

LiA Report

1. Introduction

This summer, I completed a six-week Leadership-in-Action Project at Global Spark, a global educational non-profit organization, that operates remotely and has physical hubs in London, United Kingdom and Toronto, Canada. This report is presented in six sections (including this introduction) and outlines the experience, the project undertaken, leadership skills developed, key insights, and takeaways.

About Global Spark:

Global Spark is a non-profit that empowers students to be more socially conscious and work towards practical solutions to the world's most pressing challenges. It was founded in 2007 at the University of Toronto and is currently run by a multidisciplinary team of over 110 young professionals and student leaders. The team is made up entirely of volunteers and located globally, demonstrating the immense passion and commitment that they bring to this cause. Global Spark's objective is to inspire students to advance solutions to the world's largest challenges, support their journeys by providing accessible up-skilling and experiential application opportunities, and enable students to enter impactful career opportunities across all sectors. They do this through several events and products, including Hack the Globe, Social Impact Consulting, and the new Spark Ventures (under development).

My involvement with Global Spark:

I have volunteered with the organization for 2+ years, with roles across its Community and Curriculum portfolios. In my first year, I worked on developing a community platform with access to exclusive fireside chats, opportunities, and resource boards, for those interested in social impact. Although this program did not take off beyond that year, it served as the foundation for my Leadership-in-Action project. In my second year, I helped lead a team of 12+ volunteers to develop social impact case studies that could be incorporated into postsecondary curricula to expose students to subject matter beyond their chosen specializations.

My involvement this summer:

This summer, I was tasked with the ideation, value proposition analysis, and beta tasting of two new programs – Spark Ventures and Alumni Community. The next two sections outline the motivation and execution behind these projects. Alongside this, I also assisted in an ad-hoc capacity with providing orientation and training workshops for newly recruited volunteers.

2. The Problem

Global Spark had been running programming with talented students for 5+ years; however, had no active connection with their alumni. Seeing the missed opportunity here, my primary task was associated with the creation of a sustainable alumni program. Alumni included students that had participated in Hack the Globe (a multidisciplinary social impact hackathon with direct mentorship from the Boston Consulting Group), the Social Impact Consulting Program

(where students are paired with other non-profit groups to provide consulting insights), and several panels/ thought leadership events.

Spark Ventures is a new portfolio, currently under development and scheduled to roll out later this year. It is a combination of several portfolios, trials, and feedback received from previous iteration. The main aim of Spark Ventures is to provide students with hands on experience with consulting, business development, and entrepreneurship. It begins with a consulting project with a community partner and then branches off into a venture-building stage with support from mentors and experts at every stage.

3. The Project

For the alumni community, my tasks involved creating an effective alumni strategy that would engage past alumni and Global Spark volunteers. I proposed various methodologies, including a LinkedIn Group, in-person events, a mailing list, and newsletters, amongst others. Ultimately, I developed a marketing plan that consisted of a combination of the LinkedIn Group, Themed Events, and a mailing list to keep everyone in the loop. This decision was reached after several meetings, proposals, decks, and future planning sessions.

For Spark Ventures, my role was to develop materials that would describe the new project's value proposition. I was also heavily involved in deciding the intimate details of this undertaking, looking at month-by-month schedules, potential speakers and mentors, program design, participant and partner recruitment, etc.

Beyond my LiA, I am continuing to take both these projects forward, with the respective volunteer teams.

4. Leadership Skills Developed

Throughout my Leadership-in-Action project at Global Spark, I had the opportunity to develop and refine several crucial leadership skills. Strategic thinking was essential in developing the alumni engagement strategy and contributing to the Spark Ventures program, requiring critical consideration of long-term goals and effective implementation. My communication skills were honed through articulating ideas clearly in writing and verbally, particularly when explaining complex concepts and pitching new ideas. The process of evaluating different methodologies for the alumni community strengthened my decision-making abilities, while managing multiple aspects of both projects improved my project management skills. Working in a dynamic, volunteer-driven environment taught me adaptability, and taking the lead on developing new programs cultivated a proactive approach to leadership.

