

## Learning to Lead (includes crying)

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*An essay discussing my unscientific discoveries of the past two years.*

I decided to title this essay Learning to Lead, as throughout the programme this was what I attempted to do. However, the longer I think about it, perhaps I should have instead called it Learning what Leading *Is*, because the more time I spent with Laidlaw the more I realised I really did not have a *clue*. If I was asked to name a good leader, I would probably have said someone I could not relate to like Alexander the Great. In my mind, people like him, on account of the fact that they do great things like *lead* armies, were leaders. However, Me and Alexander the Great really don't have all that much in common, and I couldn't see how I could belong in the same category as the likes of him. Laidlaw gave me some sort of glimpse into how broad and flexible a term leadership is, and I realised that I can be a leader in a day-to-day situation as much as Alexander could be a leader as twenty-year-old-king-of-Macedon (or something like that).

My *leadership* journey was not linear: I'd say that the biggest changes occurred during the second summer of the programme, however, the awkward and uncomfortable groundwork was the concern of leadership days the year before. We participated in many activities, some which were more useful and less fun, and others which were more useful and more fun. Some left greater impacts than others. I found that the most influential activities for me were those that taught me how to approach myself in a constructive way, and those that offered a new angle on the whole leadership *thing*.

I often approach myself wrong. I rush in armed with self-criticisms playing judge, jury, and executioner all at once, and I really don't respond positively to this. Very quickly I make myself so miserable that I become incapable of engaging enough with my problems to do anything about them. This makes developing myself very difficult. As part of the training on the leadership days, we took behavioural tests designed to assess our leadership style. In the results, our leadership attributes and defects were listed. I discovered here that *normal human attributes* can be leadership qualities, in other words, I didn't have to be Alexander the *Great*. This was news. Having a concrete list in front of me, which communicated my abilities in a positive/objective manner, stunned me enough to allow me to step back before donning my wig and taking myself to court. Regardless, I found engaging with the content challenging and quickly became overwhelmed. So, I selected a few particularly *curious* characteristics from each of the tests and focused on these. For example, I learnt in one of the tests that I was a "cheerleader", and in the other that I had a "delegating" leadership style. I acknowledged these more positive traits alongside a couple of more *heinous* ones and tried to recognise their appearance in my day-to-day life.

Working to enhance one's abilities is a rather broad job title, and as it turned out I badly needed direction. Luckily (or unluckily, for my flaws), this came in the form of 'leadership goals. I have a bad habit of developing strong feelings against things which encourage personal growth. When leadership goals came on my radar, I knew right from beginning that these would probably be life changing because I *hated* the idea of them. The process was simple enough (even I could do it): all one had to do was choose something to work on, this was then called 'the leadership development goal', once this was decided on, one outlined a plan of attack and decided on a measure by which success could be claimed. Once I admitted to being weak in some area, this structure effectively cornered me into developing an actionable plan to better myself. I couldn't run, it was genius. I could pick a trait that I recognised I struggle with and then I could develop an actionable goal. Nice. I originally chose "including others in group settings", as it was something I wanted to do, but didn't have the strength of character for. I later made the connection that this could be applied to any aspect of myself I wished to work on. I'm sure one day if I do this enough,

I'll be perfect (I wish, for every bad habit I overcome, another one enters the scene). The harder, and I suppose, more subtle part, was developing and appreciating where I'm strong. I decided that the best way for me to do this was to try and stretch myself where I was more confident. I took a couple of my 'skills' and thought about how I could force myself to use them. For example, I realised that as I enjoy recognising what others are good at, and it may be constructive to purposefully acknowledge their skills and wherever relevant, encourage them into roles in which I believe they would thrive. I then built a leadership goal with the aim to stretch myself rather than to fundamentally change myself.

Up until the start of my leadership in action project, most of my development was due to *a lot of thinking*, the bumble of everyday life made it hard to properly try and test what I'd learnt. My leadership project gave me the change to have a good bash at this. Although my project took an unexpected turn and ended up in an online format, if I'm honest, I think the change of plan is what forced me to be so willing to adapt and change. The project itself was focussed on physics education. I was home-schooled growing up and taught myself maths and physics up until university. I knew so many people who shied away from STEM, particularly my subjects, because of their inaccessibility. I have always found this so sad, as I gain so much from my studies and want others to have the chance to have what I have if they so wish. Therefore, I decided to run free online physics classes for students from disadvantaged backgrounds. My aim was to try and instil some confidence and curiosity in students, that was all.

If there's one thing this project taught me, it's that you must sort out what's going on *inside* your head before you can go about achieving anything in a *sane* manner. If there was a second thing, it's probably that being put in emotionally charged situations brings all my flaws to the surface, where they are nice and exposed. I'd say that the challenges of this project could be categorised as personal (*inside my head*) or practical (requiring me to be *sane* to conduct), although most of them required both an ordered personal and an ordered practical (neither of which I often had, leading me into trouble). As a meditative (or traumatic) act, I want to recount uncomfortable events which truly exposed my flaws in the context of this internal/practical dilemma. I hope then I can discuss what I did to help myself (although often that was crying – and that's ok (sometimes)). I was occupying a teaching type role, most of the problems fell under the umbrella term of 'troublesome-parent-teacher-dynamic'. This dynamic alone was enough of a situation for me to navigate (it led me to the firm conclusion that teachers must be saints). It was often the case that I was approached with some unrealistic expectation, whether it be for large numbers of classes to be moved round the clock to account for one child, or that I might allow a child barely of reading age to attend a class with *almost adults*. I found managing these expectations very hard as the ball stopped with me, there was nobody higher up to turn to. Upon receiving the first one of these emails I immediately (re)discovered that I am a horrendous people pleaser. The first few times I had an unreasonable request asked of me I swiftly replied, writing off my downtime for the sake of pleasing one parent. This happened perhaps twice before I realised it was not sustainable *and was making me incredibly unhappy*. I resolved that I would not reply immediately to emails, instead I would leave a space where my head could catch up with my anxious compulsions (a successful implementation of a leadership goal). This helped with the practical side of the issue, however *internally* I suffered thinking "what if they think I'm awful". This then led to the exposition of a second issue: I care a lot about what other people think. This one is hard to admit (probably because I care about what you, the reader, might think). So how did I get over it? I made some leadership goals. I acknowledged that the issue was there, and then I tried to accept it so building a leadership goal to do something *constructive* with it. I knew that I'm far better at dealing with my issues when I can see them written down in front of me, so I went straight to my leadership test results. I was looking for the part which talked about *what I find difficult*, and there it was on the page in front of me: I struggle with people pleasing (effectively). I tried to frame it in my mind as

a problem that was due to a positive behaviour. For example, 'I people please because I care about doing the best job, however, I often require too much validation from others, and this leads to negative behaviours and feelings'. I found I had to stick a good bit of positivity in there (forcefully, of course, not being naturally positive), in order not to become despondent. Then, bearing in mind the structure of the leadership goal I thought about what I *do* and how I might hold myself *accountable*. Once I had figured this out, I was able to make progress.

If I was to attempt to summarise what Laidlaw taught me, I'd say it would probably that leadership can look different on every single person – it's about learning to be the best version of yourself, it's about giving something your all, it's about being open to change, it's about learning to care. Through realising this, I learnt that I *could* think of myself positively without imploding. I learnt that if I employ the leadership goal structure, I can change myself without hating myself. Moving forwards, my new confidence in my ability to learn about and manage myself is leading to a recovered interest in typical 'leadership' positions. I want to collect everything that Laidlaw taught me into a nice basket which I can carry everywhere I go and add to over many years.

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