

Leadership in Action Reflection Part I

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Organization: Think Pacific

Project Title: Community and Health Project

This past summer, I had the pleasure of being selected as one of the sixteen scholars to work with Think Pacific, an NGO in Fiji, through the Laidlaw Scholars Foundation's Centrally Offered Projects for my Leadership in Action Project.

In the weeks preceding my July 8th flight, I began to grow increasingly contemplative regarding the trip. I'd remarked many times to my friend, Alex, that this trip would be 'transformative' and that I would most likely come back with at least a somewhat different outlook on life.

"You can't say that bro, you're gonna fumble the entire trip, stop setting expectations like that," he'd say to me. He was obviously right—having expectations often ruin experiences, but at the same time, I thought it was genuinely impossible for me to come in and out of Fiji the exact same person with the same set of morals, ideals, and whatnot. Six weeks in a foreign environment, regardless of any other circumstance, almost guarantees a change of some sort.

Unsurprisingly, I was right. And I made sure to stick it to Alex—he was chatting a little too much for my liking.

In a weird way, the journey itself to Fiji, which involved a quick stop in San Francisco, was indicative of what I'll call the 'eccentricity' of the trip. While I am at heart a biochemistry student, I am also a computer science student, and as such, San Fran is somewhat of a home to me. At the airport, the Toronto group and I were truly 'blessed' by the appearance of CafeX, an automated coffee shop that was more akin to a Rube Goldberg machine than it was a barista. I needed a fix of my classic drink, a cold brew, before our trans-Pacific flight. I was looking through the menu options, and saw a banana flavoured, NFT-backed option. I lost my mind. It simply couldn't have gotten more SF than ordering an NFT coffee. Regardless, I got it, for the

‘bants,’ I suppose. My dear friend, Ruhani, another Toronto scholar also decided to order a drink. Unfortunately, the machine’s bulky arm knocked her cup over as it was making the poor girl’s coffee. We had a whole fiasco where we were requesting a refund through CafeX’s online service platform. The fact that she got her refund within a minute suggests that our robotic dolt has made this mistake many a time. Regardless, this set the scene for the trip: oddity.



Figure 1: Our robotic friend truly robot-ing it up.

Our journey to Fiji concluded at around 5 am, Fiji time. This is a necessarily a funny statement since ‘Fiji Time’ will mean something very different as we dive deeper into my experiences while there. I downed a Red Bull and a coffee, unintelligently thinking that forcing myself awake for another 12 hours would be a good idea. Silly me. We soon travelled to Smuggler’s Cove, the first stop of our trip, where I met the rest of the Laidlaw Scholars team. I was so excited to meet these people—individuals my age who were all brave enough to leave the comfort of their homes and university dorms to embark on a six week stay in a relatively remote Fijian village. Looking back, I definitely came off a little strong! Caffeine coursing through my

veins, my energy level definitely didn't match the more relaxed vibe that my fellow Toronto travellers had and the general serenity that the rest of the group that arrived before us had adopted. But that doesn't matter—I was in Fiji! I excitedly took a BeReal, to show all my friends back in Canada, on the beachfront. I'd made it to the South Pacific.



Figure 2: My first Fijian BeReal. First of many...

From Sumgler's, we began our journey to the Uprising Resort, where we'd begin our briefing for the trip. I fondly remember the bus ride there. Mateo, a man that I was initially not too fond of extended an olive branch to me. He said "si je," to me, which is Albanian for 'how are you?' He captured my interest—it's admittedly a little surprising to hear a non-Albanian speaker say words in Albanian. On our way to Uprising, we stopped by a popular boardwalk where the team took this wonderful photo.



Figure 3: Lovely people in this beautiful photo!

At Smuggler's, our first real introduction to Fijian culture was our group meeting about the consumption of a ceremonial Fijian drink called Grog, made from infusing Kava root into water in a large bowl called a Tanoa.



Figure 4: Grog in a Tanoa, ready for serving.

