

Reflections on Leadership Development as a Laidlaw Scholar

By Zachary Vincent

Introduction

It was the silent meals that always signalled a day of growth.

Dining together with the other Make_Sense scholars in Lima was usually a noisy affair, all of us eager to share our day's experiences. We talked about the projects we were working on, how continually surprising it was to us that the volunteering community in Peru was so close-knit, the triumphs of our efforts, and all that there was left to do over the course of our short, six-week project. But on the days when we had all travelled to help one of the groups on their projects, the days we had shared the same space on the taxi or the Metropolitan bus and the same important work, there was not much left to say when we reached mealtime. We sat in comfortable silence, grateful that we were able to be together, tired from the day's efforts. Any awkwardness that was present the first few weeks of the experience was gone. It was on those days that we all worked together and stepped into a new reality for just a little while, the days when we ate in contented silence, that I felt myself grow the most in self-reflection, in letting go of control, in empathy, and in hope.

Self-Reflection

Getting to know the other St Andrews Laidlaw scholars at Hospitalfield House on our first leadership weekend was accompanied by a hefty amount of self-reflection. The theme of the weekend was self-leadership, which meant that the first questions I asked some of my new friends were not the typical ones of "what do you study?", "where are you from?", or "what are your hobbies", but rather ones like "which of your core values is the most important to you?" and "what do you struggle with the most when faced with a challenge you can't solve alone?" It was very different from anything else I had experienced.

And yet, getting right into the most personal aspects of personality, values, and motivations as topics of conversation with new people can breed a potent kind of vulnerability. The fact of the matter was that we were all in the same boat and all eager to get to know one another (and maybe ourselves a little bit), so there was limited awkwardness. Instead, there was a great degree of reflection. I recall beginning with a list of several dozen values and progressively narrowing down the ones which felt the most important to me. When I landed on 'friendship' as one of my top five, I was a little surprised. I had not previously thought of friendship as something that could be core to the person one is – and yet, it was very revealing about the way I managed my time and divided up my energy.

While the focus of the weekend was on the 'self', it did not ignore the impacts of self-leadership on others. This was one of the messages that has stuck with me the most throughout the Laidlaw leadership training at every stage. By spending time thinking about past experiences with leadership and identifying patterns and trends, there is a possibility of deriving a sense of one's

own leadership style; the same leadership style that it is important to understand when working with other people. It is challenging to improve the key skills of listening, advocating, compromising, etc., without understanding what is the most in need of improvement.

As interesting and important as these lessons felt on that first leadership weekend, I would come to think of them even more as I was further down my leadership journey. Every time I needed to remind myself that deadlines serve an important purpose, or that one person cannot be responsible for an entire project themselves, I thought back to the reflective work I did on that first weekend.

Letting Go

Research is often seen as a solitary act, but it involves a great degree of coordination and, in many cases, asking for help. I believe that a number of other St Andrews Laidlaw scholars learned this alongside myself during the course of our six-week, summer-one research project. Whether it was discovering the best way to articulate needs to a supervisor or to manage time to avoid total isolation, the challenges we faced during the research process often hinged on our ability to lead by letting go: letting go of the need for control over every step of the process, letting go of the illusion of the researcher as a monolith, and letting go of unrealistic expectations for the end result.

I did not learn these lessons purely through reflecting on my leadership style. There was an element of trial-and-error involved too. I set out on my research with the intention of telling a sweeping story of heritage protection and value, forged in the fires of conflict across Latin America, spanning centuries. In the end, I was lucky to have felt reasonably confident in the specifics of cultural heritage law in three case-study nations over the course of a fifty-year period. Realising that my project was too ambitious was challenging for me, but it was necessary to accept for me to achieve any kind of quality in my work.

Letting go can also mean letting others in. I watched some of my friends struggle with feelings of isolation, whether that be long days in the lab without company or supervisors who were not always easy to reach for discussion of important research developments, it is hard to work on such a self-driven project. The moments of growth I saw most plainly came when people admitted that it was hard to work on something so new and asked for help, or at least were willing to share their troubles in return for listening to others. The sense of community that was built between the researchers during the first summer of the Laidlaw Research and Leadership programme was strengthened by the lesson we learned collectively: to let go and to be vulnerable. Only then could we lead.

