

Pre-Fiji versus Post-Fiji: Personal Reflections on Leadership Development

Since I applied for the Laidlaw Scholarship in January 2021, most parts of my life have changed. I entered honours, moved student flats, visited Spain, completed my first academic research experience, and even lived in Fiji for six weeks. When I read back my application now, I laugh quietly to myself about how optimistically I viewed leadership. Entering my fourth year of university, I now conceptualize leadership as incredibly messy and complicated. In this essay, I will evaluate the peculiarities, complexities, and nuances of leadership by focusing on the evolution of my leadership development throughout the Laidlaw program: from my application to DiSC profile results and Leadership-in-Action in Fiji.

When I completed my DiSC Assessment in May 2021 for the Laidlaw Leadership Development Week, most of it reaffirmed how I perceived myself. This included the parts I was not so proud of. I was driven by “a desire to like and be liked.” I was uncomfortable with unpredicted change. I was concerned about letting people down. I didn’t like saying no. Most of these are still true to some extent but have also changed. In my third year, I was on society committees, volunteered in Fife schools, and continued the academic research I started in my first Laidlaw summer. This independent development led me to enter my second Laidlaw summer with increased self-assurance and self-awareness. However, on my Think Pacific Health Promotion Project in Jubairata, Fiji, I had to face and overcome these familiar traits of mine in a completely unfamiliar environment. I witnessed and experienced the nuances of leadership that once ceased to exist in my mind. As a result, my relationship with the concept of leadership shifted and matured.

In my application, I wrote, “Sharing experiences of setbacks leads us to teamwork and innovation.” I still agree that being a good leader means admitting your setbacks and not getting caught up in proving oneself worthy of leading. But now, I believe that even if you wholeheartedly share where you think you went wrong and how you want to improve, making progress and building teamwork is not inevitable. Sometimes leadership is working around those who will not admit their setbacks. You must make peace with the fact that you cannot rely on others by creating the best plan you can with what you can control. When Laidlaw volunteers expressed our concerns about how we could be more useful in our diabetes or mental health workshops in Jubairata, our desire to do more was sometimes met with resentment. The partner

organizations did provide guidance on how we could better assist the workshops. As a result, we, as volunteers, decided to run our own workshops. Bringing this idea to life would not be easy, but it would have real-life consequences for all involved. Our initiative was an example of using what was in our control to combat the unexpected and create innovative solutions ourselves. We formed a new, make-shift leadership team.

These self-made workshops tested our ability to put cultural and social awareness into practice. First, we recognized our position as outsiders in the village. Even though we sat with the youth participants in the partner workshops, we were still (in theory) supposed to aid the partners in delivering health information to the youth. Because of this, anything we said in a workshop, whether on diabetes, mental health, or in the ones we ran, would be assumed correct and agreed with. Mindful of this privilege, we went to the key youth and our Fijian Think Pacific leader, William, for guidance. We discussed potential topics, potential barriers, and logistics of various volunteer-run workshops. We decided to facilitate workshops on wound care, animal welfare, female empowerment, child protection, and mental health and religion. Fear of offending the community with our workshops was always in the back of our minds, but we decided to go through with them after encouragement from the key youth and William. We were reminded that our Laidlaw experience was a cultural exchange. We could run activities on parts of our culture like the Fijian youth did for us in our cultural sessions where we learned about the village's heritage and traditions. In this situation, our leadership did not immediately lead us to teamwork and innovation as I may have thought it would in January 2021. It led us to a standstill that turned into a change in collaboration. Consequently, this change required a pause and a moment of reflection. We had to take a breath, re-analyze our position as volunteers, ask tough questions about our impact, and make peace with the unexpected and the challenges it brings.

In our deliberations on what topics to focus the workshops on, I suggested female empowerment and child protection. In the village, I heard stories of bad marriages and domestic violence experienced by women. Because of my volunteer experience in public health education as Child Protection Officer for Sexpression St Andrews, I was familiar with safeguarding and passionate about teaching it. Within these two workshops, I took the lead in ways that were both natural and not so natural to me. Like the DiSC profile had highlighted, I continued to seek out the team player role and preferred to quietly check in on all parts of the project. Still, I really

wanted to make sure that both workshops were well-prepared because of the sensitivity of child protection and women's wellbeing in the village. Volunteers working on female empowerment had a two-hour discussion outside of the village on how to facilitate the workshop in a way that was most safe, constructive, and impactful for the attendees. Deliberations included discussions on separate sessions for men and women, establishing ground rules at the beginning of each session with the attendees, and creating activities that would protect the anonymity of contributors.

