

The Continual Journey of Leadership

Prior to embarking on my Laidlaw journey my idea of leadership was skewed. What came to mind were managers and team leaders – those in managerial positions. I thought the main focus of professional leaders was to manage people. This meant I chose to develop skills used by managers; giving and receiving feedback, delegation and understanding personality types. I intended to use this knowledge to more effectively manage a team, allowing us to produce the best possible outcome. The trajectory of my leadership journey shifted during a training weekend. We were asked to consider the differences between managers and leaders. As a vital learning moment in my leadership development, I became to realise a leader is an individual who can be found within many roles and has responsibilities which reach far beyond those of a manager. A leader is responsible for creating the appropriate culture within a team despite their level of seniority, they are adaptable in their approach to others, they encourage and support their peers. This realisation led to a complete change in the way I wanted to develop as a leader. My objective changed from being results-focused to becoming an empathetic, approachable and authentic leader.

One of our first tasks upon being granted the Laidlaw scholarship was to complete the DiSC profile questionnaire. The results offered a report explaining my personality type, highlighted strengths and weaknesses, how to best work with those of different personality types and explained how you may be perceived by others. Reading over the report was quite a daunting task. It concluded some preconceptions I had about myself – that I focused on results, could seem standoffish and can be impatient. Suddenly my goal of becoming an empathetic, approachable and authentic leader seemed a much bigger task. How could I be approachable when others see me as standoffish? Empathetic when results driven and impatient? And how could I possibly be authentic if these traits I want to develop are so vastly different from my core personality traits? Thankfully another aspect of my DC personality type was a love of working towards challenging goals and taking action. This instilled in me a determination to become more like the leader I wanted to be. I took decisive action to develop these skills, seeking out personalised feedback from my Laidlaw peers. The comments I received provided specific starting points for my development;

‘It’s not what you say but how you say it’

The first suggestion was to work on delivering information less bluntly and be more tact when disagreeing. I certainly don’t usually intend to come across as blunt so to help understand the root of these traits in myself, I reflected on recent examples I could think of. This allowed me to acknowledge my bluntness often came from a desire for efficiency. Since efficiency is a quality I respect in others, I assume the same is expected of me. Receiving such feedback forced me to reprioritise efficiency. The way information is delivered greatly impacts how receptive individuals are. Leaders are often tasked with influencing others, persuading groups to accept change and encouraging individuals to implement feedback. Each of these require the ability to communicate truthfully yet empathetically and patiently. Consequently, whenever I feel the desire to rush a process or a person, I check in with myself to understand why I feel this sense of urgency. Often, I find it relates to a passion for the task at hand or is linked to pressure from a looming deadline. Acknowledging the root of this feeling allows me to be able to communicate why I feel this way. Doing so not only

allows me more time to consider and perhaps re-evaluate the emotions I might be feeling, it also encourages understanding and empathy from those I am working with. Through this practice I have found I am able to communicate more honestly than before, whilst remaining aware of the effect my words and behaviours have on others.

‘Show your working’

After working on my tone and method of delivery, I next focused on the content of my conversations. It is important to be able to articulate how we reach conclusions when communicating verbally. I realised I had a tendency to jump straight to my conclusions without explaining the thought process which got me there and speculated this could be perceived as bluntness. In order to improve my empathetic communication skills, I began to journal daily. By practicing expressing my thoughts through written word I hoped being able to verbalise my thought processes would come more naturally. This skill is vital to enhance understanding, to persuade others and to reduce resistance to change, all of which are utilised by great leaders and in the profession I am pursuing.

Having put effort into the ways in which I could improve, I turned my focus to the positive aspects of the DC personality which were most applicable to me. I enjoy challenges, think critically, take action and produce accurate results. All of which were put to good use during my research project. The project also allowed me to conclude I work most efficiently when alone but feel energised after group collaborative efforts. These insights have helped me when it comes to organising my schedule and how best to prevent or overcome feeling burnt out. Further, I was forced to reconsider what others perceive as bluntness when I found myself working with a supervisor who also embodied the D personality type. I discovered they were appreciative of succinct communication which served to remind me that preferences for communication styles vary so much from person to person. I was content the information gleaned from the DiSC profiling was already benefitting me in allowing me to identify personality types and alter the way I interact with them accordingly. This is something I was able to put into further practice throughout my leadership in action project.

