Leadership-in-Action Project Report: Developing an Emerging Leaders Program

Introduction

During the summer of 2025, I undertook a six-week Leadership-in-Action (LiA) project with the Troost ILead team at the University of Toronto. My role involved collaborating with the ILead team to co-create, plan, and develop a new Emerging Leaders program specifically designed for first and second-year engineering students. This experience was significant because it addressed a critical gap in leadership development programming for young engineers, who are often stereotyped as lacking interpersonal skills yet will become the technical leaders of tomorrow.

Working alongside my collaborator Munaam, we identified that existing ILead programming lacked focus on ethical leadership, a foundational element we believed was essential for developing engineers who could lead with integrity, create safe spaces, and align their technical expertise with strong moral values. Our project aimed to design a comprehensive program that would introduce students to leadership concepts while emphasizing the ethical dimensions often overlooked in traditional engineering education.

The main leadership themes I will explore in this reflection include adaptive leadership in the face of changing circumstances, the importance of cultural humility when designing inclusive programming, ethical considerations in curriculum development, and the collaborative skills necessary for effective stakeholder management across diverse organizational levels.

Challenges Faced

The Challenge of Audience-Appropriate Content Development

One of the most significant challenges I encountered was learning to adapt my research and content development approach to suit first and second-year engineering students. Having developed strong academic research skills through previous experiences, I initially defaulted to conducting thorough literature reviews and seeking complex, peer-reviewed frameworks. However, this approach proved counterproductive for our target audience, who needed accessible, practical content rather than heavy theoretical material.

This challenge directly related to the first SMART goal I had established at the beginning of my LiA project: to develop a comprehensive curriculum incorporating the 3Cs Framework (Character, Capacities, Change Maker Values) through workshops, discussions, guest speakers, and hands-on activities. The underlying "why" behind this challenge was my desire to create a program with serious academic rigor that would genuinely impact students' leadership development. I hoped to elevate the perception of leadership education within engineering culture, where such skills are often dismissed as "soft skills" of

secondary importance. The impact I sought was to demonstrate that leadership development could be both intellectually substantial and practically applicable.

My approach to handling this challenge involved a fundamental shift in methodology. Rather than abandoning rigorous research, I learned to use academic sources to identify relevant topics and evidence-based practices, then translate these findings into simple, interactive frameworks and hands-on activities that would resonate with novice learners. This required developing new skills in instructional design and learning to separate content depth from content accessibility. Successfully completing not just the curriculum outline but also detailed facilitator guides and presentation materials for all four sessions (reduced from five due to academic calendar constraints) enabled me to apply the Laidlaw Scholar values of being **curious** through extensive research into leadership frameworks, **determined** when adapting to last-minute program restructuring, and **extraordinary** by creating comprehensive materials that exceeded initial expectations.

Timeline Restructuring and Stakeholder Management

A major challenge emerged in Week 5 when the ILead team recommended reducing our carefully planned five-week program to four weeks due to changes in the fall academic calendar. The earlier start date had shifted midterm schedules, and the marketing team predicted lower engagement during the final sessions of our original format. This challenge directly impacted the second SMART goal I had set at the outset of my project: to implement a marketing and outreach plan that would reach first- and second-year FASE students through diversity, equity, and inclusion emphasis.

Beyond the logistical complexities, the shortened timeline created a more significant content challenge. The ILead team recommended reducing the depth with which we explored concepts of equity, diversity, inclusion (EDI), safe space creation, and psychological safety. Their reasoning was sound: these are inherently complex, emotionally heavy concepts that require careful facilitation and adequate processing time, particularly for first-time learners who may never have encountered such frameworks in their technical education. With only four weeks instead of five, they argued, we risked overwhelming participants or creating superficial understanding of these critical leadership foundations.

However, I felt strongly that these concepts were not optional add-ons but fundamental to ethical leadership development. This created a tension between practical time constraints and my core conviction that engineering students needed exposure to these ideas precisely because they are often absent from traditional STEM curricula. I found myself in the position of needing to advocate for maintaining substantive EDI content while demonstrating that I could deliver it effectively within the compressed timeframe.

This last-minute change was particularly challenging because it required not only condensing curriculum content but also convincing experienced educators that we could find an appropriate balance between accessibility and depth. The marketing timeline constraints also meant I had to be **fast** in adapting to new requirements while remaining **brave** in positioning ethical leadership concepts as central to engineering education despite potential skepticism from technically-focused students and time-conscious administrators.

I approached this challenge by embracing adaptive leadership principles, viewing the restructuring as an opportunity to demonstrate creative problem-solving rather than simply accepting content reduction. I proposed a hybrid approach that introduced EDI concepts through interactive activities and case studies specifically relevant to engineering contexts, making them more accessible without sacrificing their importance. Working intensively, I reworked the entire program structure, prioritizing the most essential elements while ensuring coherence across the condensed timeline. This experience taught me the importance of early stakeholder consultation, building flexibility into program design from the outset, and the critical skill of advocating for values-based content even when facing practical constraints.

Leadership Skills Applied and Developed

Communication and Stakeholder Engagement

Throughout the project, I developed sophisticated communication skills that extended far beyond my previous understanding of keeping messages short and concise. Effective leadership communication, I learned, requires comprehensive audience awareness and message tailoring. This involved creating prerequisite materials to help audiences engage effectively, designing visual aids that enhance comprehension, and planning interactive activities that reinforce key concepts through experiential learning.

