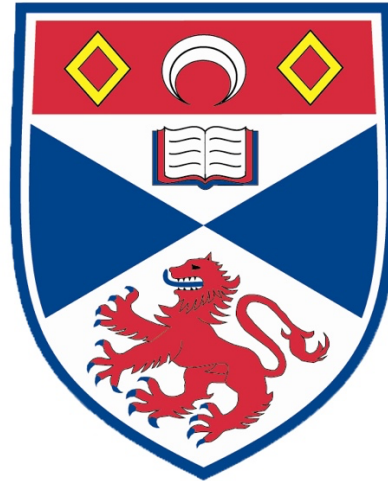


Reflections on Leadership
Laidlaw Programme 2022-23



University
of
St Andrews



Samuel L. Allen

Email: sla9@st-andrews.ac.uk

September 2023

Introduction

No reflection on my Leadership in Action (LiA) programme could begin without a thorough evaluation of my experience with *makesense*. My blog, *How to do Volunteering Right: Lessons from makesense*^[1] gives an overview of my thoughts on the *Re_action for Impact* programme, its part in the Laidlaw Experience, and on *makesense*^[2] as an organisation. I suggest reading it if you are interested in undertaking the same LiA or wish to fully understand my leadership journey as a Laidlaw Scholar.

My key takeaway from the leadership aspect of the Laidlaw Programme has been confidence. Confidence to speak publicly, confidence to disagree, and (from my time in Mexico) the confidence to speak in a second language. Confidence relies so much on soft skills that have always been harder for me to acquire. In this essay, I explain how the Laidlaw Programme has helped me to begin acquiring them.

Leadership events and training

Before becoming a Laidlaw scholar, I was someone who was more comfortable talking about powder diffraction patterns in a study group than I was talking to a stranger about the weather or introducing myself to a colleague. Not to say I could not do those things, but authentic, empathetic, and natural interactions with people have never come entirely naturally to me. My favourite interactions were those where I could hide behind jargon and excessive detail, either in a safe bubble of known people, or safe in the knowledge that 90% of my audience would lose interest by the start of my second sentence. This is what felt secure, comfortable, and familiar to me. Laidlaw has pushed me beyond that. I lacked confidence, and I certainly lacked the kind I would call *positive confidence*.

Positive confidence – what I mean by this is confidence without arrogance – is what the Laidlaw programme has helped me strive for. The foundation of this kind of confidence is self-awareness – one of the main areas in which the programme has developed me. A key example of this comes from the first leadership training event. At first, I was very sceptical of tools aimed at profiling individuals as leaders or team members, such as *Dominance-Influence-Steadiness-Conscientiousness* (DISC) profiles, which were used in our first residential leadership event. I am still sceptical, and there are valid criticisms that have been and can still be made of these tools, their simplifying assumptions, and the reinforcing effect that this profiling may have on certain leadership behaviours. However, viewing them as an imperfect or blunt instrument from which some value can be salvaged – as I think they were intended – yielded some genuine insight and self-awareness.

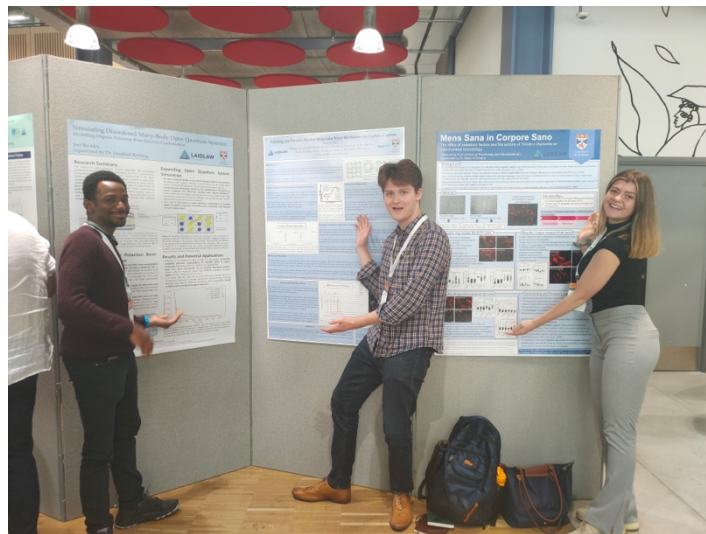


Figure 1: Using my newfound confidence to present my project poster at the Laidlaw Impact Conference in October 2022. Left to Right: Joel Beckles, Myself, Chloe-Anna Hunt.

