



Reflective Essay on Leadership

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Acknowledgements

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In this essay, I will track my leadership development through the Laidlaw scholarship. I think the best way to do this is by following chronologically how my understanding of the concept of leadership has developed, and how my leadership practices have evolved as a result of that.

Enriched Conceptual Understanding of Leadership

I believe the best place to start my reflection process is by reviewing my leadership statement in my application to Laidlaw. In looking at this statement, I now realize that I used to understand leadership as simply holding authority positions. Of course, holding an authority position in a project or a group creates the appropriate circumstances for one to exercise leadership, I.e. they are in a position where they need to work with others, inspire them, and take initiative. However, this differs from the claim that holding an authority position is a necessary condition for leadership. Through my journey in the Laidlaw scholarship, I have come to believe that one can practice and display leadership even as, say, an employee who takes orders from their employer. For instance, I now consider the ability to inspire others to set and achieve goals as a key component of leadership. I think that one can have and practice this ability without being in the leadership position. For example, the employee might have new ideas about the project their group is running. She might ask their employer to implement these ideas, and inspire her coworkers with her creativity, her ideas, her energy and her investment in the project. I take this person to be a good leader, despite not holding an authority position.

As a consequence of believing that leadership is holding authority positions (at the beginning of my Laidlaw journey), I also failed to distinguish conceptually between leadership and management. I first questioned this conflation of the two concepts during the leadership week in the first summer of the Laidlaw scholarship. I then realized that the concepts might be connected, but it is possible that one exercised good management without exercising leadership, and vice

versa. It seems to me that management is more task-oriented and it involves the ability to allocate responsibilities, keep track of one's team and one's project, and distribute resources appropriately. Leadership seems to me to be a more multidimensional concept whose core component is one's ability to inspire, influence and motivate others.

Distinguishing these two concepts and coming to believe that leadership is more about motivation and inspiration rather than task-focused management allowed me to develop a wider idea of what a leader is and how they behave. For instance, my pre-theoretical idea of a leader is a person who is loud, extroverted, and talkative. I felt like because I was lacking these characteristics, or having them at a relatively low degree, I was never going to be a leader.

However, during the Leadership Week in the summer of 2021 I started realizing that, given that a leader is someone who can influence and inspire others, there are many ways to do this that do not involve being the loudest person in the room. I started feeling like there is a style of leadership that fit my personality, and thus becoming a good leader was something I could now consider a realistic goal.

This was greatly facilitated by the DiSC profile that the St Andrews Laidlaw team developed for each scholar before the Leadership Week. It shed light on some aspects of the way I work, I.e. my analytical, systematic, accuracy-oriented type of work. It also helped me verbalise some problematic aspects of the way I work (e.g. due to my perfectionism, I tend to not to take chances or risks that might be beneficial for me). The most important takeaway from the DiSC profile, other than recognising my working style, its benefits and its disadvantages, is that I recognised there are multiple ways one can be valuable in a group. This further led me to think there are many ways one can influence, inspire, and motivate others, tailored to their own working style and personality.

From this process, I started picturing myself as a leader in a way adapted to my personality. Let me offer an example of how the DiSC profile prompted to me imagine which leadership features I could develop using my working style as the basis for them. Due to my insistence on precision and accuracy, I sometimes inspire trust and I often build on others' ideas, as I process these ideas through the lens of what could be a weakness of them and how this can be improved. This way, I often develop new ideas in this cooperative manner. This way, I bring an energy of creativity, generating new ideas in an excited way that can be influential to my group members.

The DiSC profile also allowed me to verbalise how my working style might keep me back from developing into a good leader. For instance, my hesitance to make decisions quickly without having had private time to analyse the relevant factors might often lead to stress and irritation in cases that call for a prompt response. In fact, I might often retrieve and fail to communicate with others in such a situation. Also, in the DiSC profile it was mentioned – truthfully – that I have difficulty giving negative feedback to others. I feel like (tactful) honesty cultivates the relationships one needs to have with co-workers if they want to be a leader. This kind of feedback is central to developing a relationship of trust, which seems to be a key feature of the relationship between a leader and their co-workers.

The DiSC profile, the talks I attended and the group discussions with fellow Laidlaw scholars over the Leadership Week in the summer of 2021 have all been important in developing this deeper understanding of leadership, gaining a better understanding of how I operate, and adjusting my understanding of leadership to myself. The group discussions helped me better understand and appreciate the leadership style of others. I had always been intimidated by people who are the 'dominant' style (using DiSC's terms). Coming into contact and discussing with people like this, and centering our discussion precisely on these styles, my fear was reduced. I

came to appreciate each style and the contribution that each person brings. The tasks I completed over the year 2022 (as a year abroad student who was not able to attend the in-person leadership weekend and events) prompted me to sustain a systematic reflective process over my leadership qualities, as they involved, for example, a video about how I evolved as a leader over the last year.