I was initially a little apprehensive towards trying grog. The whole idea behind it is that it contains a few compounds called kavalactones (ah there comes to biochemistry) that act as a sedative. In essence, the western world, where alcohol is consumed socially and for special

occasions, the analog in Fiji is Kava. I was concerned about trying what essentially boils down into a drug. At the same time, I was also aware of the fact that refusing the drink could come across as disrespectful in the future when we'd be in the village. In my culture, when you visit someone's home, not accepting coffee is heresy—how would it look if I were to refuse grog? Additionally, what would the optics look like when me, as a white-presenting man, enters a Fijian village, where I'm equipped with all sorts of water purifying tablets and Brita filters and I refuse to drink a traditional drink that everyone drinks. That, along with the awareness that people have been drinking grog for decades convinced me that the least I could do was to try the drink, and I did. My throat went numb, and it felt like pins were pricking my tongue in a 360° fashion. I quickly ask the leaders if this was normal—to me it seemed like a possible allergic reaction. They reassured me that it was a normal reaction. This relatively small event, me deciding to drink grog, was instrumental in lubricating me to be ready for the future difficulties of adjusting to the Fijian culture.

We soon left Uprising for our *village*. I italicize that since we didn't end up in a village, rather the location for our stay was between two settlements: one called **Vunimaqo** and the other called **Waisava**. The Dreketi road ran through the pair of settlements, and the two of them were separated by a river. I've added a picture of the settlement from Google Maps. This image was borrowed from the aforementioned Ruhani Walia, so thanks to her, once again.



Figure 5: A satellite image of our two settlements. I was on the Vunimaqo side of the river. Previously, there were no pins on Google Maps denoting the two settlement, but a scholar added them during our time there!

Our project in Fiji was a five-fold one. The components included:

1. A community build, where we would be working with Fijian youths to construct a health clinic.
2. A culture course, where we would be learning about traditional Fijian culture and customs alongside youth members.
3. Working with Diabetes Fiji, another NGO, to host a community screening for diabetes, along with raising awareness for non-communicable diseases (NCDs).
4. Working with Youth Champs 4 Mental Health, yet another NGO, to host a mental health awareness program.
5. And finally, the Think Tank, a sustainability-focussed endeavour that aimed to address areas of need related to the previous four segments and how to improve them in the future.

This wasn't the initial plan, however. When I'd initially signed up and was accepted into project, the focus was initially supposed to be a health-related one, specifically looking at diabetes and mental health. The rest of the Laidlaw-sponsored projects were later combined into this one amalgam. As a result of this combination, we had our work cut out for us. As exciting as it was for us to be doing all sorts of work, the breakneck speed at which tasks had to be accomplished necessarily introduced complications to our project. Initially, I was a little worried about this, but I quickly came to the conclusion that this added layer of challenge added an additional capacity to hone my skills as a problem-solver.

But at the same time, the 'problem-solving' and leadership wasn't at all limited to the aforementioned project outline. A large portion of it also had to do with adapting to a new environment and the associated culture shock and resolving inter-group conflict.

As such, I'll go through each component of the project, and intertwine my own personal experiences to provide the full gamut of my growth as a leader while in Fiji. This reflection will be in two parts, the latter of which will be uploaded to the Laidlaw Scholars Network later.

The Community Build

We kicked our Fiji experience off with the community build. The project was to build a community health centre, where medical supplies and devices could be stocked, instead of having them only be kept in the community health worker's home. The primary draw of having this building in the community was that the Fijian government would provide the settlement with additional supplies that they wouldn't have access to otherwise. It seemed like a perfectly logical thing to build!

The actual construction of the centre itself went well, from a personal standpoint. My father is a civil engineer-turned-contractor, post-immigration, and as a result, I most definitely knew how to nail drywall onto support studs, and how to do some framing work. I told our build manager, a man called Jim, that I had some experience. He asked me, "what, you know drywall?" I responded with a quick, "yeah." He said that I'd be learning about a whole different style of architecture and construction, especially in the context of material availability and Fijian climate. And so, I would be trading in my plywood house construction for hardwood plank layering instead. I had all sorts of questions, like how water-proofing would be accomplished. The answers I got were ingenious. For example, water proofing would be accomplished through the use of a heavily rubberized paint, something of a cross between shiny paint and caulking. The sheer resourcefulness of the building crew also astounded me. We used support beams that would be added later in the project as scaffolding to reach the top of the building.

