

# My Leadership Development

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# 1 What is Leadership?

Before I can begin to discuss and reflect on my leadership development, it is necessary to first define leadership. According to Oxford University Press, the definition of leadership is “the action of leading a group of people or an organisation” [6]. This definition offers neither insight into what it means to be a leader, nor what qualities a good leader demonstrates. Therefore, for a more tangible idea of leadership, I will use the following definition by Kruse as a foundation:

Leadership is a process of social influence, which maximises the efforts of others, towards the achievement of a goal. [4]

Whilst this definition encapsulates some key concepts of leadership, I believe it overlooks some key concepts too. Specifically, I believe this definition fails to recognise the concept of self-leadership — a concept described by Bryant and Kazan as “the practice of intentionally influencing your thinking, feeling and actions towards your objective/s.” [2]

With these two ideas of leadership in mind, I can now begin to comment on how my leadership skills have developed since my involvement with the Laidlaw Scholarship.

## 1.1 Self-Leadership

As we observed earlier, self-leadership concerns itself with one’s self-awareness, and how we might manipulate our awareness to try and achieve our goals more efficiently. One concept that I came across during the scholarship regarding self-awareness is that of the *Johari Window* [5]. In the next section, I will discuss what the Johari Window is, and how I used to it develop my leadership skills.

### 1.1.1 Johari Window

Introduced by Joseph Luft and Harry Ingham at a 1955 leadership conference, the Johari Window is a way of visualising how you perceive yourself, and how others perceive you, as illustrated in Figure 1a.

The window is split into four quadrants by two axes. The first axis represents one’s self-perception; the traits you are aware you have and the traits you are not aware you have. The second axis represents how others perceive you; the traits they are aware you have, and the traits they are not aware you have. Together, these four quadrants describe all of your traits, and the relative size of each lay the foundations for how you interact with others.

The quadrant we are most interested in is the ‘known to self’ × ‘known to others’ quadrant, also known as the Arena (top left in Figure 1a). When communicating

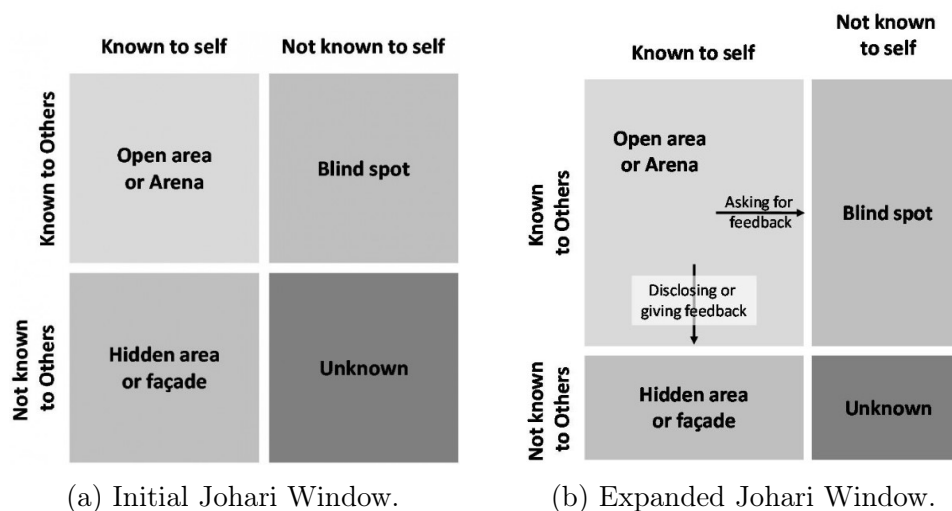


Figure 1: An illustration of how one can expand the ‘Arena’ quadrant of their Johari Window. The larger this quadrant is, the more efficient, truthful and productive communication becomes. Images from [7].

with others, it is the traits in the Arena that both parties are aware of. Therefore, it is the size of the Arena that determines how meaningful and ‘true’ our interactions are. To be an effective communicator, we want the Arena to be as large as possible, as this represents a self-aware person with transparency. This is where our self-leadership comes in.