Putting It Into Practice

Although the leadership weekends over the year 2021-2022 would have been great opportunities to put this theoretical advancement in practice, I was not able to attend any of the events, as I was on a year abroad. However, I was able to do so during my Leadership in Action project over the summer of 2022. In Uganda, I interned in Women's Rights Initiative (WORI), where I was able to observe in action Kigere Rose the best leader that I have encountered so far, and I was also able to exercise leadership myself. Rose took time twice a day to check in with me about how work has been going, she has been very keen to make sure I am feeling well, but most importantly, she spent time daily motivating us towards our ultimate goal, and reminding us of the value of the work we do and will do.

I experienced firsthand the effect that such a leader has on the people she leads; I have never felt more motivated to work and I have never felt as excited for a project. In fact, I believe the difference between other times I have felt motivated in my life was not quantitative per se (I.e. 'more motivated than other times'), but qualitative; I experienced a different kind of motivation than I had before. I believe the best way to describe this qualitative difference is through the terms 'intrinsic' and 'extrinsic' motivation. By 'extrinsic' motivation, I mean motivation sourced and driven by rewards and punishments, or because someone else in a higher position has asked me to do something, or because of anxiety and tension. Extrinsic motivation can also come from

internal pressure, such as seeking the approval of oneself or of another, feeling good about oneself by achieving a task, or feeling guilty for not doing it. By 'intrinsic' motivation, I mean motivation generated from values (doing something because it fits one's deep value) or because one gets pleasure, energy, and gratification from it.¹

Using this distinction, I can now formulate the qualitative difference in the motivation I experienced under the leadership of Kigere Rose. I experienced intrinsic motivation for the first time in doing a project, whereas usually in academic work I am driven by extrinsic motivation. I feel like it is very valuable for a leader to manage to cultivate extrinsic motivation, but it is even greater if they manage to cultivate intrinsic motivation. Perhaps this is one of the marks of a good leader for me, as intrinsic motivation seems to me to be genuine inspiration to work and commit deeply to a project or a goal. Working to create a space where East African women can heighten their voices and a space where the androcentric and colonialist narratives about African women can be overturned seemed so deeply aligned with deep-seated values that I was very happy to work everyday and very motivated to do the best work I could.

Apart from experiencing the effects of an exceptional leader on me and my work, I was also able to put into practice my own leadership qualities and advance them. I had to work on my communication skills, and overcome both my stress of communicating with people I am not very familiar with and of reaching out to numerous people and organisations in an attempt to establish the necessary collaborations WORI needs to make the museum. This is something I have struggled with a lot, and I got to practice and feel more comfortable with over my internship. Additionally, I gradually started moving from simply following Rose's orders to developing my own ideas and proposing them to Rose, as well as working on these ideas. I feel like I had a good

¹ I am drawing this terminology from the One For The World CLM conference in Philadelphia, in summer of 2022.

sense of the big picture in the museum project, and I was able to make decisions more quickly and confidently than I had before in my life. These were all leadership qualities that I felt I needed to cultivate, and that, I think, I made progress in during my time in Uganda.

Future Leadership Plans

I feel that the Laidlaw has prompted me to be less hesitant to take new opportunities and to take the responsibility of leadership roles. I feel that the best way to become a good leader is to take on such roles, even if I do not feel I will be as good as I would like to be as a leader. As a result of this boost that the Laidlaw has given me, I have decided to take over as the president of the St Andrews chapter of One For The World, a non-profit promoting effective giving towards the most effective charities that work on alleviating extreme poverty and on promoting global health. One For The World is highly influenced by the principles and ideas of Effective Altruism, and it partners with an independent charity evaluator, GiveWell, who assess charities based on how transparent they are, how effective the interventions they implement are based on the current research, as well as on how much room for growth they have. I feel like working for OFTW is another chance for me to feel the intrinsic motivation I experienced while working for WORL. OFTW has many chapters in multiple universities around the world, and St Andrews is one of those chapters. Taking over the role of the chapter president seems to me a courageous move in my journey of leadership development. I want to inspire my team in such a way that they feel the same motivation as I do. In the long-term, I aim to continue taking over such roles and fight for causes that I feel are very important.