Truth be told, I hadn't really considered the innovation that went behind construction. I suppose seeing my father's long hours at whatever job site he'd be working at really turned me off entirely from even considering that possibility. Having to do the work here made me reconsider the work that he does, and on a more abstract level, how innovation permeates into every aspect of life, however mundane it may seem in the moment.

Outside of this, however, I was quickly faced by a moral dilemma halfway through the build. One of the carpenters that lived in the village invited us over to his home for dinner, and he let slip that the healthcare facility was, in reality, being built specifically for one of the settlements, but that the two settlements had decided to have it built on the other side of the settlement. It was at this moment where I began to question the work that I was doing.

The dilemma here is that the existence of the healthcare facility implies that there could be strong future conflict over the ownership of it, if the two settlements were to argue over it. The side it was being built for could claim that the settlement was being built for them, while the settlement that it was built on could claim that since it was on their land, and since they had served people from the other side, that it was theirs. I felt extremely uncomfortable at the possibility that the work I was doing would be fuelling future conflict.

At the same time, the existence of the medical care facility also implied that the village would get quick access to medical supplies it wouldn't have gotten otherwise. I thus had quantifiable pros and cons, and a conversation to have with my higher ups.

I spoke with my leaders regarding the issue we had at hand. They were equally confused—they had no idea that this was the particular situation we were dealing with. I requested that the leaders bring in their Fijian representatives to speak with the village themselves regarding the

building of the village. This was also another difficult conversation to have, since I was revealing potentially sensitive and compromising information to an outside party that could negatively impact the scholars and the villagers. I thought that my decision of speaking to the higher ups was the most ethical way to go about things, most upholding the truth, while also addressing the future issue of potential conflict between the settlements. This experience reinforced the importance of honesty, even in more difficult circumstances in my opinion.

The side effect of this was that we realized how much more preparation the Think Pacific team should have done regarding the building of this village. We as a group addressed our leaders with the opinion that there should have been more accountability taken to ensure that the ethics of work while there was sound. Me and the rest of the group of scholars were a little uncomfortable (to varying degrees) about confronting leadership regarding this issue, but bravery as a skill emerged—it's essential to be brave in the face of potential adversity. After our conversation with our leaders, we saw an uptick in the preparedness that the organization, and in turn our leaders conducted.

By the end of the build, we were utterly exhausted. It had been three weeks of building, but we managed to get it done! We had a beautiful opening ceremony to celebrate, shown below:



Figure 6: A group photo of all the scholars in front of the medical care facility we built!

The Culture Course

The culture course component of the trip had a uniquely odd impact on me—while it was enriching in Fijian culture, it somehow brought me closer to my Albanian culture at the same time. I fondly recall FaceTiming my mother one morning.

“I’ve never felt more Albanian in my life,” I remarked to her.

“Huh?” She replied. Her brows furrowed and thought lines deepened as she reacted to what I’d told her.

“I don’t know what it is—the distance, seeing photos you’re sending me from Albania, or whatever it is that’s making me feel this way, but it’s real!” I told her.

“Ok, Gerd,” she quipped back.

At the time, I was confused as to why I felt such a strong reconnection to my culture—I wasn’t speaking to anyone in the language, I wasn’t consuming any ‘cultural’ material, and I was halfway across the world from the country itself. Yet I never felt more Albanian in my life.

The point of the culture course was to teach the Fijian youth traditional Fijian customs that slowly began to get lost with time. These ranged from things such as basket weaving, to mat weaving, to grog bowl making. Throughout each of these activities, one of the elders in the village would lead a session for all the scholars, and have a group of other Fijians assist us along the way. Not only was there a vertical transfer of customs to us as the scholars, but there was also horizontal sharing, where the elder Fijians would also teach other Fijians



Figure 7: Me preparing a traditional lovo.

how to perform their customs.

