

## Leadership Essay

When applying for the Laidlaw Scholarship at the start of my second year at St Andrews University, my motivations and the reasons I thought leadership is an important field to learn more about, were very similar to what they are now. In my leadership statement submitted with my application, I discuss the importance of great leadership in the face of the global challenges we face today - particularly in relation to climate change, the biggest of them all in my opinion. My vision of myself, however, and my potential as a leader, is what has changed the most. Throughout school and in my first year at university, I had always thrown myself into extra-curricular activities and enjoyed taking on positions of responsibility. However, I tended to have a self-limiting mindset, almost ruling myself out of certain opportunities before I'd even given them a try – the Laidlaw programme almost being one of these. I thought that it appeared to be a fantastic opportunity, but almost didn't give it a second thought that I would get a place on the programme. Just gaining a place on the programme was great for my self-confidence, and since then I feel my vision for what I can achieve, and what it means to exercise leadership, has shifted significantly. I put this down to many aspects of the programme, but in my reflections it has been helpful to categorise what I have learned and gained from the programme into (1) my personal development and what I have learned about myself and (2) what I have learned from a variety of other people across the two years.

The first leadership weekend with my Laidlaw cohort in March of 2020 was a real highlight for me, not least because it was the first and unfortunately last in-person event we had due to the Covid-19 pandemic! More than that though, it was an important weekend during which I learned a lot about myself as a person and leader. As someone who has always enjoyed a bit of self-analysis and a good old personality quiz, the DiSC profile and subsequent discussions around it were interesting for me, and I enjoyed figuring out to what extent I agreed with its analysis of my leadership personality. As was reinforced throughout the weekend, the intention of the DiSC profile is not to provide a fully nuanced picture of one's leadership style, but I did agree with much that it identified. The first summer of the Laidlaw programme was a novel opportunity to spend time digging into topics I am interested in and gain experience conducting real primary research, as well as subsequently aiding me figure

out whether research and academia may be an option in my future plans. The experience was invaluable for developing my self-leadership capabilities and a greater idea of where my interests lie, and I believe it will have set me up well for my fourth year in which I will be writing a dissertation. To be honest, I initially found the research a really lonely process a lot of the time, and it made me think, for a while, that research is not where I am best placed. However, when it came to the research interviews I conducted, in which I spoke to five members of non-profit organisations working on community-level climate change adaptation in Guatemala, I began to enjoy the process much more and relished the opportunity to have some really interesting conversations and build relationships with the interviewees. It is from those interviews that I met my supervisor for my leadership in action project. Ultimately, I think I thrive where I can bounce off other people, and am most engaged and motivated in situations where I can have regular conversations with others. I do accept that this cannot be all the time though, and sometimes you have to do other aspects of work that you might enjoy less, such as the independent reviewing of literature, in order to reach these more people-focused points. Next time I undertake a similar project, I hope I will be able to keep that in better perspective as a result of my experience. The realisation that I would prefer to be in a more people-oriented job in the future is a really helpful one as well, though, when it comes to thinking about my future after university.

My leadership in action project has also been extremely valuable for my personal development as it too entailed a lot of self-leadership, as opposed to the leading or managing of other people. I think I have developed really valuable skills, though, which will be key to team-working situations. It has definitely demonstrated to me some of my weaknesses, but also allowed me a unique opportunity to start working on them now. For example, I am not naturally the most organised or methodical of people, but my supervisor has helped me learn new methods for organising research materials and resources. Across the two Summers, my lack of time-management skills has also been exposed as I struggled each time to keep the length of my projects to the recommended five weeks. However, I think the first step in improvement is self-awareness and it is something I will continue to work on! Part of good leadership is the recognition of one's strengths and weaknesses, which the programme has helped me to understand well, without characterising them as being chronic flaws that can't be changed. This links to another discussion we had on the first leadership weekend that

really stuck out to me, on the idea of 'limiting beliefs.' As afore-mentioned, I almost didn't bother applying for the Laidlaw programme due to a sort of self-limitation, and our discussions helped really illuminate to me that the way you talk to yourself and frame your abilities really matters. Rather than telling myself that I have awful organisation skills now, I try to focus on what I can do to improve them, believing that this is possible. I think leadership is not about being the finished product, and I really like the fact the Laidlaw programme has emphasised this. The encouragement of self-reflection that has been a current throughout the programme has been something I've found extremely helpful and will continue to practice.

