

Summer 1 Personal Reflective Essay

By Olamide Obadina

Introduction

It's quite hard to believe that my (much longer than) six weeks of research is nearly finished, after dedicating so much time learning about the dearth of women from ethnic minority groups in the C-suite. In this reflection, I will dive deep into how I have grown and what I have learned from my research: from challenges to the interview process, to my significant achievements, to how this experience has shaped my view on leadership and myself as person.

G100 Global Summit Meeting in Paris

Before my official six weeks of research began, I was presented with the unique opportunity to attend the G100: Mission Million Global Meeting, held over a few days in Paris. The Club G100 is an organisation of 100 global female leaders, comprising 100 global sectors, led by 100 country chairs, advocating for women's equality, empowerment, and leadership. These women are luminaries including Nobel Laureates, heads of states, CEOs, philanthropists, entrepreneurs, and community leaders. (G100, 2021).

Before the trip, my mentor put me in touch with Dr. Harbeen Arora Rai, the CEO and president of the G100 with regards to my visit. I can fondly recall how that initial conversation with such an inspirational female leader, fuelled my spark & vigour for conducting this research even more, as I counted down the days until my departure. With the most prominent demographic of the G100 being women of colour and women from underrepresented backgrounds, I knew that it would be a perfect opportunity for me to engage in powerful conversations that could enrich my research. I hoped to conduct a few interviews, but I was unsure about how feasible this would be. Reflecting back, I learned so much about important issues, such as building a successful company as a woman, sustainability, gender pay gaps, and the influence of our childhoods on our professional lives, to name a few. As the women spoke, their stories were not just filled with success, determination, and passion; but rather, they were also filled with

unanticipated setbacks, self-doubt, and failure. This put things into perspective, and I realized that regardless of the social status one may hold, we are all simply human beings who experience the same personal & professional struggles. Whether it is imposter syndrome or simply a lack of self-confidence, we share these experiences. In fact, it is often those who have made it to the top, that have experienced these negative feelings the most. Since being accepted into the Laidlaw programme, I have experienced imposter syndrome, and found myself questioning whether I truly deserve this opportunity, so hearing their words gave me a deep sense of reassurance. After successfully conducting a few interviews in Paris, I felt so inspired by their fresh ideas and new perspectives and decided to start my research a little earlier than planned!

Overall, this trip to Paris gave me so much insight into the aptitude and competency of women from ethnic minorities in the corporate sector. I felt so proud to be undertaking research within DEI, but it made me even prouder of myself, for acknowledging the fact that there is real power in the coats of colour held by women from ethnic minorities. So, despite believing the opposite growing up, there is real power in my coat of colour.

Prominent Lessons Learned

Being frank, the six weeks has been a whirlwind of ups and downs. I've learned that there is no right or wrong way to conduct independent research. Since learning this, I've become better at trusting my own instincts. However, I've also learned that sometimes, your intuition is not always correct, as we are full of implicit biases that often distorts our judgement. I understand that research requires a lot of self-reflection, motivation, and resilience to keep going when you feel like giving up. I have become better at time management, and adaptability, and of course, I have drastically strengthened my hard research skills such as designing methodologies, collecting, organising, and analysing data, and interpreting findings.

Additionally, one of the biggest learned is that conducting research is similar to solving that 100-piece puzzle that you randomly got for Christmas one year. You spend weeks, and eventually months, trying to figure out where each piece fits, in hopes of bringing a picture to life. However, the difference, is that independent research is much more difficult as you are essentially given an empty box, with no pieces. It is your job to find those missing components,

before embarking on the taxing quest of piecing everything together. But here comes another twist- you aren't told whether your puzzle should have 100, 200, or 1,000 pieces, leaving it up to you and your intuition to figure this out too. Every piece of information that I gathered, whether it was from academic papers or interviews, was an important component of my puzzle. Once I had reached the point of collecting enough accurate data, I was faced with the task of fitting them together like a puzzle. Some pieces fit perfectly, whilst others appeared to be for a different puzzle altogether. From week one, I believed that analysing data was the most important aspect of research. However, by week two, I quickly realised that it is, in fact, identifying useful patterns from various data sources and finding ways to connect this data, that is even more vital to paint a holistic picture. Therefore, I took great care when creating my puzzle to capture the most accurate picture of many organizations' lack of an intersectional approach to diversity management, which trust me... is no easy task.