5. Collaboration and Team Dynamics

The collaborative environment at Global Spark played a crucial role in the success of my projects. The majority of my work was conducted in close partnership with my project supervisor, Lewis, characterized by weekly one-on-one meetings that provided a consistent platform for discussing progress, addressing challenges, and aligning on goals. Periodic team

meetings offered opportunities to share insights and gather diverse perspectives. The overall team dynamic was notably positive, fostering an environment where ideas were welcomed and constructive feedback was readily exchanged. Despite the remote nature of our work, the team maintained a light-hearted and enjoyable atmosphere, facilitating open communication and strengthening team bonds. Key decisions were made collaboratively, ensuring that various viewpoints were considered and that the final decisions had broad support within the team.

6. Conclusion

My Leadership-in-Action project at Global Spark has been an invaluable experience, offering deep insights into non-profit operations, program development, and leadership. Key learnings include the power of networking, as highlighted by the alumni community strategy, and the potential for innovation in the non-profit sector, demonstrated by Spark Ventures. The experience underscored the importance of adaptability, the value of diverse perspectives, and the impact of effective communication, especially in a remote work environment. Both projects emphasized the importance of strategic, long-term planning in creating sustainable impact and organizational growth. This experience has not only contributed significantly to my professional development but has also deepened my passion for social impact work. The skills and insights gained will undoubtedly prove valuable in my future academic and professional endeavors as I continue to explore ways to contribute meaningfully to addressing global challenges.

LiA Reflection

My Leadership-in-Action (LiA) project at Global Spark has been a significant experience, offering insights into leadership, non-profit operations, and driving social impact. As I reflect on this journey, I'm impressed by the multifaceted nature of leadership and how this experience has shaped my understanding of effective leadership in today's global landscape.

A key insight was the importance of adaptive leadership in a volunteer-driven, global organization. Global Spark's structure, with its team of over 110 young professionals and student leaders spread across the globe, presented unique challenges and opportunities. Leading in this environment required flexibility and cultural sensitivity. I learned to adjust my communication style and expectations based on the diverse backgrounds of team members, recognizing that effective leadership is about creating an inclusive environment where diverse ideas can flourish.

The development of the alumni engagement strategy and the Spark Ventures program highlighted the role of strategic thinking in leadership. These projects required me to look beyond immediate goals and consider long-term implications and sustainability. I learned to balance idealism with practicality, understanding that ambitious visions must be grounded in realistic, actionable plans. This experience taught me to think systematically, considering how different elements of an organization interact and influence each other.

Communication emerged as a cornerstone of effective leadership throughout my LiA project. In a remote work environment, clear and consistent communication became crucial. I improved

my ability to articulate complex ideas succinctly, tailor messages to different audiences, and use various communication channels effectively. The weekly one-on-one meetings with my supervisor, Lewis, were particularly instructive. These sessions taught me the value of active listening, asking probing questions, and providing constructive feedback. I also learned the importance of transparency in communication, especially when dealing with challenges or setbacks.

The collaborative nature of the projects underscored the importance of emotional intelligence in leadership. Working closely with diverse team members and stakeholders required empathy and interpersonal skills. I learned to read between the lines in virtual interactions, picking up on unspoken concerns or enthusiasm. This heightened emotional awareness allowed me to better motivate team members, mediate conflicts, and build consensus around key decisions.

One valuable lesson was the importance of embracing uncertainty and seeing it as an opportunity for innovation. Throughout my project, I encountered numerous instances where we had to pivot our strategies or rethink our approaches. This shift in perspective allowed me to approach challenges with curiosity rather than apprehension, fostering a more creative and resilient leadership style.

