

My Laidlaw Scholarship journey is approaching its finish line and, instead of sprinting towards the end, I like the idea of sitting on the side for a while and look back at the road I travelled. From where I am, I can see clearly how every turn I took and path I walked down contributed organically to both my leadership development and personal growth. When I joined the programme, I was in my second year of university, and who is writing now is a fourth-year student oriented towards the post-university career beyond the ‘St Andrews bubble’. The Laidlaw Scholarship has been a fundamental component of my university experience, which allowed me to acquire excellent academic and professional skills, but also provided me with meaningful spaces to reflect on my personal values and attitudes and how those interact with others’.

Leadership I: who am I as a leader?

March 2022 marked the beginning of our cohort’s work. Prior to the three days we spent together in Hospitalfield (Arbroath), each of us filled out a questionnaire to determine our DISC® profile for leadership styles, where Dominance, Influence, Conscientiousness and Steadiness were the main categories. Whilst the categorisation of ‘leadership attributes’ leaves room for approximation, I believe the tool worked as an important indicator of personal attitudes towards individual and group work: this was particularly noticeable in how teamwork dynamics and outputs changed according to whether we were grouped with people with a similar/different leadership style in the various activities.

From the test results, I was placed at the intersection between Influence and Dominance, which well captured my ability to take the initiative and bring people together strong of enthusiasm, analytical skills, and good project management tools.

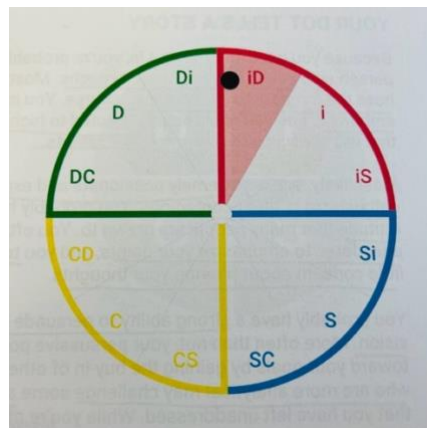


Figure I: My DISC® profile.

Looking at some aspects of my personality like being outgoing and extremely passionate as strengths of my leadership styles was unusual, as I have always perceived them as limitations to being the iron-fisted leader that I thought I should be. On the contrary, I realised how important it is to be able to motivate others and create a sense of belonging to the work environment in order to ensure the sustainability of the project through the active engagement of all actors. This led me to reflect on the fact that severity and extreme professionalism are important in certain decision-making roles but might be counterproductive in other leadership positions. Naturally, some crucial questions arose: which kind of leader do I want to be? Who and what I want to 'lead'? The importance of this kind of reflection in my leadership journey was evident from the goals I set at that time:

- Challenge the pre-existing and well-established beliefs I have about myself as a leader, both individually and collectively;
- Use the leadership programme as an opportunity to 'check-in' with myself, reflect, and grow;
- Share the awareness and knowledge I am gaining with others who did not have the privilege to benefit personally from the Laidlaw Scholarship experience.

It makes me particularly proud of myself to notice how these goals that I identified during the first steps of my journey have evolved in complexity but kept being at the core of my work throughout the Summer I research and Summer II LiA project. I acknowledged that I do not lack confidence in my abilities, rather I should work on gaining full awareness of what my assets are and acquiring the skills to employ them more impactfully.

Leadership II/III: self-leadership and team roles.

At the turn of my second and third year of university, the Laidlaw Scholarship allowed me to dive into the world of academic research. Through the summer, developing a self-defined research project, I often had to navigate the intricacies of receiving feedback from others and from myself. Receiving feedback, as we practiced during one of the leadership sessions, can be a major setback influencing the course of one's project and their self-confidence if not conveyed appropriately. Aware of how much I take into consideration external feedback, I had to learn how to distinguish between meaningful feedback and pieces of advice which could be taken more lightly. The feedback received from the supervisor and my fellow scholars during the Action Learning Sets greatly supported me in the research and data analysis by providing me with alternative tools to use when I was stuck in the process. On the other hand, I struggled

due to the harsh feedback I gave to myself, which pushed me to keep perfecting my work well past the 6-weeks allocated for the project and investing an excessive amount of time in tasks that resulted to be marginally important in retrospect. Now, I see how this lack of self-compassion came from a discrepancy between my research ambitions and the limited skills I had acquired in the field at the time. It really occurred to me that the Laidlaw research component was more about the learning experience rather than producing a perfectly polished output only in the context of our first leadership session after the summer, when all the scholars had the chance to share their similar experiences. As a result, I decided to pick up on these ideas and challenges when designing my goals for the LiA component of the programme, committing myself to developing a healthier and more balanced self-leadership style that would support me instead of holding me back. I decided to do so by keeping a reflective journal, in the shape of weekly (b)logs to upload on the Laidlaw Scholars Network, trying to analyse challenges and areas of improvement as avenues for future opportunities and not as criticisms towards myself.

