

From Theory to Practice: My Journey of Leadership Development

In writing this essay, I found myself reflecting upon my application to the Laidlaw Program and the person I was when I applied two years ago. Since the application, my life has felt somewhat of whirlwind – completing my Laidlaw research project, studying abroad in Helsinki, and living in the Dominican Republic for six weeks. Considering I applied to the Laidlaw program with a mindset of ‘there is no way I am going to get this’; I would never have believed that I would be sitting here now with the opportunity to reflect on the experiences and development I have gained with them. In all honesty, when reading back through my application, my perception of leadership sounds vague, and I list the skills I considered vital for leadership, such as communication, empathy, and problem-solving. All of these are valid skills, but when I wrote the application, I am not sure I fully understood what being a leader meant, and, although I had somewhat of an idea, I never saw myself as someone with leadership qualities or had specific goals for how I wanted to progress as a leader. In hindsight, this was somewhat a blessing in disguise. I began the Laidlaw program fresh faced, no expectations of myself or the progress I ‘should’ make. Therefore, in this essay I will evaluate the lessons I learned about leadership during the Laidlaw program and how I implemented those lessons into my Leadership in Action project in the Dominican Republic and beyond.

The first leadership event provided a solid starting point for my leadership development. In completing the DiSC assessment, I gained a valuable insight into key aspects of my personality, highlighting both strengths and areas for development. I felt that my DiSC profile had captured key personality traits, confirming that I am a reliable and supportive team member, capable of maintaining a calm manner under pressure and that I value collaboration, support and empathy, qualities essential for effective leadership. However, the DiSC profile also underscored my tendency to prioritize the needs of others over my own, a trait that can hinder personal leadership growth. Future leadership sessions taught me the significance of self-awareness in leadership, and, alongside my DiSC profile, this led me to reflect on the areas I need to work on. Understanding my strengths and weaknesses allowed me to become more aware of my abilities, and how I could use them in a more impactful, effective way, while addressing and working on my limitations. Over the year, I gained the confidence to put myself forward for various leadership roles, notably organising and running charity events as the Trampoline and Gymnastics society fundraising officer. This provided the opportunity to put into practice what I had learned during the Leadership Development events. During this time, I realised that effective leadership is not about perfection but about continuous self-improvement, and I appreciated the value of seeking feedback from my peers. This constructive criticism challenged me to step outside my comfort zone and develop new skills, increasing my independence and self-awareness before my Leadership in Action project in the Dominican Republic.

These leadership development skills were put into practice during the design and implementation of a self-defined Leadership in Action project with Fundación Aldeas de Paz in the Dominican Republic. The process of planning and preparing for my project allowed me to reflect on the qualities I felt I valued for a leader and the leadership skills I wanted to improve on during my project. It helped me think through and plan everything independently and take on feedback from my peers to help my develop and refine my SMART goals and develop a clear plan of action. I began the project with a clear vision of how I wanted to help and the potential impact it could have on the school, but was also mindful not to overstep, and structured my SMART goals to account for any flexibility or adapting that may be required

during my time with the Foundation. My leadership development began as soon as I arrived in the Dominican Republic. I had not anticipated facing such a culture shock when I arrived, and although I felt grateful for my fellow volunteers, at the beginning I felt somewhat out of place with my weak Spanish skills and having to adapt to a new culture. I transitioned from Helsinki, a city with reliable infrastructure and transport with a population of very punctual, introverted people, to Samaná, a town in the Dominican Republic that is without running water or electricity for several days of the week and a population with a strong sense of community and very 'relaxed' time keeping. I quickly appreciated the importance of flexibility and that I was unable to control every aspect of my project, having to adjust my plan weekly to accommodate unforeseen circumstances, such as school closure due to tropical storms, or last-minute changes to plans. This meant that building independence, confidence, and intercultural communication skills were crucial to make the most of my time at the school and in the community. Adapting to the diverse needs of the children and overcoming the challenges of running workshops enhanced my problem-solving and adaptability. Interacting with locals and international colleagues broadened my perspective on leadership and cultural differences. Having worked in a similar charity that ran play schemes for disabled children in the UK, I was struck by the differences in how two charities with similar goals differed in their regulations and structure, highlighting the impact of cultural differences on organisational practices.

