

The Power of Initiatives and Social Skills: The Key to Effective Leadership and Collaboration



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When it comes to leadership, I used to have a preconceived notion of a strong, powerful, and capable leader who makes decisions and unites the group. Whilst the idea is not necessarily wrong, I discovered a new notion of 'leadership' through participating in the Laidlaw Research and Leadership Programme. To some extent, leaders indeed need to demonstrate the capacity to control, guide and unite the group toward a certain direction. Observing the majority of leaders, they sometimes need to exercise their power to make a decision which is not necessarily supported by the rest of the group. The power also comes with responsibility. If your decision invites a negative result, whether the decision was made collectively or not, the leader will be questioned for their capacity and integrity. The large responsibility led me to conceive the aforementioned inaccurate idea of leadership: leaders must be strong, powerful and in some way arrogant. However, from the initial stage to the end stage of the Laidlaw Programme, the training and experience I gained entirely changed this notion. I realised that leadership was, in fact, more social than expected. Instead of arrogant and somehow dictator-like characteristics, effective leaders possess a deep understanding of individual members of the team and demonstrate a deep appreciation for the individual's unique talents. Learning the qualities of good leaders not only influenced the way I work but also changed the way I interact with others in my everyday life. I will walk you through the leadership journey I experienced since the very first event of the programme. Hospitalfield Leadership Weekend.

None of us even knew where we were going. We were simply told: 'We will take a bus and spend the weekend somewhere, but stay warm'. As mysterious as it sounded, I was highly sceptical about the approach. After all, I hated uncertainty! During the one-hour journey up the coast, I imagined what it would be like to spend a weekend with people I recently met in a mysterious place. It was exciting but scary at the same time. Living, working and becoming friends with the cohort I just met was stimulating yet a little exhausting. Little did I know it was just the beginning of meeting new people and instantly sharing the most enjoyable and difficult moments together during the second summer in India. Despite the initial hesitation, I was impressed by the

friendliness of the team and enjoyed their company. In hindsight, the weekend was literally the beginning of everything and a little bit of what I experienced in the second summer in the unknown, unfamiliar territory in the south of India.

Before I begin talking about my second summer, I must touch upon my first research summer through which I learnt the importance of taking initiatives. Conducting literature research, my research was primarily based on individual work. Some days, I did not see anyone or talk to anyone until I saw other Scholars for socials at night. It was slightly isolating, I must admit. I even published a Laidlaw blog article titled 'reading full-time', since it was what I was doing for the majority of my working days. Yet the research faced occasional difficulties, and on such occasions, peer support and 'reaching out' was the essential part of my problem-solving. Despite undertaking a completely different project, or perhaps since they were undertaking a completely different project, other Scholars often had completely new perspectives on matters I was struggling with, and gave me effective advice and recommended novel solutions. Conducting entirely humanities research amongst mostly stem students was also interesting, since I gained new perspectives that I did not have before. Furthermore, when I faced a major research issue – I realised that the topic I wanted to investigate was not answerable –, I reached out to a professor whose scholarly article I read during my research. I contacted her out of nowhere explaining about the Laidlaw Scholarship and my issues, I waited for about a week and I finally got an interview appointment. It turned out that it was the most productive interview throughout my research, and I successfully overcame the research obstacle that I had been struggling with for weeks. In the first summer, contacting the relevant people, whether it was my friends or professors I did not know, was extremely helpful, and it led to the success of overall research. Without taking active initiative, my research would not have been possible. The ability to reach out to people professionally became an important part of my professional networking even after the programme.

Throughout my second summer, I learnt the essence of leadership in a way that I was not expecting. In a remote southern Indian city, I faced the most significant cultural and physical challenges that I had ever experienced. From the beginning, the living environment and accommodations were extremely different from what had been explained prior to the programme, which created a significant challenge physically and emotionally. During the first two weeks, I