In terms of learning from others, I think one of the really valuable aspects of the programme is the chance to be surrounded by like-minded peers. Whilst all Laidlaw scholars come from a wide variety of academic fields and our research projects and individual leadership journeys may be wildly different, it is a fantastic opportunity to learn from others' different passions and also share our often-similar visions and goals for ourselves and the world. Simply by taking part in the programme it is clear that everyone has a similar drive for change and self-development. The DiSC profile-related activities during the first leadership weekend highlighted just how different many of us are, but was really helpful to get to understand each other better, and also highlight that leadership is not just one thing, or for one type of personality. Rather, there are different styles and part of what is important is the ability to recognise this in order to work better with other people. Discussions amongst the group helped highlight to me that there are ways to communicate with people that can get around the potential clash in leadership style or personality. For example, my profile highlighted to me that, as an 'S type' often I could be too focused on the group dynamic, whereas the 'D type' may be more focused on measurable task-related outcomes which is also really important. Therefore, I could benefit from communicating with people of the 'D type' in these terms – focusing on tangible outcomes. The Action Learning Set meetings we had each Summer were also really valuable to be able to help each other find solutions to challenges we were facing with our projects and learn from the ways others think and would approach certain situations.

The opportunity to work with both the supervisors of my research and leadership projects was also an incredible learning experience. I learned a lot from my research supervisor, Professor Ali Watson, on the questions to ask oneself when conducting research and how to approach research with ethical methodologies. I have been very grateful to continue working alongside Ali with the Third Generation Project, a think tank based in the School of International Relations that Ali co-founded. In regards to my leadership in action, it was a fantastic opportunity to work with someone in a sector I am seriously considering going into after university – in an NGO related to human rights and the environment. My desire to work in this field is something I expressed in my leadership statement, as afore-mentioned, and hasn't really changed, though I have learned some of the behind-the-scenes realities of such a job, such as the difficulties of finding funding, which I was involved with this summer, and other daily challenges in the field.

I also had some really valuable conversations with my supervisor about what it takes to be a leader in this field, where one is constantly reminded of the injustices of the world and striving to tackle vast and complicated problems such as climate change. I already found that just engaging with these issues in my studies at university and throughout my Laidlaw projects can be quite overwhelming, and lead to feelings of helplessness. My supervisor shared with me some of the ways she tries to manage these inevitable feelings which include ensuring that she has a good separation between her work life and her personal life and maintains passions and hobbies alongside her work; that her team that she works with maintains a good ethos and sense of humour alongside their work and are there to support each other, and importantly that the goals she has and expectations for the change she can make are measured and realistic, recognising the organisation's capabilities and maximising the impact they can have. Taking care of oneself is an important part of leadership, as well as creating an environment in which people are supported and able to do their best work. The speakers at leadership lunches and other lecture events organised by the St Andrews Laidlaw Team and the Laidlaw Foundation were also a fantastic opportunity to learn from others with impressive and varied leadership experience. For example, we had the opportunity to learn from previous scholars and what they have done since the end of their scholarship and their undergraduate degrees.

An important message that I took away from these latter talks was that the opportunities provided by the Laidlaw scholarship are just as much about what you make of them afterwards, as much as the training and experiences are important at the time. They underlined that it is really important to take advantage of the title of being a Laidlaw scholar and the experience that brings with it, as it provides you with a unique and valuable platform to take you elsewhere that you want to go. I said in my initial leadership statement that 'To date, my leadership development has been through experiences and relying on instinct. Moving forward I want to develop a firmer understanding of what good leadership entails and a stronger foundation in the skills.' I definitely feel like I have a greater understanding of leadership, despite its complexities and ambiguities, having gone through the scholarship and a stronger foundation to move on with. Furthermore, I am determined to make the most of the experiences and this foundation that I have been provided with.

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