Significant Achievements (PDP)

I am surprised to say that I have achieved two goals that I had set in my personal development plan, many weeks ago. One of my biggest goals was to learn to become "adaptable to unprecedented changes in my plans" and more "flexible" to change when working in new environments. Having grown up with a lot of structure, I have always felt extremely uncomfortable when dealing with unfamiliar situations which often hand over control to some external factor. However, this research project showed me that change truly is inevitable, so having the ability to embrace change is vital. I quickly found that research doesn't always go to plan: either I had underestimated the amount of time it would take me to complete a certain task, had an interview cancel last minute or I failed to account for how easy it is to convince me to take an extra-long coffee break. Therefore, I was constantly adjusting and re-adjust my plans. At first, I felt upset for not following my plans, but then I learned to embrace these changes, instead of trying to avoid them around them.

I also set the goal of becoming more of a creative thinker by pushing myself out of my comfort zone. I expanded the boundaries of my interviewees from just female participants, to including male participants, and women who were not from ethnic minority groups. This

enabled me to approach the dearth of women in the C-suite from a holistic and unbiased point of view which added great authenticity and integrity to my paper.

I also set the goal of being “being more confident when talking to new people” and to my surprise this goal was met quite quickly. I achieved this easily enough, as I merely made an extra effort to chat with the barista who mad my morning coffees at Butler’s Café, or the person sitting next to me at the library. I even became good friends with a few other Laidlaw Scholars, and we researched as a group together quite often, which was extremely helpful, and I felt my confidence grow as the weeks went by.

Overcoming Challenges

As with any other long-term project, there were highs, but there were also difficult challenges which tested my patience, resilience, and self-endurance. One of the biggest challenges that I faced was adapting to working without a set structure of deliverables to produce. As opposed to college essays, this style of independent research puts responsibility upon the researcher, to create and deliver the set of outcomes which they deem most appropriate. This nature of ambiguity with independent research which is not something that I am used to. Therefore, the nature of the work meant that I had to plan and re-plan as I went along each week, to ensure that I hit the targets that I had set for myself. However, the real problem arose when I planned to research a sub-topic and realized half-way through that this topic may be related, but it does not add true value to the work. This unrelated topic may have added a nice flow to the following topic, but I learned to prioritize the most important aspects. As I previously mentioned, there is no right or wrong way to do this research, although I sometimes found myself wishing that there was. Nevertheless, this issue pushed me to adjust my plans, which also taught me about the importance of prioritisation.

Another challenge that I encountered was being overly ambitious about the amount of work that I could complete in a day. I found myself falling behind my weekly schedule and this was very frustrating. I eventually realized that I was setting unrealistic goals for myself, which were simply unattainable. As someone who reads 5-6 books in an entire year, assuming that I could read 4 books on highly complex topics in 6 weeks is... comical to say the least. As soon as I started setting smaller, more achievable goals, my productivity increased significantly.

The Interview Process

Conducting these interviews built a new strength, or I might even go as far as calling it a passion within me. This passion is for listening to the stories of people who are often misrepresented or overlooked within society. I just loved listening about the people in their lives who inspired them to pursue their career. I loved learning from the challenges they faced, both internally and externally, and about strategies they used to overcome these challenges. I loved listening to their years of experience they many of them had in various industries- from software development, to banking, to non-financial sectors to technology. I loved hearing multiple variations of the same sentence from almost every individual...They would say "I never actually planned to be in position that I am in now," they simply "fell into it". As someone who like to plan out every detail of something before I do it, this was so refreshing to hear. It reinforced how life is so unpredictable, and ever-evolving, so everything should not and cannot be planned for. The important thing is so welcome and embrace that unanticipated change as it comes, so you can make the most of out the situation.

Perspective on Leadership

Before the leadership training days, I was conditioned to believe that leadership was about changing the world on a large-scale or having a 'respected' societal status. I classified leaders as presidents, social activists, and CEOs, and hence, I felt like true leadership was not within my power as a college student. However, this research project has given me a new understanding of leadership: it is not about external status but rather, true leadership comes from within. What's important is not changing the world but striving to make a positive difference in the lives of the people surrounding you. It is about becoming aligned with yourself and your morals, enabling you to create a vision that aligns with these values. It is about implementing a growth mindset which cultivates a culture of continuous improvement. A good leader strives to become the highest versions of themselves, to inspire others and leave a lasting impact on the world. My triumphs and struggles throughout this research project, I have crafted this unique vision of the authentic leader I aspire to become.

Conclusion

In conclusion, my journey of independent research has taught me so much, not just academically, but about life in general. I experienced many challenges, but they enabled me to gain new strengths and qualities which will stand to me in all my life's pursuits. I am so excited to embark on the next phase of the journey, and truly bring my project and the lessons that I have learned to life.

References

The G 100 (2021). About Us, Available at: <https://www.g100.in/g100-global-chairs-and-chapters/>