

Breaking the mould of leadership: my leadership development journey

An introvert's first steps into leadership

When I first heard of the Laidlaw programme, it was the prospect of being able to conduct my own research project that allured me, not the leadership strand. Ever the introvert, I never would have classed myself as someone who was 'leader material', and I wasn't sure whether I was really cut out to be a Laidlaw Scholar. Weren't leaders outgoing, risk-taking, outspoken individuals?

This misconception was something that the Laidlaw team at St Andrews immediately challenged. One thing that stuck with me from the information briefing session (before I even applied!) was hearing about the journeys of some successful scholars. Like me, some hadn't considered themselves to be an archetypal leader – but the Laidlaw team encouraged potential applicants to think outside-the-box, beyond a cookie-cutter version of leadership. This moment was really the inception of my leadership journey. I started thinking about what it really meant to be a leader – and how *I* would fit into this role.

The more I thought about it, the more I felt that I had already been endeavouring to improve my leadership skills, just without labelling it as such. I'd joined my Hall Committee and the Student Minds Blog, collaborating with others to lead social events and newsletters. I'd volunteered as a peer supporter, employing techniques I'd learned from the PSC+ Communication course such as active listening and creating a supportive environment. I'd always been someone who sought opportunities to learn, reflect, and improve myself – and wasn't this exactly how a leader should be?

What makes a successful leader? Or – who am I as a leader?

The concept of leadership was returned to in the various leadership talks and weekends provided by the Laidlaw programme. We considered how leadership may manifest in different career fields, and how leadership is not one thing, but something malleable. The DiSC profile that each scholar received at the first leadership weekend in March 2022 was a perfect example of this; although each of us had a different style, it wasn't that one style was superior to the others, but rather that each of us had a unique way of approach. The primary purpose of this task was to learn more about ourselves as individuals – and indeed I had some reflections on my profile which I shall cover shortly – but perhaps the most valuable part of the exercise was to see the diversity in leadership styles amongst my peers. While I had much in common with the other scholars, for example in motivation and passion, it was insightful that many different types of leaders were represented in the group, clearly illustrating that there is no one rigid, fixed form of leadership.

As for my personal DiSC profile, I was classed with the CS (conscientiousness and steadiness) style. I related a lot to the report, for example that I'm cautious and like to take time to consider the facts and weigh up the pros and cons before making decisions; I'm detail-oriented; I prefer consistency and stability over a chaotic environment; I'm diplomatic and considerate of others' needs. Although the profile was to an extent just telling me what I already knew, as I'm naturally a very self-reflective person, it was still helpful to have my introspections validated

and reinforced. Additionally, it gave me insights to reflect upon, as I didn't agree with everything in the profile. For example, I'm not "uncomfortable when others express their own emotions or share too much personal information". To the contrary, I enjoy listening to others' perspectives and understanding their opinions and approach to matters. Still, even the parts I didn't wholly relate to gave me an opportunity to learn about myself, by considering *why* I disagree. As a leader, I think it's important to keep an open mind, even when you may initially strongly disagree with something, as sometimes this may simply be an initial reaction rather than a true reflection of reality.

The Belbin Individual Team Role Report from April 2023 likewise provided me with insights into my work style, labelling me as a 'completer finisher' and 'monitor evaluator'. Much of the content of the report was similar to the DiSC profile; they both were generated after filling in self-perception questionnaires, after all. To some, the Belbin profile may then seem superfluous, but I would disagree. The Laidlaw programme is very dynamic – many scholars may have evolved into a different style. Additionally, it was useful to gain the terminology and phrasing to describe myself, making it more straightforward to communicate my needs to others when working in a team. Furthermore, successful leaders should always be ready and willing to reflect on themselves, as otherwise you may remain oblivious to shortcomings and be unable to effectively better your working methods. Both profiles gave me food for thought regarding how I could develop my leadership qualities, as they highlighted areas of improvement, such as that I may "fall into patterns of worrying about unpredictable, uncontrollable events", and that I may "not feel happy initiating contacts". These points, along with others, were aspects that I targeted during my Laidlaw leadership journey.