My leadership style fell deeply into the *conscientious* quadrant of the DISC leadership profile. Anyone who knows me and reads the conscientious profile will recognise me in some of the descriptors, both good and bad: precise, sceptical, quiet, fearful of criticism, having a dislike for slipshod

methods, and of being wrong. Key weaknesses being excessive criticism, over analysis and tendency towards isolation. The DISC profile helped me with self-awareness not by just pointing out my strengths and weaknesses, but by pointing them out in a way that showed that my characteristics, positive and negative, were inextricably linked by a style of leading. Becoming aware of this style of leading – also a style of thinking – showed me that becoming a better leader was not about changing myself fundamentally or suppressing my qualities, but rather about learning to manage and be aware of my natural leadership tendencies in a way that maximises their benefits and minimises their costs. This, if I can achieve it, will be true self-awareness, and bring with it the kind of positive confidence I am writing about.

Self-awareness leads to positive confidence because when you know your strengths you can push them authoritatively without having to mask it with bravado and without hiding them out of fear. When you know your weaknesses, you can minimise errors and take any mistakes and criticisms in your stride. These can be seen as an opportunity for self-improvement, a consequence of how your brain is wired, and not as a fatal flaw that will be your complete undoing.

This opportunity arises in my own life in instances when I can be overly critical of other peoples' methods and approaches. I have come to see that sometimes different methods are chosen not through laziness or error, but because of different priorities – or a different evaluation of the same priorities. Accepting that someone might (due to time, energy, or resource constraints) do a quicker or more approximate job of something than they could theoretically have done is still very difficult for me to accept, but I am choosing to see it as a deliberate choice. The effort we put into individual tasks reflects our priorities, rather than always being a measure of what the best of our abilities are given adequate time and opportunity.

My DISC profile highlighting my tendency to be overly critical – not only of others but mainly of myself – encouraged me to reflect on this tendency, how it can be managed, and how it connects with other, more positive qualities like my keen attention to detail. Numerous other examples of opportunities for self-reflection have presented themselves during my time as a Laidlaw scholar, but as this was the first such instance, it deserved an explanation in this essay.

Leadership in action

A large part of my Leadership in Action programme involved approaching café managers, baristas, and waiting staff all over Mexico City to pitch a new multilayer packaging recycling scheme to them – in my second language – on behalf of the environmental charity *Grupo Promesa*.^[3] This helped me to work on one of my leadership weaknesses: confidence. More specifically, the confidence to conquer a fear of failure. This had a twofold root: firstly, I learnt to not fear rejection of the scheme, and secondly to not fear mistakes in my spoken and written Spanish. Part of this came from a realisation that anticipation of failure was not only unpleasant emotionally for me, but actively detrimental to the efforts of the group. I quickly realised that I was never going to have a natural conversation in Spanish if I paused before every phrase to ensure my grammar was perfect, or to check if I had chosen the most appropriate word. I was better served, and the project better served, by speaking at a natural pace and with confidence even if this resulted in some embarrassing grammatical or word choice mistakes. Anyone familiar with the *tomar/coger* difference between Castilian and Mexican Spanish can guess one such embarrassing mistake, which thankfully I only made a handful of times. In these instances, it was beneficial to carry on with confidence than to apologise or repeat myself (combating my natural tendency to correct all mistakes I identify.) As is the case when promoting almost anything, most businesses declined to participate in the scheme we promoted. If only by repeated exposure, I came to not fear rejection. Out of

necessity, I internalised the philosophy that you fail at everything you don't try, so you may as well try it (within reason).



Figure 2: Collecting recycling in Mexico City. Left to right: Myself, Iris Liu, Sarah Wei.

