

**From a practical consideration of professional skills to finding agency in decisions: a short story of leadership development**



**Introduction**

January 2021 was a strange time for me to reflect on. I do not think there is any other part of my life that is so distinctly characterised by one word: chaotic. On the surface, many of my friends thought I had it all figured out: I had only just completed a semester, over-crediting but still doing quite well academically; I was running three student societies with some success; I was looking at a strong prospect of undertaking a semester abroad, following a successful initial stage in my study abroad application. What I don't often like to discuss with people was the fact that in the moment, I was going through a particularly rough patch in a close and ever-present friendship; I was trapped in a country going through a second stringent lockdown; my home city had just been thrown into an unprecedented period of political and social turmoil, and there was nothing I could do about it. In a nutshell, despite me attempting my best to stay in control of my decisions, everything always seemed to spiral out of my control.

Combining it all together, there is no denying that I was practicing some form of leadership at that time – only it was but a practice for professional development. And it is a somewhat fitting description for why I initially decided to apply for the Laidlaw Scholarship: knowing that I was interested in pursuing a PhD following my undergraduate studies, it felt only natural that I try gaining some research experience in the upcoming summer.

I changed my mind not long after.

**2021: Conceptualising leadership differently**

Starting off my application whilst stuck in a country with a horrendous track record of pandemic management, I felt the need to engage with a more optimistic thought experiment of how things could have looked, had we been under the leadership of a different administration. I was therefore over the moon when Dr Ryan Beasley agreed to supervise me over a project looking at the leadership traits exhibited by state leaders who had, thus far, successfully brought their countries out of initial outbreaks, and maintained a stably low level of infections within their countries after said outbreak.

It wasn't long after when I got news that I was accepted onto the programme. The initial parts of the leadership training that came with the programme didn't surprise me too much either. When I completed my DiSC profile in May 2021, it mostly told me things I've already known about my leadership style when working in a team setting: I enjoy having independence in my line of work; I value efficiency in achieving results; I dislike being challenged or told I'm wrong when I make mistakes.

Nonetheless, the real turning point in my approach towards the leadership element in the Laidlaw Scholarship arrived when I also came in contact with the idea of self-leadership: developing a sense of who oneself is, what they can do, where they are going, and bringing oneself to the destination they are looking to arrive at. This segment of the leadership sessions resonated with me. For a while, I struggled with sustaining motivation in my team leadership roles. It wasn't always an issue of my passion in these roles – I had only worked with causes that I was interested in. However, I often find myself lacking the appropriate level of self-reflection necessary to hold myself accountable for my behaviour and decisions, in contrast to the level of scrutiny I subject my team members to. This often quickly deprives myself of interest in my work and a healthy work environment: whenever I noticed that my vision for group strategies or events no longer align with that of my team members', I quickly grow frustrated with others' performance and question their commitment to the tasks at hand. In a sense, I had a grasp on how I can manage a team – however, I exhibited little healthy, balanced, and accountable leadership, self-leadership in particular. So fittingly, while I was initially reluctant to accept this conclusion I drew by the end of the self-leadership session as suggested in my DiSC profile, it was also an incredibly satisfying moment for me to finally be able to put a name to a problem that has plagued me for a while.

By the end of the research summer, I also arrived at a different conclusion about what successful leadership looks like from what I had initially hypothesised. The leaders whom I had placed on a pedestal for their successful COVID management, compared against a wider database of world leaders, turned out to be quite average on most leadership traits I assessed them on; there was also no generalisable pattern that I could observe, based on the few traits which these leaders demonstrated significant difference from the database of world leader norms.

So what are the conclusions I got from the first part of my leadership journey through the Laidlaw Scholarship? Firstly, I realised that leadership does not arise on a group level alone; it can also be applied to describe individual development. Secondly, there is no singular pathway to achieving successful leadership. While I've found some success in my past leadership experiences, the framework of success is usually limited to productivity on a relatively narrow scope – the quality and attendance of events I've organised, for example. It is an important moment of reckoning for me to understand a wider scope of what 'success' can look like, as exhibited by my peers on the Laidlaw programme, who all held different profile results but are crucially, all respected and well-accomplished student leaders. Most importantly, not all of them shared my frustrations in their leadership experiences – or, my sense of things always spiralling out of control regardless of the amount of control I attempted to assert in group leadership contexts, as a result of a lack of self-leadership. Moving forward, I realised that I needed to start conceptualising 'leadership' and 'success' more differently, and start learning from the successful leaders around me – especially the ones who take ownership of their decisions and reaped its benefits.

