

What constitutes to ‘good’ leadership? a Leadership in Action Essay

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Leadership had always been a vague concept to me – something I thought I couldn't achieve. Growing up, there was only one image that came to mind when the word 'leader' was thrown around. This was an authoritative, loud, and almost dictatorial figure who was extremely confident and charismatic. I always believed I would never be able to become a good leader given my quiet and introverted personality. When I applied for the Laidlaw Scholarship, I had expected to learn more about how to become this archetype of a leader I had so desperately wanted to be. However, the scholarship experience turned out to be quite different, broadening my perspective on leadership as well as myself.

I still remember my first leadership weekend at Hospitalfield and being excited to learn more about my DiSC personality profile. Whilst I know personality profile tests are not wholly accurate, I find value in them as a reflective tool. My DiSC results showed that I was a mix between C (conscientious) and S (steadiness), which meant I was more analytical, patient, and reserved. Although this was accurate to my personality, I couldn't help but feel like my peers who got D (dominant) and i (influence) traits for their results were automatically destined to be better leaders than me. Through exposure to various types of media and observations of general group dynamics growing up, I came to believe that an effective leader was characterized as a figure who was loud and assertive. This preconceived image of the 'perfect leader' was something that had stuck to me ever since, so it was the type of person I had always strived to become.

I started to question my definition of a leader when working on my Laidlaw research project in 2023. My research revolved around testing whether attentional focus impacted performance anxiety within pianists. Although I was working on my project independently for the most part, I was dictating myself work each day, organizing participant rotas, scheduling frequent meetings with my supervisor, and managing a work-life balance on top of that. Conducting my own research project was completely different than a typical university assignment, as I had to juggle so many elements and plan all the stages of work. I wasn't leading a team, but more so leading myself. This experience of self-leadership truly pushed me to become critical in my decisions and creative when solving problems on a whim. I started to think: 'If I could lead myself to complete this project successfully, then surely I'd be able to transfer these skills to lead a team'. This realization sparked a new sense of motivation within me and marked what I believe to be the true starting point of my leadership journey.

A particular leadership weekend in my second year of the scholarship helped me slowly consolidate the idea that leadership came in many forms, and that there is no right and wrong way of leadership. Although I had heard the notion many times, it was only at that event that I questioned what leadership meant to me. When discussing 'Belbin's Team Roles' with my fellow Laidlaw scholars, it made me acknowledge that I was close-minded when it came to understanding what effective leadership truly entailed. Visually seeing all those different types of leadership styles presented helped me understand that there is not one type of leader superior to the others. Different types of leaders that co-exist in the world, and each leader has different strengths and weaknesses. Rather than having an archetype of a leader as my goal, I realized I should try developing upon my unique strengths instead, as I can bring a distinct perspective to what it means to be a leader. Reflecting deeply on this session, I realized that it was redundant for me to change myself entirely to fit one leadership style. I came to understand that I would never become the idealized leader I had imagined. All this time, I had been investing my energy and time on trying to fit this mould of a leader I had created in my head. This only lowered my confidence in my leadership abilities and contributed to various limiting beliefs. With this new understanding, I decided to approach my Leadership in Action (LiA) project with a more nuanced perspective on the idea of leadership.

This past summer (May-July 2024), I was fortunate enough to intern at PSCORE (People for Successful COrean Reunification), an NGO working tirelessly to advocate for North Korean human rights. During my internship, I was able to refine my leadership style by leading both various teams and myself according to specific tasks at hand. One week, I worked with a colleague to teach English to a small class of North Korean defector children; another week, I was responsible for designing and organising a large-scale photo exhibition in partnership with the Seoul Metropolitan Government to celebrate the establishment of an official 'North Korean Defector Day' in South Korea. These unique experiences

