

Transformation and Acceptance: My Laidlaw Leadership Development Essay

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Acknowledgements

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Introduction

Transformation is a slow process: as water gradually wears away on stone, so do we, as people, have to constantly toil and put in the effort to make any positive change in our lives. And we are always looking to better ourselves, be it physically, mentally, or spiritually. At the start of my journey as a Laidlaw Scholar, I couldn't have imagined the changes it would bring to my life - my thought process, my determination and motivation, my cultural intelligence, and many more. But likewise, this experience has taught me the importance of accepting yourself and your core values, and that sometimes change is not necessarily needed when you are content with yourself. In this short essay, I would like to tell my stories and experiences that have come out of my Laidlaw Scholarship, and share some of my reflections on my changing perceptions on exemplar leadership.

An unexpected journey

The beginning of my journey was actually quite accidental, through a chance glance at my university email: one soggy autumn afternoon, I was sifting through the endless list of my unread society letters, heedlessly discarding them into my "non-priority email" bin, never to think of them again. My mind turned to autopilot as I mechanically repeated the mundane action, until a particular email made me pause, perking my interest. It was advertising the Laidlaw Scholarship, inviting all students to apply to the two-year research and leadership programme. The word "research" stuck out to me in bold, making my mind race with the many possibilities it could entail. As a Physics student, I was (and still am) looking for as many research opportunities as I could to gain experience in the laboratory, and to figure out what it was that I wanted to do in my career path. I was especially driven at that moment, since the internship opportunity that I had planned for the summer just passed fell through at the last moment due to the pandemic. As it usually does in moments of excitement, my mind jumped ahead to the future, thinking of a secure internship, imagining the project work that I would be doing, and my potential small contributions to the big picture of the modern scientific frontier. Content with this thought, I decided to apply. I had completely forgot about the leadership aspect of the scholarship.

It wasn't until I was preparing for the interview that it had really dawned on me that I should be thinking more about leadership. Before that moment, I hadn't considered myself to be a leader: it's true that I had held some positions of "authority" during my years in secondary school, but those experiences were too few and far between for me to fully assess my contributions. When thinking about leadership, I had always imagined a very direct, outspoken individual, who could lead his followers through the sheer

strength of his charisma and outgoing nature. At the time, I didn't feel that I fit that model of behaviour: I am a naturally more reserved person, more inclined to listen than to speak, and less willing to voice my ideas to a group until I've made sure that they are reasonable and well-articulated. This motivated me even further to apply to the Scholarship, as I now saw it as the optimal chance to not only secure a summer research placement, but to also gain invaluable experience as a leader for use in future team projects – experience that I would surely need and benefit from if I wanted to pursue a career in the research field.

Leadership trainings

Over the course of these past two years, we have had many leadership training sessions, all as important as the last, during which we developed our knowledge as about the crucial qualities and attributes required to be an effective leader. The first such (remote) leadership week took place before the start of the research project in 2021, as a collaboration between Tufts University and the University of St Andrews, and became our first real introduction to a new style of thought about leadership. We listened to informative guest speakers, took part in interactive seminars, and collaborated with fellow scholars from across the two universities to build and expand our leadership base.

The most important factor that I took out of the early leadership trainings is my assignment on the DiSC profile chart: a detailed infographic that displays your precise characteristics based on a previously taken leadership personality test. After finding out mine and others' results, and discussing them at length, I came to realise how much diversity in leadership styles there really is. This began to dissolve my initial presumptions about the ideal leadership style (direct, outgoing, etc) because, while there certainly are many effective leaders who display these traits, all the others sub-styles are equally as valid and important. This fact was only further cemented in my mind by considering a group dynamic, in which you would ideally need people with all different thinking and communication styles to produce the best creative and innovative results in anything that is being done.

Throughout the rest of the academic year, we took part in three separate leadership days, each one bringing a new variety of activities from which we could learn and develop our leadership further. I found the spring leadership days to be the most valuable, as by that time we had already much time to think about our own leadership styles, and understand more about ourselves as people, and thus we were able to reflect more profoundly and draw more conclusions about our preferred way of leadership. I once again came to the conclusion that I am more inclined to keep quiet, and more willing to work individually on tasks if it is required of me. However, I was still not completely happy with this: owing to an annoying sense of perfectionism, and a slight sprinkling of imposter syndrome, I just couldn't let go of my original perception of a good leader, and I felt like I was stagnating and not taking concrete actions to progress in this. Indeed, I would set myself a goal to become "more assertive" for the upcoming LiA project.

