

Leadership in Action Reflection

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During my Meet & Greet Zoom call with my was-then potential supervisors, I was informed that if I accepted the placement at Justice for Children and Youth (JFCY), I would be the only non-law student within the organization. That is, there could be discrepancies in what I wanted to do versus what I could do at JFCY due to my unique background and experience. Still, I gladly accepted my placement offer because I shared the child-centred mission at JFCY and also believed that being in a new environment could allow me to further develop my leadership skills.

However, although I was mentally prepared, I still experienced imposter syndrome as the least experienced member of a team of highly motivated and successful lawyers, who were occupied with an overwhelming number of cases that I, unfortunately, could not assist with (despite my enthusiasm). It was a challenge for me to overcome -- in a way, I could choose to passively observe the lawyers or actively figure out a “niche” that I could fill at the organization. My leadership training through the Laidlaw Scholars Program helped me develop self-reflective practices that I used to figure out a new niche: I could use my art and language skills to create an educational comic on legal issues in a children-friendly way! “Children-friendly” is an important aspect that is often overlooked in the justice field: the resources available on the rights and responsibilities of justice-involved youth are written in legal language that is not easily accessible for these children.

During my time at JFCY, I learned to adopt a new perspective on leadership - a perspective of children. It is a perspective of a group of people who have the greatest stake in our future yet are powerless to make their own decision in our legal system. And in turn, as leaders, we strive to empower them by working with them to advocate for their rights and protection in an age-sensitive way. Not only did I have the opportunity to put my leadership skills into practice, but I was also inspired by the selfless leadership of the staff lawyers, who worked around the clock to advocate for children and youth. Their perseverance to win difficult cases, their courage to serve challenging clients, and their vision to protect the legal rights and dignity of minors

teach me a lot about servant leadership -- or giving without expecting anything in return. Also, I am further inspired by the fact that despite the “serious” nature of their work, the lawyers were able to maintain a very positive work culture where everyone -- from the staff lawyers to summer students like myself -- feels supported. My summer experience at JFCY helps me to uncover my leadership style and the type of culture that I would like to cultivate in my future journey.

In addition to learning from the staff lawyers, I also had the opportunity to learn from other high school students during my summer placement. My background taught me the belief that we should only learn from people with higher seniority than ourselves because people with less experience -- such as those who are younger -- have little to offer. However, my work at JFCY shows me that this could not be further from the truth: my fellow summer student was very talented whose valuable work and feedback were critical for shaping our final product. Overcoming presumption taught me that good leadership not only involves working collaboratively with others but also empowering others -- particularly those with less voice -- to utilize their strengths to contribute to the vision.

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