gave me the opportunity to network with interns and individuals of external bodies such as universities and human rights NGOs. I was also able to work on effectively communicating within various teams within the organization, such as the social media team and the grant writing team. Lastly, I believe I became more confident in my critical thinking and decision-making skills. One occasion that particularly stood out to me was an incident during my role as Education Coordinator at the organization. My primary task was to coordinate English language classes between volunteer teachers and North Korean defector teachers who were responsible for the defector children at their schools. On one occasion, a misunderstanding regarding the timing of a class arose, leaving me flustered as I had to quickly translate and act as a mediator between different parties. However, I managed to think on my feet, successfully coordinating a new class time and ensuring both the volunteer and defector teacher were on the same page. Whilst this might seem like a mundane task to some, it required me to rapidly utilize my problem-solving, communication, and limited language skills. Before my Laidlaw journey, I know I would have struggled with navigating this situation and likely passed the task to a colleague due to my doubts about my own abilities. Looking back, if I had gone through my LiA project at an earlier stage of my leadership journey, I wouldn't have thrived in Korea as much as I did. That leadership weekend exploring the different styles of leadership really allowed me to become more open-minded about my abilities as a leader and was extremely crucial to my growth.

During my time as a Laidlaw Scholar, I came to understand that there isn't a singular, rigid definition of what a good leader looks like; instead, leadership is shaped by one's unique personality, with its own strengths and weaknesses, translating into different leadership styles. I discovered that effective leadership goes beyond being loud and authoritative; it is about listening to peers, being a team player, and engaging in consistent reflection on oneself and one's team. Though most importantly, I believe being a good leader means *defining* leadership for oneself by recognizing that different elements of leadership work for different people and tasks. It is how we apply these different styles of leadership to various situations and finding that balance to adapt to specific circumstances which differentiates a good leader from the rest. The skills I have honed through the Laidlaw program have fundamentally shaped how I approach tasks and situations, both within academia and in my personal endeavours. My leadership journey has shown me that being a good leader is intertwined with many core values linked to self-development, such as empathy, organization, and discipline. Growing as a leader also means focusing on personal development, underscoring that leadership is as much about personal growth as it is about guiding others.

Touching upon personal development, I came to realize that a big part of my closed mindset on leadership had to do with imposter syndrome and my limiting beliefs, which affected how I viewed myself as a person. This preconceived notion of ideal leadership was so far from who I actually was, which always left me feeling inadequate. This sense of inadequacy not only hindered my ability to pursue leadership opportunities, but also undermined my confidence whenever I tried to lead. When I would watch TED talks or read books on self-development and leadership, the importance of mindset was always reiterated. So, I was aware that my fixed mindset was a barrier to realizing my potential. Though, my experiences throughout the Laidlaw scholarship put me in situations where I really had to confront my self-perceptions, and therefore my understanding of leadership as well. Through this programme, I engaged in experiences that allowed me to face my insecurities, and although it was difficult, it truly transformed my outlook on leadership and introduced a more positive and resilient mindset. I am so grateful to have had opportunities which allowed me to practice leadership in various situations, helping me build my confidence as a leader. The scholarship helped me see that my vulnerability wasn't a weakness I should be ashamed of, but a tool I could use to connect with others. Embarking on a journey of self-compassion was surprising, but it was an invaluable outcome of the programme.

The Laidlaw Scholarship really allowed me to push myself, and I only hope to inspire my peers and Laidlaw scholars to do the same. Looking to the future, I would love to be involved with the programme which helped me develop so much as a leader and as a person. Whether it be through future networking events or keeping in touch with the scholars I have made friends with as part of the programme, I hope to stay involved with the programme as an active alumni. The support and guidance I received from the

people I met through my Laidlaw journey were irreplaceable, and I wish to inspire incoming scholars similarly if possible.

Whilst writing this essay, I often found myself reflecting on the person I was two years ago, before joining the Laidlaw Scholarship. Back then, I would've never expected myself to grow so much as a person within the span of two years. The personal and professional development I experienced during these two years have been remarkable. I greatly owe this to the Laidlaw programme for providing me with a safe environment for me to explore leadership and make mistakes. I know I will look back fondly on the memories and friendships I created whilst being a Laidlaw scholar. The experiences I've had, the lessons I've learned, and the growth I've achieved has been pivotal to my leadership journey I will continue to embark on. I will be forever grateful for the chance to be part of such a transformative experience which has played such a crucial role in shaping the person I am today and aspire to be in the future.

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