It was also very insightful to put the question of leadership in a different context, as we partook in outdoor activities which placed us out of our comfort zones, and forced us to think on our feet to come up with the best solution to any situation. Moreover, during this time we attended the excellent Ethical Leadership seminars hosted by Prof. Daniel Efron, in which we learned about the makings of a moral leader, while discussing some of the main issues faced by individuals in the workspace, such as developing ethical blindspots.

Leadership in Action project: Ciudad de México

As part of the second summer of the Scholarship, I applied to a central LiA project run by make_sense – an international organisation setting up initiatives to tackle social and climate injustice. This particular reaction4climate project was initiated by make_sense México, with a four-week on-site experience in Mexico City. As part of the project, my partner and I worked with an organisation called Sommos, which operates as a grocery delivering app, promoting a circular economy in the local communities by providing them the opportunity to do shopping in a sustainable way. As they deliver all of their products in reusable and returnable packaging, they greatly reduce waste production from shopping, thus greatly helping with the problem of waste management in CDMX. Our task was to help them expand their (regular) clientele network, to spread the word about what they do, and to increase the public's engagement with their organisation. Additionally, every week we attended workshops about the Design Thinking methodology organised by make_sense, which helped in forming our solution to the problem.

As a final solution to this, we developed the idea of a public picnic in one of the local communal gardens, to which people could come along, try a selection of their produce, and have the opportunity to buy from them and download their app to continue using their services. As we continued discussing the idea with other student teams, it grew from being just a picnic to a full sustainability event, which we named “La Fiesta de Sostenibilidad”, and which would include the participation of five different ecological organisations (Sommos, Bike Recycling, Nidaria, Ecolana, and Extinction Rebellion). In the days leading up to the event, we had planned to launch an online and in-person campaign, helped by our volunteers, to persuade people to download the app, as well as attend the event. This included social media advertising, and the running of several free taster stations in public.

Unfortunately, due to some unexpected circumstances and challenges that appeared on our way, we weren't able to fulfil our plan to its full potential: there were multiple issues, ranging from not enough engagement from our pool of volunteers, miscommunications with Sommos and their needs, and finally not having a permit to run pop-up stands in public, greatly hindering our original plan. Although we still carried out the main points of our campaign, we had to greatly minimise the scale of the initial plan, thus decreasing our desired effect.

While the collaborative event still went ahead, and was a relative success considering the circumstances (lack of advertising ahead of time, the event being held on a work day, etc), we failed to garner enough engagement for the picnic, which meant that we had to get rid of that element of the event, and resort to running an information stand with free tasters and an opportunity for people to buy some of the best-selling produce. Regardless, the stand enjoyed much attention and success considering the overall situation, and Sommos gained profit and new customers over the course of the evening. Additionally, we produced a recipe book for Sommos to be published online – a resource that they can add to and reuse for further online publications. As one of the main organisers of the event, we were also able to secure musical entertainment to make the evening even more pleasant to the public.

As a result of our campaign, Sommos gained new clients, and expanded their network of contacts for further advertisement and communication. From the feedback given to us by our volunteers, they expressed that they enjoyed working with us as team leaders, and that they would also try using the Sommos app and recommend it to their friends and family, thus expanding their influence even further. I was a little disappointed in the result at first, as I had an ambitious idea in mind that ultimately was not completely realised. However, I soon realised that over the course of this experience we had shown resilience, determination, and adaptability to the challenges we had to face, which are all leadership aspects that I wanted to achieve. We were still able to put on an event in spite of difficulties, and inspired the organisations to hold such events more frequently, to create a mutual support network for cross-promotion; I hope that our small impact has inspired the organisations and all those working with them to garner public engagement in a more direct, in-person approach.

Conclusions and main takeaways

Over the course of these past two years, I have learnt much about leadership, and developed my leadership skills and abilities in ways that I could not have imagined at the start of the programme. Over the LiA project, I managed to develop the leadership (and, to an extent, personality) traits that I set out to target, becoming more direct, confident, and clear in my project vision. But nevertheless, my leadership style has not cardinally changed, and I have come to accept that this style is best for me and my personality, and that I don't have to force a change where it is unnecessary, especially since there is not one correct way to go about leadership.

The main conclusion that I drew from this experience is that the core principle of being a good leader is not necessarily set in personality, but in one's determination and resilience to achieve a common goal: if that passion is really there, then others will naturally follow and be inspired by your actions. In my case, there is no need to accommodate with my previous perceptions of idealised leadership: as long as I stay true to my own principles, I will continue to grow as a leader, and always strive to improve and develop on my past self.