In order to expand the size of the Arena, as illustrated in Figure 1b, we must learn more about our own traits through receiving feedback, and allow others to learn about our traits through open communication and giving feedback.

In my experience, I have found that the most useful time to consider the Johari Window is when I am presented with a new group of people to work with. By consistently asking myself “which of my characteristics am I presenting to my teammates?” and “what characteristics do I know about my teammates?”, I become more aware of how our group dynamics are developing. From here, I can begin to offer and elicit feedback that will expand the Arena of each team member, ultimately improving group understanding and productivity.

When we think of leaders, we often think of people in a position of authority. However, as seen in this example above, by simply suggesting a feedback session, we can help maximise the efforts of others towards a common goal. In other words, as outlined in Kruse’s definition, we can demonstrate leadership. This highlights one of the biggest lessons I have come to realise over the course of my scholarship — leadership doesn’t necessarily require authority, seniority, or power.

A key idea that keeps occurring when considering the Johari Window is that of

feedback. In the next section, I will discuss some of the techniques I have learnt and developed to help deliver effective feedback.

### 1.1.2 The Art of Feedback

As mentioned in the previous section, an integral part of becoming more self-aware — and therefore improving one’s self-leadership — is understanding how to give and receive effective feedback. At the beginning of my leadership journey, I thought that the best feedback to receive was “everything was great and you did an excellent job”, because that meant everything was going well. In actuality, this piece of feedback highlights no particular strengths or weaknesses, and leaves me as self-aware as I was pre-feedback.

During my leadership journey, by attending workshops and honing my skills through practice, I have compiled a list of tips to deliver good feedback.

1. **Focus on behaviour, not the person.** When asked for feedback on a piece of work, people don’t want a full character assessment. It is important that our personal opinions don’t cloud our judgement, and we offer constructive feedback. Similarly, when receiving feedback, it’s important to focus on the comments that directly relate to our work and our actions, rather than any comments that may embody how the feedback-giver feels about us as a person.
2. **Be specific.** As we saw in our poor example of feedback, without specificity, we don’t know where to focus our efforts. The ideal piece of feedback contains precise descriptions of the parts that were best received, and the parts that were worst received. With this information, we can begin to adjust the emphasis and style in which we present ourselves.
3. **Own the feedback.** By this I mean making it clear that “I want to hear your feedback.” Oftentimes, people can be hesitant to offer their true thoughts as they might not want to appear rude or negative. By ensuring the feedback-giver that we really want to hear their opinion, and that we know to separate comments based on behaviour from that of the person, we create a safe environment for them to share their thoughts, and for us to become more self-aware.
4. **Give a feedback sandwich.** Although feedback should be seen as a positive opportunity to better understand oneself, it is all too easy to focus on the negatives and become disheartened. Therefore, when giving a piece of constructive criticism, consider offering a *feedback sandwich*. In other words, wrap the item that needs addressing in two compliments so that the feedback

doesn't seem so blunt. For example, "*The font you used was difficult to read*" becomes "*The pictures on slide two really helped my understanding, though the font you used was difficult to read. Overall, I think the presentation was delivered very well.*" Much better!

## 1.2 Team Leadership

We have just discussed some methods in which we might develop our awareness to better our self-leadership. In this next section, I will discuss some ways in which I have developed my skills as a leader of others, firstly discussing team roles.

### 1.2.1 Belbin Team Roles

Throughout our education and careers, it may often become apparent that different people respond differently to the same stimulus. For some people, the fear of failure is a motivator; for others, it is a road-block that renders them unable to work. It is the job of a good leader to acknowledge our differences and understand our role in the team to maximise productivity. One way in which we can look at team roles is through the lens of Belbin:

The types of behaviour in which people engage are infinite. But the range of useful behaviours, which make an effective contribution to team performance, is finite. These behaviours are grouped into a set number of related clusters, to which the term *Team Role* is applied. [1]

Belbin goes on to explain that there are nine of these clusters — Resource Investigator, Teamworker, Co-ordinator, Plant, Monitor Evaluator, Specialist, Shaper, Implementer, Completer Finisher<sup>1</sup> — and outlines some of the comparative strengths and weaknesses between the roles [1].

