

Laidlaw Leadership Development Essay



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1 Introduction

At the beginning of the Laidlaw scholarship, my understanding of leadership was limited to my observations of leadership in others. While I believe that these ideas formed a good basis for my own definition of leadership, I now appreciate the value of my experiences over the project in developing this understanding. Leadership is not simply a theory or an algorithm to be implemented. Fundamentally, it is a skill that must be honed through experience, while also being adapted to the individual and the circumstances they find themselves in.

This leads to the concept of self-leadership: a leader must have a profound understanding of their own strengths and weaknesses, as well as how their experiences have shaped these attributes. This then allows them to exert control over their own thoughts and emotions, and prevent their weaknesses from working against them. Only then can they project confidence and motivate others towards a shared vision.

Furthermore, I have come to understand that leadership can take many different forms. I initially thought that leadership had to be overt and explicit, and that leaders needed to be the leading face of their organisation. While this is certainly the case for some organisations, I have observed and appreciated more subtle forms of leadership that are more suited for certain contexts.

My experiences throughout the scholarship have led me towards a greater self-understanding as well as an expanded definition of what constitutes leadership, and I believe this is what will set me up as a leader in the future.

2 Starting my Leadership Journey

Conducting the University of St Andrews Wind Orchestra in 2019 was my first real leadership opportunity. My initial approach to leadership was the same approach I had always used to solve problems: extensive preparation and rigorous analysis of the details. While this allowed me to develop my interpretation of the music, getting the members of the orchestra to realise this interpretation required something more.

To discover what this something was, I reflected on the conductors of the various orchestras I had performed with. The best conductors I had worked under could clearly communicate their interpretation of the piece, then the musicians would work together diligently to implement the conductor's interpretation. In other words, they had to inspire the orchestra. This then led me to believe that inspiration was the key to leadership, which I outlined in my application to the scholarship.

What I didn't understand was how leaders achieved this. I assumed that it was down to confidence and being a good communicator. What I didn't appreciate at the time was that while this was partly true, these skills do not exist on their own: confidence and clear communication are themselves a consequence of self-leadership.

3 The First Summer

3.1 DISC Profile

Before my research project began, the starting point for developing my self-understanding was the DISC report. My personality was classified as a ‘C’ style. This meant that I have an analytical and systematic approach to problem solving, which was of no surprise to me. The assessment also described me as being private and uncomfortable in unusual social situations. This was somewhat true: while I do make an effort to be sociable, it isn’t something that comes naturally to me. My DISC profile then allowed me to begin reflecting upon how these attributes might determine my responses to various challenges in life.

Also, I began to think how my DISC profile might shape my role as a leader. A leader, I thought, is someone who is front-facing and visible at every turn. Furthermore, they must thrive when working in a team and engage enthusiastically with those they work with. How then could I be a leader if, by my very nature, I prefer to work alone and avoid public recognition? Throughout the scholarship, I would come to see examples of leaders who did not operate according to the criteria described above. Seeing these alternate leadership styles made me think that perhaps my personality might actually allow for effective leadership in certain situations.

3.2 Research Project

The difficulties I faced in the first summer of research helped me understand how my personality shapes my response to certain challenges. For example, while trying understand all the details of a problem may work for tasks of a smaller scale, doing so in a research context is almost impossible. As an undergraduate researcher working with academics who had spent their entire career on this problem, it would take months to get to grips with all the underlying physics of the project. This helped me realise that I need to temper my desire for absolute understanding with an appreciation that sometimes a narrow focus improves efficiency.

Working within the Centre for Exoplanet Science gave me an insight into leadership in academia, and how this type of leadership often deviates my initial idea of leadership. I saw this firstly in my supervisor Christiane Helling, who was the director of the Centre at the time. From my observations, she preferred to manage things from behind the scenes with quiet diligence. She expressed a more reserved confidence in meetings, allowing her experience and knowledge in the field to speak for her most of the time. It was evident that this style of leadership earned her the respect of her colleagues, which I found encouraging, since this style of leadership is more suited to my personality.

4 Leadership Training

4.1 First Leadership Weekend

In the first leadership weekend of the new semester, we attended a talk from Colin Harper, a former police officer who worked with the hostage negotiation team in Police Scotland. In his talk, he mentioned how people involved in such negotiations are typically in emotionally charged states, and thus were unresponsive to reason or logic. This made me reflect on another one of the attributes reflected in my DISC report. I try to communicate with people using reason and logic, but perhaps in certain situations I should instead try to show sympathy and understand the situation from their perspective.