was in constant pain and could not fully participate in the programme, which made me consider going home and doing the programme online. After the rough first few weeks, however, I started to adjust and became able to observe the organisations we worked with. Most organisations were dominantly female-run social enterprises with the cause of improving and reclaiming the social dignity of women coming from a disadvantaged background. Although managing those organisations under the rigid social structure and with the significant lack of resources seemed difficult, I identified a common feature of successful organisations: the presence of an effective leader(s). In each organisation, the presence of effective leaders who often possessed a strong intellectual capacity and a thorough understanding of Indian and foreign societies seemed crucial. Even from an outsider's perspective, it was easy to tell that the leaders had solid trust from the other members of the organisation. Furthermore, unique to female-run organisations, most leaders had a deep understanding of the social disadvantage of being a woman, yet also had a good appreciation for the potential of women and their roles in society. One day I was sick and sitting in the corner of the room, feeling miserable. One female leader approached me and offered me tea, sat next to me and started talking about her experience of going abroad and similarly feeling upset. Listening to her story, I felt heard, as she demonstrated a sense of understanding by talking about her experience. I learnt that that was how effective leaders gain trust. Rather than blaming someone or acting defensively in a difficult situation, you show sympathy and understanding to those who need help. The best way to gain trust from someone is to help the person when they are in need. The simple act of sitting next to me and offering tea was enough to make me feel supported and it motivated me to re-join the rest of the group. Reflecting back, I am certain that it was a key learning moment throughout the six-week programme.

The unique structure of the leadership programme – despite participating in the same group project, all six of us were expected to act as leaders, rather than selecting one person to represent the whole group – contributed to the discovery of a new definition of leadership. After a few weeks, the group knew each other well and individuals had unique parts to play within the group. Understanding each other's strengths and weaknesses, we learnt how to divide tasks and how to manage the heavy workload. Despite not having met each other for the most part, we managed to live together, work together and become friends with each other. Although the process did not come without occasional challenges, it was impressive that we all learnt to do so in a period of a

few weeks. For a long time, however, I was unsure about the structure of the leadership programme: if all of us were expected to be leaders, who makes the final decision, unites the group, and acts as the 'true leader'? The concept of having multiple leaders in the same group was difficult to grasp at the beginning. However, eventually, this new style of leadership allowed me to discover a new definition of leadership. In the past, I thought leaders were those who control the situation, whether or not they were supported by the rest of the team. My ideas of leaders were powerful CEOs or politicians in a higher position. Nonetheless, through participating in the programme, I learnt that leadership was more about the act rather than the status. Regardless of how many other leaders there are, you can still be a leader as long as you take the initiative in your or your group's actions and take responsibility for the consequences. In the process, especially in a group situation, the trust of your team is crucial, as it will effectively encourage other members to work toward the same goal. Whilst acting as a leader, it is necessary to build mutual trust amongst your group so that you can retain support from your team as a leader. Through acting as a leader with five other Scholars in the programme, I learnt the dynamic, rather than the static, nature of leadership. Leadership is a process, and it is a result of constant effort and trial and error.

Having learnt the social aspect of effective leadership, my idea of leadership has changed completely. To realise a desired outcome, may it be an individual project like my first summer research or a group project like my second summer consulting programme, it is essential to first take an individual initiative to put yourself out there and solve a problem yourself. Secondly, it is equally important to rely on others, reach out to people and ask for their help when necessary. If they can provide answers to the questions that you cannot complement yourself, it is okay to ask for help and oftentimes they are happy to help you. Through the process, whether you are providing or receiving the help, it is important to establish mutual trust. You can do so by offering help when others are in need, giving advice or skills that only you have, or simply by giving a nice word of encouragement when they are losing confidence. By becoming someone who needed help during the second summer, I saw the characteristics of effective leaders first-hand. The good leaders were not only kind to me but also demonstrated the sign of understanding and sympathy whilst giving me constructive advice. Moreover, leadership is never static; it is a constant effort to take initiative and build mutual trust amongst your team. Having learnt this important lesson through the Laidlaw programme, I aim to build trust with others both personally and professionally, whilst offering

support to others and actively reaching out to people as necessary. I believe 'giving back' to future scholars will be one of the effective ways to do so, and therefore, I would like to continue being involved in the Laidlaw community, especially through the mentorship programme. Finally, I would like to demonstrate a deep appreciation for the Laidlaw Foundation for giving me this valuable learning opportunity and kind support throughout the first and second summers. Last but foremost, I would like to emphasise my appreciation for Load Laidlaw for his generous donation and the establishment of this scholarship.