The team I worked with were from a variety of backgrounds and countries, and the experience of collaborating with individuals from different cultures and backgrounds significantly improved my teamwork and intercultural competence. Working with disabled children in a Dominican school presented unique leadership challenges, and in my first week, I prioritised getting to know new people and their personality traits, and establishing how we could work as a team. The Belbin team roles framework we learned in the Leadership Development events provided another lens through which to examine my contributions to group dynamics. While I knew I had a natural inclination towards a more supportive role within a team, I knew I had to balance this with more assertive behaviours and place myself in a leadership position. By understanding my team role preferences, I could better complement the strengths of others and contribute more effectively to the goals and priorities of the school. However, a difficulty I faced was that the cultural context did not inherently prioritise leadership, and, although teamwork is strongly valued, I found it hard to put myself into a leadership position. As a team, we worked each week on developing a plan for the workshops, and although I enjoyed working as a team, I found it difficult to put my ideas across if it was different to what was being discussed, and I had to push myself to suggest my ideas. However, the more I did it, the more I realised my value and contributions as a team member, and this became a stepping stone for building my confidence and working towards my goal of leading a workshop myself. In the fourth week, I proposed the idea of running my own workshop. I was surprised as to how nervous I felt beforehand but was reassured by the enthusiasm presented by the team at the idea, and others were also keen to do their own too. But this goal came with many levels of challenge. Not only did I have to face my fear of public speaking, but I had to do it in Spanish, as English was not understood by the children and teachers. Despite my nervousness, this barrier enabled me to appreciate the value of my team, both the volunteers who helped run through my plan with me, and the teachers who checked my Spanish notes beforehand. Then came the time to present the workshop. Fortunately, it went relatively smoothly, and the previous weeks of working together as a team to help the children stay focussed meant that I was able to deliver the presentation and run the activities smoothly. As someone who describes herself as 'fiercely independent', relying on others to check the quality of my work and to assist with my goals felt strangely difficult, and the idea of not doing it all myself felt like a setback.

However, using the self-reflection skills I had gained in the Leadership Development events, I reframed my thoughts in a positive light. My perception of leadership needed adjusting, and I grew to realise that the values that I had listed in my application in January 2022, ‘communication, empathy, and problem-solving’, I had believed were qualities of leaders themselves. However, upon reflection I can now appreciate that these qualities are difficult to achieve without the support of a team, and that there is no shame in relying on others to help achieve my goals, as the workshop would not run as smoothly without them.

Overall, my time in the Dominican Republic was instrumental for my leadership development. Having taken on board what I had learned in the Leadership development events, I felt confident I could put into practice what I had learned. The challenges of navigating a new culture, working with a team of people from a variety of cultures and backgrounds, and adapting to new and unexpected circumstances forced me to step outside of my comfort zone. This experience highlighted the complex nature of leadership, showing the importance of teamwork, confidence, flexibility, and effective communication when tackling dynamic challenges. The skills and confidence gained in the Dominican Republic have already positively impacted my work. Returning to my job when I got back to the UK, I noticed just how much I had gained from putting what I had learned about leadership skills at leadership events into practice, and found I was more confident in placing myself in a leadership position at work, and decision-making, adapting to change, and fostering teamwork and communication came more naturally to me. The challenges I faced in the Dominican Republic pushed me to develop the leadership qualities identified as areas for improvement in my DiSC profile, such as confidence and flexibility. The skills I developed in the Dominican Republic have equipped me with a solid foundation for future leadership roles, ones that I will value as I move into my final year of university and in my future career. I hope to give back to the Laidlaw program by fostering a supportive community for future scholars. Confidence has been a cornerstone of my leadership journey and is a quality that has ebbed and flowed throughout my time as a Laidlaw scholar. Whilst confidence is still a leadership quality I need to work on, I hope to grow it by sharing my experiences with future cohorts to inspire and empower them in their own Laidlaw leadership journeys. By giving presentations to incoming students, I hope to offer the same encouragement and guidance that I received from Laidlaw alumni. In doing so, I can contribute to the program's continued success and create a lasting impact on the next generation of leaders.

Of course, none of this would have been possible without the support and funding from Lord Laidlaw and the Laidlaw Foundation. This generosity has provided me with skills that are invaluable to my future and experiences that I will cherish and share for years to come, and for that I would like to express my sincere thanks to everyone that made my Leadership in Action project possible.