

Reflecting on Leadership: My Boston LiA Journey

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AFFILIATIONS

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A reflection piece on my LiA Project “Bridging the Gap: Integrating Psychological Research for the Identification and Rectification of Wrongful Convictions”



Introduction

During my Leadership-in-Action (LiA) experience, I engaged with the New England Innocence Project (NEIP) in the context of a critical legal case involving Raymond Gaines. My role involved preparing for an amicus brief, building a resource library and establishing connections with psychologists to enhance the NEIP's advocacy for justice. This experience was significant to me both professionally and personally because it allowed me to explore the applicability of legal psychology research, a field that I may pursue for my higher education, and contribute to the prevention of wrongful conviction which greatly aligns with my values for equity. The meaningful work I had undertaken in Cambridge, Massachusetts, more importantly, provided me with an opportunity to apply and develop leadership skills through the challenges I faced.

Collaboration and Team Dynamic

While my primary interaction was with my supervisor, Radha Natarajan, I gained invaluable insights from observing the interactions within NEIP. Their dedication to their cases, evident through their expression of genuine frustration and respect for their clients in conversations with me, reinforced my aspiration to work in an environment where members collaborate in the pursuit of justice and positive change. From Radha specifically, she has been my role model who demonstrated traits I value in a leader. For instance, I learned how she effortlessly incorporates compliments of team members into daily conversations and how she always takes the second to include new members into established topics within the team regardless of their scope of work.

Ethical Leadership

During my project, I had the privilege of witnessing ethical leadership in action. At a Massachusetts state hearing, I observed a senator spearheading campaigns and advocating against life sentences without parole, despite the personal tragedy of her brother's murder. Her ability to balance personal loss with a commitment to addressing systemic biases against marginalized communities in sentencing was powerful and awe-inspiring. This experience was my living example of a leader who prioritizes justice and empathy in their decision-making, even in the face of personal challenges.

Challenge #1

Building Relationships: My colleagues held far more seniority than I did, and this, coupled with the hybrid work environment, created a barrier to forging connections naturally. The fear that I might intrude on their work if I created opportunities to engage in conversations was persistent, but the lack of connections within the organization had also impeded my productivity as I realized I gained energy and motivation from forming meaningful connections at work. I was also disappointed in my inability to comfortably reach out to others, a trait I perceive leaders to be equipped with. To overcome this challenge, I leveraged my position as an intern and newcomer to Boston to first initiate small talk, and also heavily relied on a learning mindset to ask for invitations to attend hearings and meetings. Additionally, I open conversations with gratitude because my desire to convey that message was greater than my fear of intrusion. This experience laid the foundation for me to reach out to individuals when one may not naturally seem approachable and proactively create opportunities for meaningful connection.

Challenge #1

Processing Anxiety: During my LiA experience, my counterproductive doom scrolling on social media has become more prominent without familiar social interactions. I reflected that this was my way to cope with guilt and shame related to not fully utilizing the past or opportunities at the present and feeling like I was robbing myself of personal growth. More specifically, I felt ashamed that my productivity was not maximized at the office due to my difficulties in analyzing legal documents. Acknowledging these feelings was a wake-up call in preventing a negative feedback loop of doom scrolling and regret. To face my discomfort head-on, I focused on the idea that my area of resistance is the room for most growth. I thus implemented a structured approach, allocating specific work time intervals in tune with my energy, and switching environments, both physical and digital, if needed to restart my motivation levels. This challenge underscored the significance of confronting discomfort and anxiety as a means to foster personal growth and professional development.

Leadership Attributes

Throughout my Leadership-in-Action (LiA) project, I applied a range of leadership skills that significantly contributed to the success of my initiatives. These skills included communication, problem-solving, critical thinking, and adaptability.

Communication: Effective communication was paramount in my role. Working closely with my supervisor, Radha Natarajan, and legal professionals at the New England Innocence Project (NEIP), I honed my ability to articulate ideas clearly, ask probing questions, and actively listen. I also developed concise and organized meeting notes, ensuring that discussions remained focused and that action items were clear. This skill helped in facilitating productive conversations, resolving issues, and maintaining alignment within the team.

Problem-Solving: Given the complexities of the legal documents I analyzed and the challenges presented by the historical nature of the case, problem-solving skills were crucial. I had to devise strategies to navigate through extensive, scanned legal documents and decipher intricate legal language. Additionally, I faced challenges in selecting credible scientific sources. These experiences honed my ability to break down complex issues, identify key obstacles, and develop effective solutions.

Critical Thinking: Critical thinking was central to my work on the Resource Library and preparing the amicus brief. I needed to critically evaluate legal documents, identifying areas with potential to contribute to Gaines' case, and critically assess scientific literature to ensure its relevance and credibility. These experiences deepened my capacity for analytical thinking, enabling me to distinguish between valuable evidence and irrelevant information.

Adaptability: My project demanded adaptability in various aspects. I navigated through unfamiliar legal terminology and procedures, adapting my approach to ensure comprehension. The evolving nature of the project also required me to adjust my priorities and strategies based on emerging needs and insights. This flexibility was crucial in maintaining project momentum and effectiveness.



Conclusion

In my Leadership-in-Action (LiA) experience with the New England Innocence Project (NEIP), I confronted challenges that fostered personal growth, from building relationships in a new work environment to addressing unhealthy coping mechanisms. These experiences underscored the importance of discomfort, meaningful connections, and a learning mindset in ethical leadership. Collaborating with NEIP members, particularly my supervisor Radha Natarajan, provided insights into inclusive and empathetic leadership. Witnessing ethical leadership at a state hearing further emphasized the significance of prioritizing justice and empathy. Through this LiA project, I honed crucial leadership attributes like communication, problem-solving, critical thinking, and adaptability. This journey reaffirmed my commitment to advocating for justice and equity, laying a strong foundation for future leadership roles.

