

Leadership Reflection Essay

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Introduction

I would like to begin by thanking Lord Laidlaw and my supervisor Dr Banerjee for the central role which they played in providing the opportunities, guidance and means for me to develop my research and leadership skills.

Upon reflection, my most enduring takeaways from the Laidlaw Scholarship are how diverse and nuanced leadership can be and how it is not a direct corollary with authority. Whilst seemingly self-evident now, this observation increased my confidence in my own ability to 'lead' and has underpinned my own personal development.

This essay discusses how my perspectives and skills relating to leadership evolved during the 'leadership days', 'research project' and 'leadership in action project' which made up the Laidlaw Scholarship programme and how I hope to further develop my capacity to lead in the future.

Leadership Day 1

When I first applied to the Laidlaw Scholarship, I was not a particularly confident person. An unsatisfactory academic performance in first year combined with an aversion to conflict meant that if pressed to list traits which made me 'employable', leadership was the last one I would have chosen. In fact, what prompted me to apply to the programme in the first place was a desire to improve my capacity to be direct, forceful, strong-willed and goal-oriented; skills which I saw as central to leadership with authority (which I saw as the only 'real' type of leadership at that time).

Even during the application process, it became clear to me that the skills I had sought to improve, whilst important, were not the only skills constitutive of good leadership and in excess could be damaging. My application forced me to reflect on the importance of self-leadership, example setting and consensus building, even whilst leading with authority. I was also alerted to the potential of leading without authority. This insight was enhanced by the first leadership weekend, which focussed heavily on leadership without authority and used DISC profiles to explore how people with vastly different personality types can operate within their comfort zones by using pre-existing skills to exert effective leadership.

This first weekend helped demonstrate to me, how many varieties of leadership a leader could employ and gave me some insight into how my pre-existing inclinations towards tact and accommodation could be employed to effectively lead. However, it also imparted the importance of adapting my leadership style to get the best from the individual or team I was working with. This inspired me to use my first summer to improve my capacity to be outspoken and constructively critical so that I could become a more well-rounded leader in whatever environment I found myself.

Summer 1: Research project

My initial research project was built around interviews. A late ethical approval put me behind schedule and forced me to arrange large numbers of meetings at short notice. Whilst

frustrating at the time, these setbacks provided me with ample opportunity to work on a range of skills which will be useful in the workplace and in leadership more generally. Time management, prioritisation, and scheduling around the commitments of multiple other people are all skills which I feel far more confident in after this experience.

However, the actual process of conducting the interviews was the one which I felt most impacted my personal development, particularly in relation to leadership. Selecting the material which I wanted to prepare, coming up with a list of critical questions designed to elicit responses which would be accessible to a non-specialist and then actually doing one-on-one interviews, led me to develop the way I thought about communication. In particular, I considered how I could communicate effectively with a historical specialist to get them to give me the information which I wanted for my project. This process had a significant overlap with what I had learnt in 'leadership weekend one' about how good leaders adapt the way they communicate with distinct people to achieve the results they want. During the interviews, I felt that I achieved my goals of being constructively critical and outspoken, frequently discussing my ideas and reservations with my interviewees. These were key skills which I had wanted to improve since the start of the Scholarship.

Unfortunately, the grand plans I had for my first project never came to fruition. Unlucky circumstances and several bureaucratic issues led to the material which I had wanted to publish being trapped in data protection purgatory, as well as some of the most exciting interviews and roundtables which I had wanted to conduct never taking place. Dealing with these setbacks, along with changing my essay and poster to reflect the realities of what I had been able to achieve with my project allowed me to practice adaptability and resilience. Responding to new and unpredictable external situations took practice, but across the 6 weeks of my research I became able to change plans more quickly and with less stress. I also learnt to build redundancy into my plans to ensure that tasks could be accomplished even in the face of minor setbacks.

No reflection on my first summer would be complete without an honest assessment of where I failed. My experience running an interview-based project has convinced me that if I could go back and do it all again, I would have done a very different project, focussing instead on archival material. Indeed, with another year of experience under my belt, my interviews (despite the personal growth which they provided me) lacked overarching direction and failed to identify a common theme which would have allowed me to create more coherent outputs. In that regard, I think it is fair to say that I failed at being direct and results-oriented.