The process of developing and refining the Spark Ventures program taught me the value of iterative leadership. I learned to embrace a more agile approach, developing minimum viable products, gathering feedback, and continuously refining our ideas. This iterative process not

only led to better outcomes but also fostered a culture of continuous learning and improvement within the team.

Another crucial insight was the importance of purpose-driven leadership. Global Spark's mission to empower students to address pressing global challenges resonated deeply with me. Throughout the project, I saw how a clear sense of purpose could inspire and motivate volunteers to dedicate their time and energy to the cause. This experience reinforced my belief in the power of aligning personal values with organizational goals.

The LiA project also highlighted the role of networking and relationship-building in leadership. Developing the alumni community strategy opened my eyes to the potential of a well-nurtured network. I learned that effective networking goes beyond collecting contacts; it's about fostering genuine relationships and creating mutually beneficial connections.

This experience reinforced the importance of self-reflection and continuous personal growth in leadership. The dynamic nature of the projects and the responsibilities I shouldered pushed me out of my comfort zone numerous times. Each challenge presented an opportunity for introspection and learning. I developed a practice of regular self-assessment, critically examining my decisions and their outcomes.

What made this experience particularly meaningful was the opportunity to contribute to the growth of a non-profit organization over the summer. Knowing that my efforts were directly helping Global Spark expand its reach and impact added a sense of purpose to my work. It was

rewarding to see how the strategies and programs we developed had the potential to empower more students and create positive change on a global scale. This sense of purpose made the challenges more worthwhile and the successes more satisfying.

In conclusion, my Leadership-in-Action project at Global Spark has been a journey of personal and professional growth. It has expanded my understanding of leadership, teaching me that effective leadership is a balance of strategic thinking, emotional intelligence, adaptability, and commitment to a shared purpose. The experience of contributing to a non-profit's growth over the summer added depth and meaning to my work, reinforcing my passion for creating positive social impact. As I move forward in my career, I carry these valuable lessons and insights with me, confident that they will continue to shape my approach to leadership and my commitment to driving positive change in the world.

Weekly Reflections

Week 1 Reflection

1. What went well?

I successfully onboarded with Global Spark and familiarized myself with their mission and current programs. I had productive initial meetings with my supervisor, Lewis, and other team members. We outlined the main objectives for the alumni engagement strategy and Spark Ventures program.

2. What could have been done differently?

I could have asked for more detailed background information on previous alumni engagement attempts. This would have provided a stronger foundation for brainstorming new strategies.

3. What did I learn about myself when working with others?

I realized I have a tendency to jump into problem-solving mode without fully understanding the context. This experience taught me the importance of active listening and asking clarifying questions before proposing solutions.

4. What did I learn about leadership?

I learned that effective leadership begins with building relationships and understanding the organizational culture. Lewis's approach to welcoming new team members and setting clear expectations demonstrated the importance of creating a positive first impression.

5. What do I want to develop or focus on next?

I want to focus on improving my ability to synthesize information from multiple sources and stakeholders. This will be crucial for developing comprehensive strategies for both projects.

Week 2 Reflection

1. What went well?

I made significant progress on researching best practices for alumni engagement in non-profit organizations. I also conducted initial brainstorming sessions for the Spark Ventures program, generating several promising ideas.

2. What could have been done differently?

I could have reached out to more team members for their insights on alumni engagement. Relying primarily on my research and discussions with Lewis may have limited our perspective.

3. What did I learn about myself when working with others?

I discovered that I thrive in collaborative brainstorming sessions. However, I also noticed that I sometimes struggle to concisely communicate complex ideas, which can lead to confusion.

4. What did I learn about leadership?

I observed that effective leaders facilitate discussions rather than dominate them. Lewis's ability to guide conversations while encouraging input from all team members was inspiring and something I aim to emulate.

5. What do I want to develop or focus on next?

I want to work on my communication skills, particularly in articulating complex ideas more clearly and concisely. This will be crucial for presenting my research findings and program proposals effectively.