In both leadership and non-leadership situations, valuing my contributions in the same way I value others has always been a struggle of mine. On the other hand, one of my strengths has always been finding hobbies or projects I am deeply passionate about that make me eager to learn more. In preparations for these workshops, I decided I had to stand up for my opinion on content and structure because I cared so deeply. Consequently, I suggested a "Draw a Jubairata Women" activity. The activity drew inspiration from relationships and sex education lessons that I led in Fife schools as a Sexpression volunteer last year. In small groups, the women drew a woman who might live in Jubairata. She could not have the name of anyone in the village. Then, by drawing her and writing on or around her, the group answered these questions using colored pencils and markers: What are her everyday responsibilities? What are some everyday struggles she faces? What does she do to enjoy herself and relax? What does she want to achieve? And finally, how can we support her?

This activity sparked many conversations among women of all ages. While pondering the prompted questions, grandmothers and mothers shared stories of women's hardship with Fijian youth and volunteers. The youth asked to present the Jubairata woman they had created to the other groups. At this stage in our stay in the village, the youth and the volunteers had become friends because of the workshops and cultural sessions we always did together. It was exciting to see such engagement and enthusiasm from the youth in our self-made workshops. It was clear they had gained confidence in leading workshop activities and discussions where they presented their own thoughts rather than looking to volunteers for answers. Older women demonstrated their engagement in the workshop differently by sharing relevant stories with just a few people in an intimate small group setting. The enthusiasm displayed by women of all ages made me so grateful that I stepped out of my familiar habits and shared my idea for this activity rather than

keeping it to myself. Looking back, I am also proud of how seriously we took workshop preparation. We had established the main takeaways we wanted attendees to walk away with before selecting activities: female solidarity, taking care of oneself before taking care of everyone else, and understanding that if a woman feels unsafe, she always has safe places she can turn to. Because of this thoughtfulness, we had curated activities that started conversations women did not want to end.

In Fiji, I gained the most leadership insight in the small moments. In such a patriarchal community, I saw how being in a position of power does not imply that one is good at leading. Grating coconut or kneading dough for roti with my Fijian host mother and her neighbors while the children were at school, I listened to Fijian women's stories of education, faith, motherhood, work, or marriage. I decoded experiences of abuse, financial hardship, and sickness. After hearing these stories and facilitating the female empowerment workshop, I sat by the river in reflection. I thought about how the women I met experienced leadership, and more broadly, life, in a specific way because they are women. Hardship and resilience take on different meanings for those who juggle caring for their children, their parents, their husband, their home, their income, and themselves. I saw self-motivation, self-awareness, and independence instilled by older generations of women in young girls. Our Fijian mom encouraged her young daughter to work hard in school to get into university so she can one day provide for herself. Preparing lunch with my Fijian host mother before we would head to the farm to plant cabbage, I wondered how I ever saw leadership as straightforward or one-dimensional.

In the future, I see myself embracing the complexity and messiness of leadership that I witnessed and experienced in Fiji. I encountered so many instances of sudden change that required me to befriend instead of shy away from the unexpected. I want to use my responses to the unexpected in Fiji to make more mindful decisions when faced with the unexpected in my future. Creatively curating workshops that I was passionate about affirmed that self-confidence in my abilities and ideas pays off. Being passionate and feeling deeply proved to be a valuable leadership attribute of mine that motivated careful planning and well-thought solutions which, in turn, had a real-life impact. I learned that however much you desire to be culturally aware, before moving forward, you need to check with those who know more than you about the culture you are engaging with. The female empowerment workshop started conversations that women had

not had before in the village. This reaffirmed that I want to lead projects that work to help women feel valued for their contributions and lead safe and happy lives around the world in the future.

Lord Laidlaw and the Laidlaw Foundation's generosity gifted me with an experience of a lifetime that I will be sharing stories from for many years to come. I express my sincere gratitude to Lord Laidlaw and the Laidlaw Foundation for funding my leadership development and Leadership-in-Action project.