Leadership day 2

Leadership day two built further upon the insights which the project had provided me with so far. I was much more confident in my capacity to play leading roles through facilitation and arbitration at this point. As such, when I took the Belbin test, I was unsurprised to see that I identified strongly with the roles of monitor evaluator and completer finisher. I was also unsurprised to see that the potential weaknesses the test identified in me remained an aversion to the conflict which organising and challenging others can produce.

An interesting observation which the test highlighted, was that the traits which I self-identified with had the potential to make me a strong team worker, with the ability to identify gaps in a project or team and fill that role. As someone who hadn't had the opportunity to do much group work at that point, this was a takeaway which I thought I would try and live up to in my summer volunteering project.

The feedback I received on my Belbin report helped confirm to me the importance of improving my ability to be outspoken and manage people confidently. It suggested (accurately at that point) that I would likely be more comfortable working for a 'powerful and charismatic manager' than at the centre of attention myself. However, I applied to the Laidlaw Scholarship to push myself out of my comfort zone and thereby become a more effective and employable leader. Despite not having a predilection for playing the head decision-making role in groups, I felt it was something I should work on so that I could become a more rounded 'team worker' capable of filling any role which an employer or team required of me.

Summer 2: Leadership Project

In summer two, I joined one of the Laidlaw expeditions with 'Think Pacific' to Fiji. Our task was to build a community health centre and also to join the local youth in several climate change workshops which were led by a Fijian charity. During this expedition I think I fulfilled my aspiration of being a good 'team worker' well. During the first week, a lack of experience building left me feeling like a spare part once or twice. However, as I grew in confidence, I felt able to pick up more jobs and more tools, allowing me to identify where help was needed and step in. I also felt able to take up more roles, and there were one or two occasions where I was able to take on the role of making sole decisions and giving instructions to small groups. Whilst I wouldn't want to overstate how frequently this occurred, I feel it was an important moment in my own personal development and it has increased my confidence that if called upon to manage a team I would be able to do so. Working on a build project also made working in a results-oriented manner very easy, as the output was pre-set at the start of the project and our progress towards it was tangible. This allowed me to better allocate my time and ensure that unlike the prior summer I focussed heavily on the end-goal and purpose of the tasks which I performed.

I also got a first-hand look at how important leading by example can be. In the initial climate change workshops, I observed that some of the Fijian youths were not paying attention, would try and avoid all forms of public speaking and were not confident in sharing their viewpoints during group work. Despite this, members of the Laidlaw cohort treated speakers with compassion and made an effort to engage the local community in discussions and cultural exchange. By the end of the project, several of the Fijians I had worked with in earlier days seemed more confident and willing to lead discussions. Additionally, more of the youths focussed during presentations. Whilst leaders with more authority (such as those working for the charity) also helped facilitate this change, I feel like that, even without authority, the example set by the cohort of volunteers had a significant impact on the behaviour of our Fijian peers.

The final thing which I feel is worth touching on is how much my ability to communicate, as well as my awareness of what good communication constitutes benefited from the Think Pacific project. Seeing examples of how poor communication by our build manager could decrease productivity contrasted with how much work we got done when tasks were clearly delegated and explained, was a visible reminder that clear communication will be a vital skill to develop if I wish to be successful in my future career. In regard to my own ability to communicate, working around a lack of English in my host family, being culturally aware in my conduct and learning the best ways to communicate with the vastly divergent personalities in our team, have all improved my confidence and my ability to effectively impart information to people.

Conclusion: Future Aims

As I near the conclusion of my Laidlaw scholarship, I am not sure I have achieved what I hoped to at its commencement. Whilst I have no doubt that my ability to be direct and goal oriented has improved, I still feel more comfortable with subtlety and consensus building. However, what the project has shown me is that this inclination does not necessarily mean I cannot be an effective leader. The leadership days I attended crystalised my knowledge of my strengths and weaknesses, whilst also illustrating to me how I might employ the skills in which I am already confident to lead. Furthermore, both summers projects have significantly boosted my confidence in my ability to lead by providing me with opportunities to practice and train my own leadership skills. That being said, in both summers there was little opportunity/need for me to practice the more confrontational leadership skills which I will need if I hope to be a well-rounded leader in my future career. With that being said, to enhance my future leadership development I will seek out positions which encourage more self-reliance and require me to be outspoken in defence of my arguments and beliefs, as well as ones which require me to make executive decisions. I currently think the best way to do this would be to pursue the publication of an academic article, as well as taking up more positions of responsibility, both within and outside university.