It is challenging to lead without having a team.

Empathy and Hope

The term ‘developing/emerging country’ is at once specific and vague. While I am sure that Peru shares certain similar challenges with other nations across the world, its position is also

unique. It feels reductive to focus too much on economic conditions when it is the people of any place that truly define it. And yet, the economic conditions were something I took note of while I was in Lima for my six-week Leadership-in-Action programme.

Working with the social entrepreneurship organisation Make_Sense, I was able to travel to some of the poorer parts of South America's second-most populous city and see the lack of permanent infrastructure, the informal economy many rely on, and barriers standing between many Peruvians and long-term financial stability. There were certainly times when this discouraged me, like when talking to volunteers from the organisation Comunidad Peru, which strives to improve educational access for children and young people in the Shipibo-Conibo indigenous community of Cantagallo in the heart of Lima. I learned about the lack of access to education the volunteers initially sought to address, when they came upon a bigger problem which impacted education (among countless other parts of life): nutrition. Focusing on education was impossible without addressing the sometimes-unmet nutritional needs of the community's children, so the organisation had to switch focus. Hearing about the challenges that they faced at every step of their plan to serve the community was, admittedly, hard.

Yet, as discouraging as it was to learn about the roadblocks social organisations often face in Peru, lessons emerged. The first was the importance of empathy, which is essential for staying focused and working on the issues on which the most real progress can be made. The second lesson was the maintenance of hope, because it is the only reliable motivator and the best way to build successful teams.

Empathy is not the same as pity. Pity is not helpful and action should not be motivated purely out of sadness over the plight of others. Human beings are durable and universally capable of fighting for things that will make their lives better. Empathy, then, is grounded in listening to the calls for action *coming from* communities, not *imposed upon* them. Taking one's own perceptions of the issues is at hand out of the equation is the first step in being an empathetic leader. This can be challenging and requires minimising the sense of one's own importance, which can be uncomfortable. But, as I learned from Comunidad Peru, when a community tells an educational organisation that they need food, a pivot in direction is needed. Empathy is grounded in respect.

My understanding of hope was also changed by my time in Peru. The best hope is not baseless, but is reinforced everyday. My hope was maintained and strengthened by the people around me, by all the energy expended by people who wanted to see the world a better place. Whether it was the leaders of social entrepreneurs like Make_Sense and Saphi Quechua, an indigenous language educational organisation I worked closely with, or volunteers giving up just a few hours a week, there are selfless people in the world. Working with so many of these truly empathetic, hard-working people brought me hope. I felt hope that people continue to fight for equal access to opportunity even when it is hard, and I feel hope still when I consider that there are people across the world, not only in Peru, doing the same kind of work. Hope is essential to beginning and working on social projects, and it should be something valued by every leader.

Learning these lessons alongside my fellow Laidlaw scholars in Peru was a huge privilege. I feel that we all became more empathetic, respectful people because of our experiences. And I continue to draw hope from them in the same way I hope they might from me, a hope not constrained to Peru's future, but a hope which I take now into my approach to leadership more broadly.

Conclusion: Leadership and Life

Beyond the lessons I learned, my Laidlaw experience has also been an exceptional opportunity to meet like-minded people from different backgrounds and with different interests, united by a shared passion and commitment. I have made good friends, contacts to carry with me into a future career, and memories I will cherish for a long time to come. I developed hard skills I plan to use in the furthering of my education and career, most importantly independent research skills. The leadership training I received, both formally and experientially, will shape the way I approach managing both myself and others. I have been able to travel places I would not have otherwise gone and my world has been forever expanded in the process.

For all these things, and more, I am grateful for the opportunity to be a Laidlaw scholar and I hope to continue giving back to the programme by proudly reflecting on my experiences and hopefully serving as a mentor for other scholars to come. Because if my Laidlaw journey taught me anything, it is the importance of remembering that change does not occur as a series of disconnected acts. Rather, it takes a community of people with complimentary skills working in tandem to create an entire ecosystem of change. And when this community is driven by the principles of self-reflection, letting go of a need for control, empathy, and hope, then real success may be achieved.

I look forward to the opportunity to developing and putting into practice these valuable skills in leadership and in life.