The Diabetes and NCD Awareness Project

The incidence of diabetes in Fiji is extremely high, owing to a carbohydrate-heavy diet. During my stay, I learned to deeply love cassava, a root crop, somewhat similar to potatoes. Our family there absolutely loved cassava, having it with all sorts of condiments like mayo or ketchup. We were even told that Fijian boys would load up on cassava to try to bulk up while training for rugby.

At the same time, however, an unbalanced diet greatly increases the risk for developing type II diabetes. And unfortunately, due to poor health monitoring standards in the country, many cases reach the point where diabetes inhibits the body's ability to heal itself, leading to scenarios where a scrape on the foot could lead to getting that same foot amputated.

Diabetes Fiji, the NGO we worked with, was thus formed to tackle the issue that was plaguing Fijians. We were invited in to do sessions with people in our community to learn about the specific communicable and non-communicable diseases (CD and NCD, respectively) that were common in the region, through a local and culture-specific lens.

This specific second point is particularly pertinent to individuals working in my background. I'm extremely interested in the minutia of medical biochemistry—the reasons things are the way they are. However, this is contrasted to the practice of medicine and providing medical care. Patient-facing medicine isn't about explaining the exact biological processes, whether they be a protein mis-fold due to a mutation, or a thymine dimer forming due to UV radiation damage. It's more so about delivering concise and easily-understandable explanations

for why diseases and conditions arise, and what they could do to avoid developing these conditions.

This treads on the fine line of simplifying information, and having it teeter into misinformation. The primary spokesperson for Diabetes Fiji was presenting information that was factually incorrect, such saying that the reason why Fijians didn't get cancer as often as North Americans was because of the prevalence of GMO foods in America. Permeating falsehoods like these is specifically dangerous in this context. Teaching people these things, where the presenters are able to leverage their *ethos* to convince people of certain things leads to 'unlearnable' information that is blindly accepted as true.

Upon hearing this, I went up to the presenter and asked him about his sources for the information he'd presented, and he was blanking on a few things. I wanted to speak to him discretely such that my comments wouldn't come across as disrespectful, and I didn't want to 'call him out' in front of everyone else, where he could've felt shamed. I told that I respectfully disagreed with what he was saying, and that he should make it clear to the people in the session that he misspoke. He agreed and apologized.

I think that I demonstrated a strong balance between the ethical responsibility to be committed to the truth while also balancing the cultural sensitivity, both in regards to basic human respect, while also considering the permanence of such information disseminating.

We concluded this portion of the project with a large walk-in clinic where locals were able to come in and check themselves for things like height, weight, blood pressure, dental work, sexual health information sessions, and more. My role during the day was to have patients come to me with their statistics and to essentially use a flowchart of stats to make suggestions to

people. For example, if they showed that their blood pressure was registering 140/95, I'd talk to them about their dietary habits and how much physical activity they could get during the day. This was another balancing act, because there comes a point where one leads a certain cultural lifestyle that is necessary incongruent with 'healthy living'. Aware of this, I'd always probe and ask them about their thoughts on certain things. A conversation that came up often from the locals was, "am I eating too much sugar? I have 3-4 spoons of it in my morning tea." This could've been a sensitive conversation that could've offended people. So I'd always respond with something along the lines of sugar being an essential macro in a diet since it's such a good energy source, but that overconsumption would be bad. I'd then ask them where else they thought they'd be having sugar, and they'd list of meals. By doing this, they realized that they were in a position where they'd been eating too much sugar. It's a careful approach where you want to suggest a solution to a sensitive issue without overstepping. I think this experience strongly improved my communication skills, since it showed the impact of emotionally connecting with someone, even over something as 'quantifiable' as blood pressure.



Figure 8: The health information team assembled!

Conclusion to Pt I

My time in Vunimaqo and Waisava, especially the first of my time there, and what I primarily focussed on this reflection, taught me a great deal about the importance of having integrity as a leader, as well as how important it is to communicate effectively. I'm excited to utilize these sessions in my future endeavours!

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