

Laidlaw Year 2 Submission 2: Reflections on Ethical Leadership and Global Citizenry.

Political leadership has become synonymous with poor intention, lack of spine, and incompetency. Rather than being respected or supported, political leaders are more and more selected based on being “the lesser of two evils”. This response to political leadership in the 21st century is unsurprising. In countries like the UK, back-to-back prime ministers have displayed staggering levels of incompetency, negligence, and moral compass. They consistently embody the opposite of ethical leadership and global citizenry.

It is with this in mind that I entered my Laidlaw scholarship. Other than a couple of historical role models like Nelson Mandela, I really had no current leaders to look up to or learn from. Whilst you can learn a lot from bad leaders, I was hoping I could finally learn from some good ones!

I would like to share four lessons about ethical leadership and global citizenry I have learnt from the experiences and leaders I have encountered during my time as a Laidlaw Scholar. When thinking about the lessons I have learnt, I really wanted to focus on some of the less obvious traits, qualities, and behaviors that great ethical leaders embody.

Attention to Detail – Ethical Leadership

Too often no-nonsense, bluntness, and strict hierarchy are viewed as the fulcrum of effective leadership. I have come around to attention to detail as something which was sorely missing from my understanding of leadership. During year 1 of the scholarship, I had the pleasure of working with Dr. Lewis Mates, who has by now become a good friend and mentor to me. Lewis was one of the first people who exposed me to inspirational leadership. I greatly appreciated the level of trust, confidence and freedom he gave me when completing my research on democracy and homelessness. His guidance worked so well because of his attention to detail. Not only did Lewis keep in touch, but he made sure to pay attention and respond to the small stuff – how I was doing, what I had been up to, what my interests were etc. This not only helped develop trust and other important aspects of the mentor mentee relationship, but also made sure that communication was kept open. As a leader, you can always keep an open-door policy, but if no one feels able to approach you, then you may as well not bother.

Attention to detail meant that I always felt able to ask for help by putting effort in to staying in touch, therefore preventing a wide array of issues from arising before they could damage the research project. This soft style of man-to-man leadership was not only inspirational, but it also helped me respect his perspectives, viewpoints and advice more, leading me to seek his opinions on critical matters. I endeavor to pay attention to my teams’ details whenever I find myself in a leadership position.

Meet everyone – Global Citizenry.

Although I have only met them twice, and briefly at that, the stories I have been told about Peter Fredriksson and Juha Kaakinen have taught me a great deal. These men have been larger than life figures who have embodied “meet everyone” to a tee. Of course, meeting everyone is not a physical command – that would be impossible. However, what Juha and Peter both did was make a concerted effort to meet people, no matter their background or supposed importance. When they did meet people, you could see that they did not suck up or talk down to those who were more or less ‘important’. I have rubbed shoulders with people from every walk of life

through my experiences in the homelessness field. When working in a field like homelessness, all the best leaders have 'met everyone' – a quality which I continually aim to work on and improve. I believe this is an important part of what it means to be a global citizen.

Long-term thinking

Through my LiA in Helsinki, I found great reward in reflecting on the leadership found in the annals of history.

Finland gained independence in 1917 after being tossed between Swedish and Russian empires since the 13th century. Civil war broke out in 1918, and despite agrarian and other economic reforms, WW2 brought further conflict. The Winter War and Continuation War against the Soviet Union, and Lapland War against Nazi Germany ended with Finland retaining independence, albeit at significant losses to territory, 90,000 deaths, 400,000 displaced Finns – 12% of its population, and extensive reparations for Finland's earlier cooperation with Nazi Germany.

The post war era saw continual struggles, as the previously agrarian population rapidly shifted to an urban industrial life. Returning soldiers and refugees flooded cities, leading to cramped conditions and homelessness. Once again, the Finnish government and people found the will to act. The goal was to end the housing and homelessness crisis. Over the next 40 years, they have very nearly succeeded. This was done by maintaining a long-term vision, not trying to achieve short term success for political saleability.

I would urge all prospective leaders to think more about the long-term impacts of their actions on others, not how the short-term outcomes affect their status of leadership. Selfishness is the enemy of an ethical leader.

A concluding analogy on ethical leadership.

Whilst at Y-Säätiö, Juha Kahila gave me an analogy. He explained that Finland had found out how to significantly reduce homelessness. The north star had been located. What needed to be done now was follow the compass in the right direction, facing problems as they come. One issue I found with this analogy is how to navigate those problems when they do (and they will) come. In light of this, I would like to modify Juha's analogy somewhat.

The process of leadership, whether it is over a new homelessness policy, government department, or classroom should be seen as analogous to constructing a train route.

As with Juha's analogy, you locate your north star. In homelessness policy this may be a goal, such as ending homelessness by 2030, or a policy – say implementing Housing First model service provision by 2025. Then you have critical decisions to make. How do you get to your goal. At first, the way may be clear – you face flat and sturdy ground which supports tracks easily. However, soon you will face a mountain range. The choice is then to go through the mountain or around it. Many countries have attempted to emulate the Finnish approach to homelessness by going around the mountain. They don't change the landscape of their society, instead trying to add to it – perhaps by changing the way that social work is accessed and practiced. This is all well and good, but an ethical leader must always ask the question: Am I making this decision because it's the most effective route to achieve our goal, or because it's the easiest route to take. I am convinced that many who attempt to emulate the Finnish model of Homelessness provision will fail for this reason – they always go around the mountain, not through it. Sometimes a leader needs to change the system they're working in, and this takes guts.

Rome was not built in a day, and Finland didn't solve their homelessness crisis in less than 40 years – but they succeeded in the end. This is because they focused on long-term thinking, and making the harder, better choices. An ethical leader, more than anything, should emulate this quality – to make the decisions which are often harder, but better in the end – to go through the mountain.

I now continue my work in the field of homelessness and housing policy with these lessons in mind.