

LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT: MY REFLECTIONS

I laughed to myself when I re-read the leadership statement I submitted as part of my Laidlaw application. I thought I knew what I was *supposed* to say, how a leader is *supposed* to act and how a Laidlaw scholar is *supposed* to be. I had this vision of reinvention, thinking that by surrounding myself with the kind of people that Laidlaw attracts, I would somehow become this better version of myself. Although, if the programme has taught me anything, it's that effective leadership stems from authenticity. To be the best leader I can be, I must embrace the nuances of my personality and leadership style that interested Laidlaw in the first place. Of course, role models are an immensely formative element to leadership development, however I have found that inspiration is more important than emulation, in this context. I'm never going to be a better Martin Luther King Junior than he himself was, nor can I out-Jacinda-Ardern Jacinda Ardern, so why try? Instead, I think studying their styles and unpicking why they strike me as such effective leaders is a far more useful approach.

In my statement, I mention *'the ineffable ability to coax out the best efforts of a team'*, which I maintain is a reasonable definition of leadership. However, when I ask myself how to hone this skill, I have just as many questions now as when I first applied. The good news is that the questions have changed. Over the course of my tenure as a Laidlaw scholar, I have attended many workshops and lectures explaining the different styles of leadership and how to tailor the approach to the personalities of the people I am trying to lead. Whilst this, somewhat reductionistic, outlook can be helpful in a leadership context, it changes the way you interact with people. I try to moderate the extent to which I employ this framework outside of leadership roles. The uncertainty now isn't one of communication, but one of ethereality. The ability to make people want to complete a task to the best of their ability lies somewhere in the realm between motivation and manipulation. I don't think I'll ever know exactly how to strike this balance, nor do I believe that every situation will demand the same one. I suppose the best I can hope for is enough experience to be able to tell whether or not people are engaging with the leadership style I choose to employ.

I remember attending a talk on the different styles of leadership, given by St Andrews' own Alex Stanley. Here I was introduced to some of the more general styles of leadership. The funny thing with leadership studies, to me, is that most of the taught material is fairly intuitive, but not necessarily something I would've thought about, if I hadn't attended the talk in the first place. I'm reluctant to believe that my entire approach to leadership fits so neatly into one of the 'boxes' mentioned in the talk, however I agree that I have stronger inclinations towards some styles over others. For example, I am by nature a pacesetter and a coach. I believe in leading by example, because it doesn't seem right to expect more from my team than I do from myself. Of course, the trouble with this mentality is that often in leadership settings, the whole point is to surround yourselves with experts and advisers and then lean on their knowledge to make informed choices. It is therefore unreasonable to expect the same expertise from myself as I do from them. I regard myself as a pacesetter more in the context of showing a strong work ethic and a high moral standard. Cultivating respect in this manner

also helps to alleviate some of the 'imposter syndrome' that tends to creep in when I lead in unfamiliar situations. Similarly, I identify as a coach, or as an affiliative leader, in that I prioritise personal development of the members of my team, rather than employing a one-size-fits-all strategy to leadership. Seeing growth in individuals is often more satisfying to me than the actual end-result. This is a consequence of my empathetic nature, which I usually regard as a strength of character, however the scholarship has taught me that this is something of a double-edged sword. Overinvestment in the development of the people I lead often blurs the professional with the personal and can make it more difficult for me to discipline or replace certain members, despite this being in the best interest of the team overall. The leadership style that is most alien to me is curiously the most direct one. Commanding or autocratic leadership is difficult for me because it seems artificial. It seems as if the power comes from status and positions of authority, rather than from a willingness of the subordinates to be led. Therefore, it can sometimes feel unnatural and inauthentic and consequently accentuate my 'imposter syndrome' rather than attenuate it.

One of the talks we received recently from a previous Laidlaw scholar (Tom Burdge) examined the importance of consent in this context, which compounded my scepticism towards autocratic leadership. Without this element of consent, I think autocratic leaders run the risks of tripping at the same hurdles as many totalitarian regimes, expecting subservience rather than garnering faith in their followers. The coercive nature of these styles seems short-sighted and unlikely to elicit the best efforts from a team, and so I doubt this will be a technique that I try and integrate into my own leadership style going forward. I am firmly of the opinion that a leader should earn their place for as long as they lead, and sometimes that means being challenged by their team. A leader should catalyse the exchange of ideas, and make the team *want* to complete a task as best they can. This ability is characteristic of charismatic leaders, although I am still unsure as to how teachable or learnable it is. The abstract nature of charisma makes it difficult to quantify, or even qualify, but most people know it when they see it. It is just hard to pinpoint exactly what constitutes it. There is nuance between charm and charisma, as a charismatic person is necessarily charming, whilst the converse is not strictly true. I think part of the reason people-pleasing has brought me success in the past is because charming people isn't difficult, whereas inspiring devotion is. There's a knack to making people realise that what you want from them is also what they want from themselves. I believe that devotion comes from awakening this passion within your followers and them realising that trusting in your leadership and sharing in your mindset, will help them to achieve things initially they didn't know they could. Again, there is clear opportunity for misuse of this ability and, for fear of developing a saviour complex, extreme care must be taken not to overstep the mark. The moment I presume to know the needs of my followers (rather than actively asking for it), is the moment I stop being a leader, and start being a ruler.

