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2021 Cohort

Reflective Leadership Essay

Leadership and learning are indispensable to each other. ~ John F. Kennedy

When I first heard about the Laidlaw programme, I was immediately intrigued by the prospect of conducting independent research on a topic of my own choosing and curious about the idea of learning more about leadership development - but I had no idea to what extent the scholarship would change some of my views and perspectives on what makes a good “leader” and the concepts behind leadership as such.

My “leadership journey” arguably started even before being admitted to the programme. Finding a supervisor who would support my self-defined research proposal proved to be rather difficult. After approaching close to ten different lecturers from different universities, I finally found the perfect match with a professor from St. Andrews whose expertise aligned exactly with my proposed project. After working with her on my application and eventually being accepted into the programme, it came as quite a shock when I was informed that she had been seriously ill for some time and had passed away. I was not really sure how to deal with the situation, as I had not been aware of her condition. In terms of the programme, my current supervisor kindly stepped in, and the summer taught me a lot about self-leadership in the context of conducting research; but the unexpectedness of that difficult situation definitely changed my perspective on some things.

With regards to the designated leadership elements of the scholarship, it all started with the application process, during which we had to answer a question on how we would like to develop as a leader and what our plans for the second summer Leadership-in-Action projects were. Reading back my answer, I find it very interesting how, on the one hand, I already had a pretty clear idea for the second summer (I wanted to work with *Think Pacific* in Fiji, which I ended up doing), whereas, on the other hand, my idea of leadership was very different from the one I have today.

After one and a half years on the programme, having conducted six weeks of research, attended various workshops and seminars, and of course having completed my LiA project this past summer, I have adopted quite a different understanding of what constitutes good leadership and the ways in which this can be expressed.

In my initial Laidlaw application, I talked about self-leadership and teamwork skills in work environments, which I had previously experienced during my gap year. I also focused on the student-supervisor relationship within the research projects, which, for me, exemplified the kind of leadership I was hoping to experience during my (university) career, both as a student but also

as a potential mentor for younger students, which I later put into practice when working as a student ambassador and mentor for newly incoming students.

After being admitted to the Laidlaw programme, one of the first steps in our “leadership journey” was to complete and work with our DiSC profiles. Seeing how accurate our leadership profiles were and how we all acted accordingly differently in various situations taught me a lot - not only about my own leadership style, but especially about how to interact with other types. (My profile fell under the category “influence” with its leadership attributes being “outgoing, enthusiastic, optimistic, high-spirited, lively”.) Both the positive and negative traits of those profiles were surprisingly accurate in many of our cases, and it was interesting to talk to other scholars about our different ways of approaching problems and our motivations for doing so.

Over the course of the first summer, simultaneous to most of our research projects, I then participated in weekly online workshops and leadership events. It was great to meet Laidlaw scholars from other institution at the international meet up and Global Induction sessions; and the summer sessions (shared between students from St. Andrews and Tufts University) brought about stimulating discussions about time- and project management, which was helpful both for the research we were conducting and for getting a first idea of how these attributes relate to good leadership.

Another insightful event was the first (almost) fully in person leadership day in October 2021, during which we first heard (via Zoom) from the Associate Dean of Education (Arts and Divinity) at St. Andrews, whose own story about personal and professional growth was very inspiring. That morning, we also had a talk from a Communications Coach and former Police Hostage and Crisis Negotiator, who discussed leadership from a very different, yet absolutely fascinating, perspective. In the afternoon session, we learned a lot about each other and our different skill sets through various “games” and group activities. Being able to finally meet the cohort in person for the first time and to discuss the morning talks was a great end to our first proper leadership day.

Our next two leadership days took place in March 2022. The first one was a “surprise” trip to Hospital fields, an old Scottish estate and former hospital, where we got the chance to meet and talk to the newly admitted cohort and also had a session about teamwork and different roles within a team. We later received our “Belbin teamwork profiles” (mine was between Monitor-Evaluator and Coordinator), which, similar to the DiSC profiles, were again surprisingly fitting in most cases. The second leadership day took place the following weekend at Falkland Estate, where we participated in activities organized by the St. Andrews Laidlaw Team and representatives from the *Fresh Air Leadership Company*. Getting insight into yet another completely different perspective of leadership - this time in terms of decision models, moral dilemmas and team roles within such situations - was an unforgettable experience and made for a great day with the rest of the cohort.

Towards the end of the semester, the upcoming LiA projects were growing closer, so we all focused on our applications and proposals. After receiving confirmation that I would be working with Think Pacific on their Youth and Development project, I had to set myself a leadership goal for the summer, which was consistent with one of the “weaknesses” I had talked about in my initial Laidlaw application: improving my patience in social settings, especially with children and youth groups. The Youth and Development project seemed to be a great opportunity to tackle this struggle of mine. Before leaving for Fiji, I also attended the final sessions of the Ethical Leadership Masterclass series with Daniel Effron, which shed light on some moral dilemmas and provided an opportunity to discuss ethical blind spots and challenges with fellow scholars.

