerness to do everything I could so everyone would like me. I like to think that maybe it was the result of the six months spent at home without many interactions with new people, but deep down I know this is not the whole story. I was not exactly being fake, but throughout the first two weeks of the project I could feel quite clearly that I do not behave naturally. I spend a lot of time (or as much time as I could working 24/7 with young energetic kids) wondering what drives me to behave like this.

While I was still full of energy and enthusiasm, I did not see a problem in such behaviour. But after two weeks the burnout was slowly making itself felt, I was more and more tired and I saw that I will not be able to function like this for the rest of the summer. Therefore I did something very brave: I set a boundary. During the first two weeks I had a feeling that there was always something to do and taking time off would be seen as slacking. However, seeing my energy levels going down I realised that first and foremost I need to take care of myself. I looked into our schedules and took initiative to organize the sessions in the way that enabled me and my team to take some time off.

This situation also brought me back to an unsolved question of my personality: am I an extrovert or an introvert? Every test or survey that I have ever taken always put me on the fence. Wanting to see myself as confident and outgoing I was always stretching to my extrovert side. Looking back at it I also realized that the social narrative was similar: it was "better" to be extraverted and "here are ten things that you can work on if you identify as an introvert". Taking the time to acknowledge that I need more personal space and that I need regular breaks when I work with people allowed me to take care of my introverted side and embrace the fact that I am, despite my attempts to change that, somewhere on the spectrum. I can be outgoing and involved in creating a good atmosphere in the group, just as much I may need time for myself to rest in solitude and silence. I am also aware that it might change in time, I am a human being, I do not have to label myself as anything, I just need to listen to my intuition and do what seems best for me. It was a lesson I did not anticipate to learn from that experience, but I am very glad I did.

To lead or to be led?

Quickly changing teams and roles gave me the opportunity to observe the dynamics between people. Because it was my first summer in the company, I was not assigned the position of a leader and had to listen to orders given by others. It was not so easy to learn that sometimes I could not have a last word in an important matter. It was a great lesson for me to listen carefully and sometimes just do what I was asked to do; I had learned that there are times where listening and completing the assigned tasks is more important and gives better results.

This new environment also helped me tremendously to realize that challenging someone's decision does not mean challenging someone's position as a leader. I had to consistently practice to speak my mind feeling hesitant and afraid that someone will take my comments personally. I was also afraid that my clear lack of agreement with some proposals would be a reason not to like me, which as I already mentioned was a huge source of my insecurity. But I was always really aware of the situation and I never attacked someone's position undermining their leadership skills, rather I was just proposing another solution that could be taken into account. Every time it was slightly easier to break through all these worries and clearly express my opinions.

Looking forward

There are still many questions I have about myself, but it feels good to know that I am always on the hunt for more answers. My Laidlaw journey was more rocky than I would like to admit, but it was also more rewarding than I could ever imagine. Inspirations came even from the avenues I was never considering exploring: during my research project I realized that I want to be more engaged in education for sustainability as I see promoting nature literacy to be a promising angle in combating climate change. This summer I discovered that not only I am likeable, but I also have the skills necessary to effectively work with children. Every step of the way I discover something that makes me more confident and ready to put myself out there for challenges that I would not have previously considered myself qualified for. Less than a month ago I was offered a position as a Team Lead in a student-focused company and I happily accepted. Even though sometimes I still wonder if I am good enough or smart enough, I just decide to try.