Following the exploration of our individual leadership dimension, the programme shifted the focus towards team roles and dynamics during the second year. By looking at the distinction between action-oriented, people-oriented, and cerebral roles, we had the chance to play with the different positions one might take when working in a group. In educational settings, I have always preferred independent work over collaborative projects, blaming it on my passion-driven working style and a busy schedule which makes it hard to coordinate with others. During the leadership session on Belbin's team roles, however, I realised that what prevents me from truly thriving in teamwork is my tendency to try to fulfil all the roles instead of channelling my energies more intentionally. In fact, amongst at the list of roles that was given to us as guideline, I could see myself performing well in almost all of them. Contemplating the abstract scenario in which I had to pick only one of these roles to perform, I started noticing an inclination towards more 'supporting' roles like the Resource Investigator, who is the person working to bring together others' ideas and turn them into action, developing partnerships, and contributing innovative problem-solving. Of this team role, I also share the weakness of not following through once the initial enthusiasm dissipates or when I get particularly anxious. Reflecting on my personal limitations made me look at teamwork under a different light: working with others constitutes a safety-net for individual shortcomings, as the skills of each member will naturally compensate and balance each other. Mindful of this, I was able to approach the teamwork environment during my LiA project in a more open-minded and relaxed manner, actively working on finding my specific role in the group and making peace with the fact that delegating tasks to others is not only necessary but also extremely helpful in the development of a project.

Leadership-in-Action: Peace and Social Resilience in Colombia

On July 9th, 2023, I saw the sun rising over Milan and setting into the Atlantic Ocean on my way to Medellín, the second-largest city in Colombia, where I partook in the re_ action for impact project organised by make_ sense americas in partnership with the Laidlaw Foundation. Throughout the six weeks, our group of twelve scholars was divided into teams of three, each working with a different local organisation. The team I was part of collaborated with *El Derecho a No Obedecer* (DANO), an activist organisation supporting communities and individuals in promoting grassroots participation and recognition in public/political processes. DANO introduced us to the community of El Faro, a neighbourhood of Medellín created around two decades ago by residents who were for the most part escaping the violence of the armed conflict affecting the rural areas. Due to the illegal nature of the urban expansion that occurred in the city during the internal conflict, many neighbourhoods like El Faro are not yet recognised officially, preventing them from accessing public services like electricity and water. For a few months now, DANO has supported El Faro's community and *Junta de Acción Comunal* (JAC, a legal entity representing the community through elected leaders) in the process of building community spaces to compensate for the current lack of government support for the development of the area. In particular, our work with them focused on their on-going community garden and agroforestry projects, for which we contributed technical assistance, material resources and manual labour. Our main task was taking care of the logistics and recruitment of volunteers to organise a *convite* (literally translated, a gathering of people who work together to build something for the community/an individual in exchange for a meal) for the maintenance and expansion of the two spaces. *Convites* like the one we contributed to are almost a weekly routine for the community, but our more long-term contribution was putting the JAC in contact with an agricultural engineer to install an irrigation system and establishing a network of volunteers which will hopefully ensure continuous support to El Faro in collaboration with DANO.

In the development of this project, I experienced a resurgence of personal interests and skills that have been dormant for a while: I rediscovered my passion for political and community-oriented action, along with a strong sense of social responsibility and justice that motivates me to step forward as a leader. *Liderazgo social*, social leadership, has been a recurring buzzword during my time in Colombia, where most community leaders became such not because of personal ambition but out of necessity and often at great personal risk. The social leaders we met are people who took on a position of responsibility without receiving a leadership training before, discovering they are leaders almost by accident when appointed by others who look up to them as such. Then, there is me, supposedly a wannabe social leader who also had the incredible chance to receive said leadership training. I believe that the more 'managerial' leadership

discourse and the social dimension of leadership work could well in synergy. For example, make_sense walked us through the steps of the Design Thinking model for project development, which we were encouraged to adopt for our group projects. This model, based on the product development steps of empathising, defining, ideating, prototyping and testing, was a precious tool that helped me give structure and direction to my enthusiasm for the project, ensuring that both value-driven and impact-oriented consideration could find space in our work.

Inspired by the findings of my Summer I research on the social dimension of the circular economy and my recent experience in Medellín, I am looking forward to writing my dissertation on the importance of community-led action in the promotion of sustainable development. The academic and professional network built throughout the various components of programme has meaningfully influenced my next steps: building on the skills I acquired and interests I developed, I will be applying to Master programmes in policy evaluation and peace and security studies. I feel really privileged for the opportunity to partake in the Laidlaw Scholars programme, extending my gratitude to Lord Laidlaw, the Laidlaw Foundation and its St Andrews branch, and the make_sense team for making this formative experience possible. To me, this privilege comes with the responsibility of sharing my expertise with others. Community leadership is about promoting exchange of ideas, resources, skills and knowledge to improve collective wellbeing: inspiring this change is what I hope to do in the journey ahead, wherever the road might take me.