The second cause of my personal development within my LiA was the exceptional example set by the *makesense* team, which I explain in greater detail in my blog. The opportunity to lead was the crucial part of this summer, clearly, but being led also helped me learn by example. Without repeating the points made in my blog, the *makesense* team led their programme with integrity, a keen awareness for cultural sensitivity, and a clear focus on goals for both the scholars and the partner charities. There was a good balance between individual freedom and responsibility within our projects, coupled with strong support when needed. The team were friendly, personable but always professional. As an organisation to work with, *makesense* set a shining example for a considerate, well led, and inclusive working culture which I really appreciated.

Developing as a leader outside of Leadership in Action

Outside of work, in leadership events, socials, and friendships formed with other Laidlaw scholars I have discussed everything from Schopenhauer's criticisms of Kant to the existence of dark matter, from interpretations of biblical perspectives on relationships to the music of Troye Sivan. In this way, a great deal of my personal development has come from being thrown together with so many intelligent and committed free thinkers, and having many frank and lengthy discussions with them on some topics that I am well versed in and many which were (or still are) a complete mystery to me.

Within the research element of the programme, there were also opportunities for leadership development, particularly self-leadership. For me, the greatest of these was learning time-management skills. On a typical day in the laboratory, I was running three or four simultaneous syntheses, three or four ion-exchanges, prepping samples for analysis and trying to read relevant literature in between. At times, it was akin to spinning plates. There was no technique to it – again simply out of necessity and practice I came to be able to keep track of many things at once in my head, prioritise my tasks, and plan my time well. Managing your time is arguably *the* key laboratory skill, far ahead of any technical ability. This is particularly important when your syntheses can occur over a matter of days, as is the case in solid state synthetic chemistry. To have had upwards of twenty-five laboratory hours per week for six weeks was an incredible opportunity for personal development – I acquired many transferrable, non-technical skills over the course of my project in addition to the substantial technical knowledge I was taught there.

Future impact of the programme

The impact of the Laidlaw programme will stretch beyond the present for me for the same reason I imagine it will for many other scholars. The friendships, connections and mutual experiences forged throughout this scholarship have created a permanent connection with the programme beyond its effect on my own personal development. I hope that through this network of connections I can help other scholars in any way I can in the future – collaborating, giving advice, and encouraging.

When more formal avenues open for contributing to the Laidlaw Scholars community, or the foundation's other activities, I hope to take them. Participating in the foundation's mentoring schemes, speaking at events, presenting to future scholars, and promoting the scholarship are all opportunities I would be interested in pursuing. In short, I am keen to repay in some small part the debt I owe to the foundation and my fellow scholars for giving me the greatest personal development opportunity of my life so far.

Conclusions

In summary, my Laidlaw leadership journey has developed my confidence and self-awareness. The leadership events have encouraged me to reflect on my strengths, weaknesses, and biases in cases far too numerous to adumbrate in this short essay. First, my summer of research taught me to manage my time, my expectations, and to prioritise. In my second summer, I have made strides in conquering my fear of failure; in seeing the value in alternative approaches to certain problems in some situations; and developed my interpersonal skills in two different languages. Finally, my interactions with other scholars have not only served to form new friendships but have provided me with the opportunity to have my views on a full spectrum of conceivable topics thoroughly

examined, challenged, and listened to. I have reached this stage grateful for all the support and opportunities I have been afforded, and keen to give something in return to the Laidlaw Foundation and to its present and future scholars.

Acknowledgements

Thank you to the Laidlaw Foundation, its employees, and the Laidlaw team at the University of St Andrews for giving me the opportunity to participate in the programme. Thank you also to Iris Liu and Sarah Wei from the University of Hong Kong for being exceptional project partners in Mexico. Thank you finally to the other St Andrews scholars, who have contributed far more to my leadership development than they realise. A special mention must go to Elena Rico Hernando for her enormous part in my Laidlaw journey.

References

- [1] *How to do Volunteering Right: Lessons from makesense* – Laidlaw Scholars Network, <https://laidlaw scholars.network/posts/how-to-do-volunteering-right-lessons-from-makesense>, (accessed: 14/09/2023).
- [2] Makesense Americas, <https://americas.makesense.org/>, (accessed: 14/09/2023).
- [3] Reciclando por un Techo – Grupo Promesa, <https://grupopromesa.mx/impacto/>, (accessed: 14/09/2023).