Week 3 Reflection

1. What went well?

I successfully drafted the initial proposal for the alumni engagement strategy, incorporating research findings and team input. For Spark Ventures, we narrowed down our ideas to a few promising concepts and began developing them further.

2. What could have been done differently?

I could have sought feedback on the alumni engagement proposal from a wider range of stakeholders before finalizing the draft. This might have helped identify potential issues or opportunities earlier in the process.

3. What did I learn about myself when working with others?

I realized that I have a strength in synthesizing diverse ideas into coherent strategies. However, I also noticed that I sometimes become too attached to my own ideas, making it difficult to incorporate conflicting viewpoints.

4. What did I learn about leadership?

I learned the importance of balancing decisive action with openness to feedback. Observing how Lewis guided the team through the decision-making process while remaining receptive to new information was enlightening.

5. What do I want to develop or focus on next?

I want to focus on developing my ability to give and receive constructive feedback. This skill will be crucial as we refine our proposals and prepare for internal pitches.

Week 4 Reflection

1. What went well?

We refined our alumni engagement strategy proposal based on initial feedback and began preparing for a formal internal pitch. For Spark Ventures, we developed a detailed program structure and timeline for presentation to the leadership team.

2. What could have been done differently?

I could have anticipated some of the questions and concerns that might arise during the internal pitch. This would have allowed us to address potential obstacles in the initial proposal more effectively.

3. What did I learn about myself when working with others?

I discovered that I have a talent for project planning and breaking down complex initiatives into manageable tasks. However, I also realized that I sometimes overlook the human factors in implementation, focusing too much on processes and timelines.

4. What did I learn about leadership?

I learned the importance of championing ideas while also being open to pivoting when necessary. Lewis's ability to balance enthusiasm for our proposals with a realistic assessment of challenges was admirable.

5. What do I want to develop or focus on next?

I want to improve my ability to anticipate and address potential concerns in project proposals. This will be crucial as we prepare for our internal pitches to the leadership team.

Week 5 Reflection

1. What went well?

We successfully presented our alumni engagement strategy to the internal leadership team, receiving constructive feedback. For Spark Ventures, we finalized the program curriculum and prepared a compelling pitch deck for potential mentors and community partners.

2. What could have been done differently?

We could have prepared more detailed implementation plans for both projects. Some leadership team members requested more specifics on resource allocation and timelines.

3. What did I learn about myself when working with others?

I realized that I have a strength in maintaining enthusiasm and momentum in long-term projects. However, I also noticed that I sometimes struggle with handling critical feedback, taking it personally rather than seeing it as an opportunity for improvement.

4. What did I learn about leadership?

I learned the importance of resilience and adaptability in leadership. Observing how Lewis navigated challenging questions during our presentations and used feedback to strengthen our proposals was instructive.

5. What do I want to develop or focus on next?

I want to focus on improving my ability to handle and integrate critical feedback effectively. This will be crucial for refining our proposals and gaining broader organizational support.

Week 6 Reflection

1. What went well?

We incorporated leadership feedback into our alumni engagement strategy and prepared a revised proposal. For Spark Ventures, we developed a comprehensive outreach plan for potential mentors and community partners.

2. What could have been done differently?

We could have allocated more time for revising our proposals based on feedback. The tight timeline meant we had to work extra hours to incorporate all the suggested changes.

3. What did I learn about myself when working with others?

I discovered that I have a talent for synthesizing feedback and translating it into actionable improvements. However, I also realized that I sometimes take on too much responsibility, which can lead to stress and potential burnout.

4. What did I learn about leadership?

I learned the importance of balancing vision with pragmatism. Lewis's approach to refining our ambitious plans into achievable goals while maintaining the core purpose was enlightening.

5. What do I want to develop or focus on next?

As my LiA project concludes, I want to focus on developing sustainable leadership practices. This includes better work-life balance, more effective delegation, and long-term strategic thinking. I also want to explore ways to stay involved with the planning and development of these initiatives at Global Spark.