Self-leadership and resilience in research

As my summer research project rolled around, I initially wasn't too worried about spending a lot of time directing myself in solo research. I *was* daunted, however, by the length of six weeks: the biggest project I'd ever been faced with. Ironically, these two notions were reversed as I sunk my teeth into my project. The worry of not having enough material to fill up six weeks quickly transformed into struggling to narrow things down, and my self-leadership skills were challenged more than I ever expected.

The scale of the project was very overwhelming at times, especially as I had no official brief to follow and refer back to; I was deciding everything for myself. Wading through all the literature, it was vital to preserve clarity for the 'bigger picture', and not get sidetracked by interesting but only tangentially relevant information. As the weeks progressed, I became more adept at sorting through information and focussing only on the most pertinent details. I also became more resilient when faced with setbacks, becoming more willing to depart from my original ideas, even though I was quite attached to them.

My supervisor was invaluable in aiding my self-leadership development; her guidance encouraged me to see both a micro and macro view of the project, and she did not instruct, but rather guided me, so that I always had the final call. This made me feel in charge of my project and gave me the confidence to value my own ideas and decisions – not only in terms of making project management verdicts, but also in my research conclusions. The importance of external feedback became apparent as I experienced its benefits firsthand. My supervisor sparked fresh ideas and perspectives through her suggestions, and I ended up considering my project from

several angles. Additionally, I had the support of my peers through the ‘action learning sets’, wherein we scholars discussed our challenges and advised each other in small groups. One pearl of wisdom that stuck with me was to keep a journal noting down what you did each day. Often while researching, I would spend many hours without finding anything of relevance to my project, which could leave me feeling like I hadn’t made any progress or done anything, even though I had worked all day. Journalling meant that I could stay on track, remember my progress, and keep motivated.

By the end of my research project, “self”-leadership took on a whole new meaning. While I still believe that understanding yourself is key to maintaining motivation and staying on track, I now place a lot more value in the inputs that others can give me. In some measure, “self”-leadership is a rather misleading term; it isn’t just working by yourself, and in fact it can be harmful to isolate yourself, both for your mental health and for the evolution of your project. I now believe that there is a worthwhile place for others when developing self-leadership abilities. Others have helped me to reconstruct my work approach and working habits, ultimately transforming how I work most effectively.

My Leadership-in-Action Journey: determination, sensitivity, and adaptability

As I opted to design my own Leadership-in-Action project, my self-leadership skills were once again put to the test. In order to hit the ground running, I planned out my project timeline carefully and launched steps into motion well in advance of the official start date; simply showing up and following instructions was not an option! Leading my own project required me to carefully assess and ascertain the realm of possibilities available to me, and to develop a practical and feasible roadmap. Paramount to my success was maintaining a clear vision for the project, which enabled me to persevere through challenges and to make judgement calls when necessary, without compromising my overarching vision.

In addition to the appealing opportunity to have creative and directive freedom for the project itself, my decision to forge my own path also enabled me to tailor the project to streamline my own leadership development. Reflecting on my DiSC and Belbin Team Role profiles, I set myself the personalised leadership goal of improving my networking and team-working skills. I began my Laidlaw journey feeling reserved and uncomfortable reaching out to others; I deliberately placed myself in a situation where I would have to personally reach out to and develop contacts, forming my own support network rather than relying on a ready-made one. My LiA project demanded that I communicate effectively with school administrators, teachers, local contacts, and relevant peace and conflict experts, all within an unfamiliar cultural context.