A highlight of the programme for me was the very first leadership weekend, where my cohort and I were lucky enough to enjoy a weekend retreat to Hospitalfield House, in Arbroath. Here we attended several seminars on the many different facets of leadership and engaged in some interesting debates, such as the differences between leadership and management. I think the most impactful talk I had was in the wake of receiving my DiSC personality profile. I had

never put much stock into these kinds of test, assuming it impossible that such a metric could truly capture all that is 'me'. However, this test revealed things that I hadn't even considered. I knew I was an emotional person; however, I hadn't before realised just how detrimental this had been to my own development. Suddenly, I understood why criticism seemed like a personal attack and why investing too much of myself into personal relationships with every colleague left me spread far too thin. Interestingly, my profile showed an aptitude for all four quadrants: dominance, influence, steadiness, and conscientiousness, with a clear proclivity for influence and steadiness. This isn't something I would have guessed ahead of time, given my prioritisation of relationships over results. Although, it should be noted that my profile showed only the slightest inkling of the results-oriented, dominance-based leadership style. I found it curious how different contexts engage different aspects of my personality. As a chemist, I'd like to say I am analytical, precise and systematic, which are all traits of a conscientious leader, but I've learned that one has little to do with the other. My approach to leadership is very much its own thing and not an emergent property of my other personality traits.

Sadly, I must confess that the leadership goal I was most keen to develop at the outset of this scholarship is still the one I struggle with the most, because it's hard to suppress my nature. I am and probably always will be a people-pleaser. The difficulty with unpicking this quality in myself is that it has undeniably been of more help than hindrance in my life so far. However, as I transition into more leadership-based roles, there's no way that this can continue. Importantly, just because I still struggle with people-pleasing and saying no doesn't mean I haven't improved. I can only hope that continued exposure to situations where I have to make decisions like this allows me to keep progressing. After a discussion with the Laidlaw team here at St Andrews, I am actively seeking these situations out, and trying to force myself to get used to saying no. I've tried to work out why this is such a problem area for me and, to be honest, I've still not got a satisfactory answer. My best guess is that it's probably a confidence issue, where I wrongly substitute social acceptance for internal validation. Until I can divorce these two notions, this will remain a challenge, but by actively seeking out conflict and realising that disagreements don't destroy relationships, I hope that I'll get there.

Over the course of the programme, we've spoken a lot about where we see ourselves in maybe five or ten years and I don't think I've given the same answer twice. One of the benefits (or burdens, depending on your viewpoint) of the leadership training and the talks I've received, is a greater sense of social responsibility. I started this programme of thinking I would end up as a patent lawyer, then considered a research career and even dabbled in scientific communication. As I write this, the field of ocean chemistry seems a really exciting prospect, within which I could not only see myself having a really rewarding career, but also effecting genuine positive change. Whereas this kind of choice would've paralysed me two years ago, I now see it for the exciting opportunity that it is and am not too worried that it isn't entirely figured out just yet. As I prepare to move to Switzerland for my industrial placement in September, I'm optimistic about what lies ahead. I'm sure there will be an all-too-familiar sense of imposter syndrome to start with, but my experience as a Laidlaw scholar has

prepared me well to deal with that. Here I intend to work out whether industry or research careers really are the right choice for me, by getting stuck in and giving them a go.

I think one of the main lessons I have taken from the programme is the importance of *just starting*. Jacqueline Novogratz, a speaker at one of the leadership talks last Summer, highlights this in her book 'Manifesto for a Moral Revolution', where she says that rather than overthinking yourself into inaction, just put one foot in front of the other and see what happens. This is not my usual tactic, but it makes a lot of sense. No one starts out as the finished product, and so I look forward to trying new things, failing at some of them, but always continuing my development. I know I will never be 'finished', but as long as I am progressing, then I'm on the right track.