Through my scholarship, I was afforded the opportunity to take a psychometric test and determine how well I associate with each cluster. From there, I was given bespoke feedback regarding my perceived strengths and weaknesses as a team member, tips on how I can maximise my potential and develop as a team member, and suggestions on how I might work best with people from different clusters.

For example, I learnt that I most strongly associate with the *completer finisher* role, meaning that I am likely to be very precise, demanding and achieving high standards in my work. Conversely, I am inclined to worry unduly, and can be reluctant to delegate. Furthermore, when working with monitor evaluators, I learnt that I should try and talk to them about the bigger picture, rather than getting

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<sup>1</sup>A more detailed explanation of each of these roles can be found at <https://www.belbin.com/about/belbin-team-roles>.

stuck in the finer detail. This should help boost their engagement and thus overall team productivity.

This offers but a small snapshot of the information provided in my Belbin report, but it exemplifies how useful it is to know what role you and your colleagues play in a team. With this established, we will now explore some of the ways in which we can communicate with our team members.

### 1.2.2 Clear Communication

As a team leader, in order to play to your team members' strengths and maximise efficiency, it is often necessary to delegate tasks. With different people having different standards and styles, we sometimes need to compromise in order to reach an agreement on how the task ought to be carried out. Delivered by Colin Harper, a Negotiation and Communications Coach, one of the talks [3] I attended as part of my Laidlaw Scholarship discussed concepts we can employ to effectively negotiate with others. For the remainder of this section, I will discuss some of the ideas presented by Harper that I have found most useful for my leadership development.

Firstly, Harper highlights the importance of appreciation in a team environment. When working as part of a team, I find that I become much more motivated to be productive when my hard work is recognised. Therefore, when I am leading a team, I make it a priority to offer my thanks and appreciation of their work.

Secondly, Harper discusses the idea of affiliation; showing the person you are communicating with that you are working together. One of the biggest challenges I have faced as a leader is mentally distinguishing between *delegation* and *giving other people the jobs that I don't want to do*. This has resulted in me taking on too much work because I don't want my team members to think I am giving them the undesirable tasks. Harper's talk helped me address this issue, by teaching me to demonstrate to team members (and myself) how our combined efforts are moving us towards our goal.

Finally and, for me, most importantly, Harper discussed the power of giving team members autonomy. Thinking back to Kruse's definition of leadership, we recall that leadership pertains to maximising the efforts of others. Importantly, it does not pertain to telling people exactly what to do and micro-managing. When people are given some freedom in how they complete a task, they will opt for an approach that suits their style of work which will yield better, more efficient results than if they had forced themselves to complete a task in a way that felt unnatural. Furthermore, by allowing team members to complete a task in a way that makes them feel comfortable, they will be more willing and confident to work with you in the future.

## 2 Looking Forward as a Leader

When I began my leadership journey through the Laidlaw Scholarship, I was determined and excited to learn lots of new skills that would make me a better leader. Not only have I achieved this goal, I have challenged what it means to be a good leader, and hopefully even shared some of my knowledge with other scholars.

One thing that has become very clear to me is that I have so much more to learn about leadership. In the coming academic year, I will be working in a secondary school, applying the skills that I have developed in a very unfamiliar setting. I am excited to see how transferable my skills are, and if I gain any new perspectives from working with school-age children.

To conclude, as I look forward, I am hopeful that I will continue to build, both in theory and in practice, on the skills that Lord Laidlaw and the Laidlaw Foundation have so generously afforded me the opportunity to develop.

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