Being an outsider to the diverse and multicultural Nepali community, active listening was key to ensure that I avoided tropes of ‘white saviourism’, ‘voluntourism’, and cultural bias. I maintained an open mind and embraced cultural differences, immersing myself in the local culture and engaging with the community by demonstrating a genuine interest in their perspectives and way of life. Before delivering any workshops at schools, I first consulted with experts in peace education to ensure that my workshops aligned with the field’s goals and was appropriate for a Nepali audience. My in-depth understanding of the community enabled me to clearly articulate the aims and importance of the workshop series to school principals, including how the participating students would benefit and how the educational goals of the schools would be met. As I learned more about each group I would be working with, I revised the content of my workshops to make them as relevant and engaging for the students and the

schools as possible. I regularly changed my approach based on the receptiveness and responsiveness of the students, and personalised my approach to match the ‘culture’ of each school. For example, although I anticipated a multireligious and multicultural assortment of participants, I expected all students would be Nepali natives; upon learning that one school had a minority of foreign students, I adjusted the content to accommodate for their varying experiences, maximising participation. Another accommodation I implemented was to encourage students to speak in a language they felt comfortable with. Pre-empting that some students may struggle to understand or express themselves fully in English, I brought a Nepali-English translator with me to all the workshops, so that the students could benefit most effectively from the workshops.

Another leadership skill that I have always felt challenged by is dealing with unpredictability. My strengths lie in planning, prediction, and prevention; precisely because I prefer to do things most efficiently the first time and avoid any mishaps. However, in reality, it is impossible to control all variables, and I certainly had to exercise flexibility during my LiA project. As I was continually gaining insight into the nuanced inner workings of the community, I adjusted my workshop content and approach accordingly. Additionally, plans with the schools were changed on short notice, for example with the time allowance I had to deliver the workshops, and accommodating additional requests from the schools; I had to regularly redraft and restructure the workshops to fit new constraints while simultaneously maintaining the integrity of my vision. I also had to redraft workshop content due to lack of technology, reschedule workshops when a sudden holiday was called for government schools due to the weather, and navigate the medical system in Nepal when I fell ill and was prescribed two courses of antibiotics. In spite of all that, the epitome of unpredictability was undoubtedly when I showed up to deliver a workshop to a class of 30 students – the school had decided last-minute that they wanted the whole year group to participate, meaning that I had to do some quick-thinking to adapt my content and materials to accommodate around 80 students. It was overwhelming to be faced with such a drastic change with no prior notice, and I had no time to weigh up my options; instead, I had to quickly improvise, adapt, and overcome.

Finally, ethical leadership was quintessential to my leadership moral code. As I have already detailed, I was determined to circumvent any traits of ‘voluntourism’ throughout my project, which I achieved by working closely with the local community to ensure my project aligned with their experiences and priorities. Given the ultimately short length, I was intent on creating a project which was sustainable and accounted for its long-term impact. I developed a relationship with the charity Never Such Innocence, to promote ways in which the workshop participants could continue to involve themselves in the content and aims of the workshops, e.g. through international competitions and potentially future workshops. Additionally, I will adapt my project into material for the Museum of Peace at the University of St Andrews, offering a model of approach and content for future workshops. This will contribute to conversations on peace education generally and cross-culturally, and thereby have an indirect impact on further communities in need in the future.

My future in leadership

Since applying for the programme, I have come a long way. My concept of leadership has evolved, and I now recognise the multitude of ways and settings in which leadership skills can manifest and be implemented. I have a deeper understanding of my strengths and weaknesses,

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and a wider vocabulary to describe myself to others. I have a more potent sense of myself as a leader, and the qualities that I value: compassion, empathy, patience, sustainability, perseverance.

Venturing outside of my comfort zone has given me knowledge, experience, and skills that I will take with me beyond the Laidlaw programme and my university degree. Ultimately, I now feel much more connected to the title 'leader', and more confident to take on leadership roles in the future. I hope that I may continue to better my own leadership development and offer support to future Laidlaw scholars through the alumni network.

Thank you to Lord Laidlaw, the Laidlaw Team at St Andrews, and my supervisor, Dr Alice König, for enabling me to have such a valuable and enriching journey as a Laidlaw Scholar.