The activities we took part in also demonstrated how my personality dictated how I operate in a team setting. In one activity, we had to work as a team to draw a map of the world. I had a fairly good recollection of where the countries were, therefore I ended up drawing most of the map. The task made me realise that my instinct is to take control of a situation instead of delegating to members of a team. I reasoned that this came from my desire to be seen as a hard worker and not as someone who coasts on other's achievements. However, observing my supervisor's role as director of the Centre for Exoplanet Science made me think that perhaps a more passive role to teamwork and therefore leadership can be efficient in certain situation.

4.2 Ethical Leadership Training

Throughout the remainder of the second semester, I attended the ethical leadership masterclasses with Daniel Effron. Our discussions of ethical blind spots and potential rationalisations we use for unethical behaviour made me reflect upon my own ethical decision making. I acknowledged that in the past, I had used many of these rationalisations to justify behaviour that I knew deep down was immoral. Being aware of the rationalisations that I might use in the future would not only help prevent unethical behaviour, it would also help me be honest with myself about the decisions I make.

I then realised that this self-honesty was key to inspiring people as a leader. Before convincing others that a vision is worth working towards, a leader must first convince themselves that they truly believe in this vision. Doing so requires an understanding of the potential rationalisations a person might use to deceive themselves about their intentions. Once this self-doubt is removed, or at least managed effectively, a leader is able to work tirelessly towards their goal and motivate the people around them to do the same.

5 Leadership in Action Project

For my leadership in action project, I chose to undertake a youth and community project with Think Pacific in Toga village, Fiji. I chose this project primarily because I would actually be living in the village I was working in. This would be more challenging than

staying in a hotel, but I believed that it would lead to more self-growth. Also, living in the community would be a more effective way to learn about how leadership operates within the community.

During the build project, we were under the direction of a local build manager. Much like my research supervisor, he took on a passive leadership role, preferring not to interfere unless asked to. However, the lack of instruction and firm guidance meant that often we did not know what we were doing. In theory, this would allow us to show initiative and find solutions ourselves, but our lack of professional build experience made this difficult without assistance. Therefore, while appropriate in certain situations, passive leadership only works if people within an organisation are well-trained and understand their roles clearly.

Conversely, the village itself seemed to operate effectively under a more passive form of leadership. The role of the chief in the village seemed to be more ceremonial than practical, in that decisions were made based on the consensus of the villagers. The effectiveness of this leadership style, I believe, stems from the decentralised and sustainable nature of their society. Their self-reliance removes the need for a centralised authority, and the fact that their society can adapt to changing circumstances means that they do not require a strong figure to change their community dramatically.

Fundamentally though, the most important thing I learned in Fiji was not about leadership in particular, but about myself. While the lifestyle in the village was challenging, dealing with these challenges made me more secure in my strengths and helped me confront my weaknesses. For example, my resilient and stoic approach to problem solving helped me to adapt to the material conditions of the village. Also, the lack of privacy in Fijian culture meant that I had to overcome my insular nature and open up to the community. Confronting these challenges helped me develop a greater self-understanding, and gave me more confidence in my ability to overcome future challenges.

6 Looking to the Future

I still believe that the key to leadership is inspiration. However, my experiences over the project have taught me that the ability to inspire relies on self-confidence, which requires an individual to understand how to control and manage their own strengths and weaknesses. My reflections throughout the leadership training and especially my experiences in Fiji have deepened my self-understanding and taught me how to evaluate myself honestly.

Additionally, I have developed an appreciation for alternate forms of leadership which may be suited to my personality. In the Centre for Exoplanet Science and in Toga village, I saw how a more subtle and less overt form of leadership can be effective when dealing with a well-equipped and well-informed group of individuals. This form of leadership complements my characteristics as outlined in the DISC survey, which shows that there are leadership roles that are suited to me.

I am unsure about which career I intend to pursue, or which field I will be a leader in. However, I now understand the importance of self-leadership in inspiring others as a leader,

and how I can develop my self-leadership through experience. While there is still much for me to learn about leadership, I know now what the next steps are in my journey as a leader.

7 Acknowledgments

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