### **Late 2021-2022: From theory to application**

After completing my research in summer 2021, I found myself in a very different place.

I began to explore opportunities surrounding my leadership-in-action summer for the Laidlaw Scholarship soon after new academic year started. It was no easy process: while many of the centrally-organised projects offered something I was interested in, few entailed aims, processes, or end products which I could fully, passionately immerse myself in. Knowing that I'd have six weeks to work on the project, I knew I had to engage in something that I could commit for the full duration.

And so began a long and tedious process of formulating a self-defined project – roughly three months of seeking out opportunities, creating a proposal, approaching organisations regarding the project, getting rejected, and repeat. On so many occasions, I've been asked to reconsider taking up one of the centrally-organised projects offered by the Laidlaw Foundation and its partners instead: after all, I was

in another country for exchange, I was over-crediting on my studies – there's only so many cycles of rejection I could take until I must recognise that I was running out of time. Still, I refused and kept trying. I wanted to make the most out of the freedom of choice that I had within the situation.

Fortunately, closing into the deadline for a project application, I was offered an opportunity to work with the Seoul-based NGO, Database Centre of North Korean Human Rights (NKDB) to support their international outreach. It was an amazing opportunity: while NKDB has done important work for North Korean human rights and have been recognised by both the South Korean government and intergovernmental organisations such as the UN, there is limited public awareness of the work done by NKDB internationally.

Actually working there was a different experience from what I had anticipated, though. With most staff members of the office having a limited grasp on English and limited translated materials I could work with, I struggled to communicate with most of my colleagues, much less understand the work that is undertaken there. While my supervisor has done his best to pass on translated material available at NKDB, a lot of the work I undertook was heavily reliant on personal research. For instance, because of my specialism in psychology, I hoped to focus the promotional material I produced on the counselling work undertaken by NKDB's Resettlement Assistance Headquarters. However, as my supervisor is not familiar with psychological treatments, and members at the Resettlement Assistance Headquarters not understanding English, I had to take initiative in seeking out literature available on the topic and translate NKDB's published materials just for a foundational understanding in the department's work. There was also a lot of creative problem-solving that I did not expect to utilise during my time there. For instance, much of the design work I undertook during the production of publicity materials was a revival of a personal hobby in digital art and graphic design which I haven't engaged in since I started university. While this started as a means to achieve the ends of producing promotional material, it also became a secondary motivator to keep me engaged with what I was doing. Most crucially, it helped me produce a piece of more individually-developed product for the leadership-in-action project, within a field of veterans who have seemingly exhausted all possibilities for the publicity and advancement of North Korean human rights: a comic strip series that represent how NKDB's Resettlement Assistance Headquarters carries out narrative exposure therapy to treat North Korean escapees suffering from complex PTSD, based on the published account of a North Korean escapee who consulted NKDB's support.

So what did I learn from this project? Certainly, social and cultural intelligence and awareness. South Korea has a work culture that stresses working efficiently and productivity. As I was only formally working as an intern with NKDB, the workload and complexity of tasks expected of me was nothing compared to what was expected of the permanent staff; however, being in a social environment where everyone respects this norm, it felt only right that I step up and do the same. I've also learned to be creative in my problem solving. Especially since coming to university, I've been accustomed to approaching problems from a very academic perspective; being in a position where I'm working with an office full of seasoned academics who have approached with all possibilities of finding solutions through traditional means, I've had to approach the problems I faced differently to offer a fresh perspective, or utilise skills I haven't initially thought applicable to the situation. Work is something that is only as structured as you frame it to be. Most importantly, I've learned to be more assertive and confident in my leadership, when I recognise that I have a strong case to make. Being educated in psychology meant I held understanding and most up-to-date information in the field few other colleagues knew, in an office of human right analysts; so when it came down to parts of the project where parts of the narrative I recognised to be problematic in this day and age, I've learned to recommend changes, understand and accept the opposing arguments from NKDB's perspective, and strive to find a working solution.

## **Conclusion**

Looking back, I have certainly come a long way from where I started in January 2021, when I was applying to join the Laidlaw Scholarship programme. Along the way, I've picked up important skills that will go on to benefit me for the rest of my life. It has shaped my career and life outlook, and taught me to be flexible in responding to my environment, to find success in whatever I do. Most importantly, though, it has helped me recognise that no matter how chaotic or out of control a situation might seem, I can always become a self-leader and find agency in what I do.

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