

Laidlaw Scholars Leadership & Research Programme

Leadership-in-Action Reflection

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Prior to Urban Minds and the Laidlaw programme, I started off with some leadership experience, but not at all comprehensive of the abilities expected of a leader. While I had been involved in many initiatives in high school and university in a position of leadership, I sensed that I was immature as a leader to the needs of my activities, the capabilities of my team members, as well as the amount of effort I could dedicate to my leadership against other variables. Not only that, but I played a game of being a big fish in a small pool. I devoted myself to pursuits within my immediate community (the faculty/high school) and working in an external organisation seemed like an investment for a distant cause. Working with Urban Minds through the Laidlaw Programme was thus a fantastic opportunity to take my leadership to the next level and to impact more people than I had done before.

Working with Urban Minds came with its own unique set of challenges. There were the concerns involved with collaborating within an organisation that was virtually run entirely online, as noted in the Leadership-In-Action report. There were also the challenges of integrating myself within the team for the short period of 6 weeks. The structure of the team and my placement period, combined together, created a large amount of pressure to adapt quickly in a new and fast paced environment. One particular leadership challenge I faced came from the information structure. I found that there was an information structure rigidly controlled our supervisors, thus literally embodying the architecture of an information silo. As nobody was talking to one another, I hypothesised that it was due to the social culture of the organisation that people were generally unwilling to speak out and take action. For instance, not many people were friendly in meetings and only spoke when their role was addressed. Therefore, I tried to use my reputation as a new inductee to Urban Minds to break the ice by cracking jokes and proposing new ideas, such as making icebreakers more interesting by combining trivia with bingo to add a competitive element to it. Even though we were working online, Urban Minds also devoted time to in-person meetings once per month, which I joined in order to familiarise myself better with the people I was working with, as well as joining social events such as mug painting within the team. By doing so, I was able to establish a rapport with several team members. This meant that by the time the 1UP Leaders Lab rolled around, I was able to get over my fear of working with strangers, even managing to leverage my expertise from event management to set up the conference scene. Therefore, using leadership training and building up a friendly rapport allowed me to organise my colleagues effectively.

In addition, by taking the initiative I found the ability to grow my own practical skills. By trade, I'm a photographer first, with considerably deep experience. By contrast, I barely have experience with video. Even so, I was asked to record video testimonials for future promotional content. As I knew my limits, I learnt that humility is a trait that defines the difference between overconfident management and leadership. I deferred experience to a student volunteer who was much younger than me, but had a lot of video experience as well. His guidance helped us through tricky issues such as uneven lighting, scene and making sure that all our hardware were running on consistent settings for easy video editing later. My main task was more related to gathering enough people for video testimonials. It's not easy talking to the participants, especially when they're much younger, perhaps awkward and shy, let alone asking them to take part in testimonials. However, I benefitted once again from establishing a friendly presence beforehand. Some strategies I tried were also related. This ranged from asking students if they needed anything or had any questions, to striking up casual conversation. Establishing familiarity eliminated some tension around answering questions for strangers. However, it also helped me to identify personalities that might be more conducive towards interviews, especially extroverted participants. These actions showed me that leadership can be forged from the bottom-up - and not asserted by top-down managerial directives.

My time at Urban Minds reminded me, ultimately, of the importance of proactive and clear communication. What is leadership if nobody exists to be led? Leadership is inherently and simultaneously social structure and social experience. My role in the organisation was a secondary role, but through proactive communication I have come to feel that my expectations for my goals were exceeded, and helped to enhance my offerings to the table. Communication is key - and helps pave the way for new ideas, deeper engagement and stronger connections that facilitate initiatives to go above and beyond.

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