Despite all those interesting workshops and trainings (including Think Pacific’s own pre-departure webinars), nothing could have fully prepared me for the intensity and change of perspective that I was about to experience during my six weeks in Fiji.

Looking back, I went into the project with a rather narrow view on leadership, most of it based on my own profiles and the categories we had learned about. But of course, we were not here to lead in that way - if anything, it was a continuation of the learning journey I had begun when first applying for the Laidlaw Programme. In Fiji, I not only learned about a totally unfamiliar culture and language, but also about different views and roles in the small village community that I was fortunate enough to live in for five weeks. During our project, we lived with host families, who warmly welcomed us into their homes and lives. For the first half of the project, we helped build a health facility together with the village youth, whereas for the second half, the Fijian NGO Alliance for Future Generations (AFG) facilitated workshops revolving around the topic of climate change, in which we participated and contributed as much as we could.

During the build, we each had our designated roles within team: our Think Pacific team leaders took over the obvious “leadership responsibilities” within our group of volunteers, an external Fijian building instructor was in charge of the practical supervisions and planning on site, and us volunteers, together with some of the village youth, carried out the instructions and were often split up into smaller groups, where we would take turns of “leading” our subgroups according to our varying skills. In my case, since the building instructor had to leave early before we could finish the build, he put me and four other volunteers in charge of subgroups to oversee the finalizing steps and details of the project. This turned out to be rather frustrating, since the project had already been delayed due to materials arriving late and we all wanted to get the last few details right, (which, we were told, is always the hardest part); but it was all the more rewarding when we finally completed the building and could celebrate the opening of the health center.

This first half of the project was a great experience in so many ways - its hands-on nature was definitely different from anything I had done before, but it was also lots of fun and very insightful

in terms of the cultural settings. (For example, women in the village traditionally do not carry heavy weights or do the “men’s jobs”, so it was great to see how everybody acknowledged and accepted all of us working together on the project.)

Even though we weren’t all occupied in the more “obvious” leadership positions the whole time (which of course is rather difficult with a group of 18 people), the building project taught me a lot about interacting within a team, delegating tasks and communicating ideas or problems.

The programme was also rather well structured, as we would usually conduct the build in smaller groups in half day shifts with culture sessions taking place during the other half of the day. This allowed for a constant exchange and learning experience between the villagers and volunteers and a strong sense of community. This was of course strengthened by our daily lives within our families. For me, living together with young children in such an intense environment was, as I had expected, a challenge, but it got better and better with time. Village life was a great opportunity for me to practice my patience, not only because of the language barriers, issues on the build or “Fiji time” (everything happens very slowly), but also with myself. I had to adapt to a very different lifestyle and adjust my expectations towards myself accordingly.

The second half of project consisted of workshops with AFG. Once again, us volunteers were not occupied in the more obvious leadership roles of conducting the workshops (which was what we had initially assumed, but it made sense for the sessions to be facilitated by the very knowledgeable representatives from AFG). Instead, we were part of the audience, listening to and participating in the passionate and interactive sessions about how climate change affects Fiji and what can be done by even the smallest communities to make a change. It was truly inspiring to see the willingness of the village youth to create a lasting impact, for example by setting up bins around the village, discussing more sustainable methods of rubbish disposal or brainstorming suggestions that were being passed on to Fiji’s representatives at this year’s COP27.

Here, the leadership aspect came from within the village community, and we were there to assist and encourage the sometimes shy participants to speak up (in English) and voice their opinions.

For this half of the project, most of our “leadership moments” happened during our free time.

For example, some of us organized a hike up the mountain right next to the village. Four of the volunteers and some of the Fijians (most of whom had also never done the trip before) climbed to the peak and back to later learn that not only had we been one of the very few to have ever been up there (there is no real path due to the heavy cyclones in the winter), but we had been the firsts “tourists” and myself the first woman to ever stand on that peak. This was a truly rewarding and unforgettable experience (not only because of the amazing views on the village and the surrounding highlands), which surely contributed to the difficulty in having to say goodbye to our families and the village upon completion of the project.

Looking back, the six weeks that I was fortunate enough to spend in Fiji were the best kind of leadership experience I could have ever asked for. It really was a leadership *in action* project that taught me some lessons no seminar or workshop could have ever conveyed. Today, I still don't have a clear definition of what leadership actually comprises, but at least I know that it's not as narrow and one-sided as I had initially believed. It's a never-ending learning experience, which consists of being open to other people's contributions, different values and belief systems and being able to adapt the way in which one "leads" accordingly (even if that means stepping back and *not* taking over the obvious leadership roles for a change.)

For the future, I hope to be able to bring that understanding into my degree and career journey and never cease to learn more about the different angles and perspectives from which the concept of leadership can be viewed.

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