My leadership in action project was challenging, but not in the ways I first expected. I chose to sign up for the project because of its focus on healthcare, an area which interests me and is the focus of my degree. I expected to be challenged intellectually and for my main struggles to centre around the outcomes for the project itself. I also thought the setting would provide challenges I had not yet encountered in a healthcare setting. Whilst it did deliver on these challenges, I also found more difficult challenges in the social and cultural aspects of living and working with a group of strangers within a completely novel environment.

I encountered my first real emotional struggle whilst helping provide healthcare on a mobile clinic. A collection of healthcare professionals including nurses, doctors, laboratory technicians and volunteers travelled to rural settings in order to deliver services to those who would usually be unable to access healthcare. A lot of people turned up yet we had a strict number of hours we could be there, and limited resources. This resulted in many having to be turned away without being seen and even some who had been provided with a

prescription were unable to get all of the medication they required. I felt helpless in this situation but was assured that with a prescription, these people could at least travel to another pharmacy without having to see a doctor – often the thing which prevented them accessing the correct medication. I was stunned by the appreciation those we saw had for any level of healthcare provision. This at first made me think that I could serve to be more grateful for our own National Health Service. Then I reminded myself of the fact that health is a fundamental human right, and should not be thought of as a privilege. Unfortunately, this is often not the case and those who are more privileged tend to have access to superior services. As a future healthcare worker, this experience has pushed me to consider the ways we can ensure those less privileged are provided with equally excellent healthcare. By exposing myself to different cultures and schools of thought I hope to continually challenge any bias I may hold in order to treat everyone equitably. It has also shown me that I enjoy the challenges which come with working in more remote areas.

As a group of highly independent, confident individuals all keen to develop their leadership skills there were often times when several people vied to take control of a situation. This meant I was afforded more opportunity to be a group member, instead of a leader. I used this time to observe and note the leading styles of others. Often the way in which we behave within a group is the way we expect others to behave. Some scholars were vocal and forceful with their opinions – I learned these were the individuals who would appreciate directness and that could withstand more blunt communication. Others were more cautious in their approach to work or involvement in discussions. I learned these people required more time to reach a conclusion and whilst I prefer a fast-paced work environment, they often need time to consider all options before moving forward. With these people I tried to assist with dilemmas they were facing by talking through the situation together utilising cooperation to help them reach a conclusion. I found this method of mirroring others to be particularly insightful and an effective way to gauge how they like to be interacted with. Being adaptable in this way promotes a supportive and non-judgemental environment where people can be free to express themselves authentically and strengthens relationships between two individuals.

Having satisfied myself with making some progress towards becoming a more empathetic and authentic leader, I took some time to think about how my current skillset could benefit the group. Physical and mental health is something which I value in my personal life. As a future medic I also try to support others to ensure these things are prioritised in their lives. To do so, I led group yoga and fitness sessions and helped to organise team games. These activities enhanced group bonding and was great for the group's morale following a particularly challenging day. In future group settings, I endeavour to utilise my own strengths to benefit the group more often. As I continue on my leadership journey, I intend to repeat this pattern of identifying the ways in which I can improve and working towards them through the help of feedback and self-reflection. It is important that I also focus on the traits and interests which are already well developed and how these can be of benefit to myself and others. This will ensure I am motivated to continue improving.

This journey has been beneficial to me in many ways. My leadership in action project granted me insights to the type of work I would like to pursue once graduated. This has been an important personal realisation given leadership focuses so much on inspiring

others. Working in an environment I feel truly passionate about doesn't necessarily mean my working life will be easy, however it does mean the hard work will be worth it. The DiSC profiling was useful in helping me to identify certain personality traits within individuals and how I should best interact with them. Without this I also wouldn't have been able to pin point the exact differences between the leader I was, and the leader I hoped to be. Through a lot of self-reflection and goal setting I have proven to myself I am on the way to becoming the leader I imagined. This experience has given me the determination to continue striving to be better and the skills which will allow me to do so.

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