I also developed skills in "leading upwards", learning to communicate effectively with senior team members by preparing thoughtfully for check-ins, sending questions ahead of time, and structuring updates so others could provide meaningful feedback. This proved invaluable when working with the ILead director and other stakeholders who needed clear, actionable information to make decisions about the program.

Problem-Solving and Adaptive Planning

The project demanded constant problem-solving as we navigated changing requirements, resource constraints, and stakeholder needs. I learned to balance my enthusiasm for comprehensive content with practical limitations, developing skills in prioritization and strategic decision-making. The experience of cutting substantial amounts of content taught me that effective leadership involves focusing energy on high-impact activities rather than trying to address every possible need.

This challenge-driven learning directly supported the third SMART goal I had outlined at the beginning of my project: to develop evaluation tools assessing program impact on participants' Character, Capacities, and Change Maker Values through surveys, interviews, and performance metrics. I researched and identified an engineering-specific leadership inventory and developed reflection frameworks that balance quantifiable assessments with meaningful introspection. This goal embodied the Laidlaw value of being **good** by ensuring program accountability and **ambitious** in creating comprehensive evaluation systems that could inform future program iterations.

Cultural Humility

Recognizing and Challenging Personal Biases

Working on leadership development for engineering students required me to confront my own assumptions about what constitutes effective leadership education. Initially, I approached the project with an academic bias, assuming that rigorous theoretical frameworks would be most valuable. However, I had to recognize that this preference reflected my own learning style and educational background rather than the needs of our target audience.

I challenged this bias by actively seeking feedback from team members who had more direct experience with engineering student populations from a teaching perspective and by researching pedagogical approaches specifically designed for technical audiences. This process taught me that cultural humility extends beyond demographic differences to include disciplinary cultures and learning preferences.

Engaging with Diverse Perspectives

Throughout the project, I engaged with stakeholders from various backgrounds within the ILead organization, including program directors, marketing specialists, and experienced facilitators. Each brought different perspectives on student engagement, organizational priorities, and implementation logistics. Rather than viewing these diverse viewpoints as obstacles to my vision, I learned to see them as essential inputs that would improve the final program.

Demonstrating Empathy and Active Listening

A specific situation that exemplified cultural humility occurred during Week 5 when the marketing team recommended timeline changes. Instead of becoming defensive about the potential disruption to our plans, I practiced active listening to understand their concerns about student engagement patterns and academic calendar conflicts. I recognized that their expertise in understanding student behavior was valuable and that incorporating their insights would ultimately serve our participants better. This required setting aside my attachment to the original timeline and demonstrating empathy for both the team's operational concerns and the students' academic pressures.

Ethical Considerations

Balancing Rigor with Accessibility

An ongoing ethical consideration involved ensuring that our leadership program would be genuinely beneficial to participants while remaining accessible to students who had never engaged with leadership development before. This created tension between my desire to create intellectually substantial content and the ethical obligation to serve our target audience effectively.

I addressed this by consistently returning to our core objective of serving first and second-year engineering students, using this as a guide for all content decisions. When faced with choices between comprehensive coverage and practical application, I prioritized approaches that would provide immediate value to participants while building foundation skills for future learning.

Representation and Inclusion

Developing programming for diverse engineering student populations raised important questions about representation and inclusion. Throughout the design process, I worked to ensure that examples, case studies, and activities would resonate with students from various backgrounds and that the program would create space for different leadership styles and cultural approaches.

Sustainable Impact vs. Personal Investment

I grappled with the ethical dimension of creating programming that I was personally passionate about while ensuring it aligned with organizational needs and student interests. A specific example arose when I advocated strongly for maintaining comprehensive EDI content despite time constraints. While my passion for these topics was genuine, I had to critically examine whether my insistence stemmed from personal values or from what would truly serve our participants best.

This ethical tension became particularly apparent when receiving feedback that suggested reducing the depth of equity and inclusion concepts. I found myself asking: Was I prioritizing my own learning interests and ideological commitments over the practical learning needs of first and second-year engineering students? Through discussions with the ILead team, I learned to distinguish between compromising core program values and adapting delivery methods to serve our audience effectively. This taught me that ethical leadership requires separating personal enthusiasm from objective assessment of value and impact, while still maintaining the courage to advocate for essential content that might be challenging or unfamiliar to stakeholders.

Collaboration and Team Dynamics

Navigating Organizational Hierarchy and Decision-Making

Collaborating with the ILead team provided valuable experience in navigating organizational structures and understanding how decisions are made at different levels. I learned to communicate appropriately with everyone from peer collaborators like Munaam to senior directors, adapting both my communication style and level of preparation accordingly. For instance, when presenting curriculum changes to the program director, I learned to lead with impact and rationale rather than detailed methodology, while peer discussions could explore implementation nuances more thoroughly.

The experience taught me that effective collaboration requires understanding each stakeholder's priorities, constraints, and expertise areas. The marketing team's concerns about student engagement patterns during midterm periods initially felt like obstacles to our programming goals, but I learned to view their insights as valuable intelligence about our target audience. By taking time to understand how different team members could contribute to the project's success, I was able to build more productive working relationships and create better outcomes. This process revealed that organizational hierarchy, when navigated thoughtfully, can enhance rather than hinder collaborative innovation.

Managing Asynchronous Collaboration Under Pressure

Given that team members balanced multiple commitments during the summer, we developed an effective asynchronous working rhythm with robust document versioning practices and clear communication protocols. This became particularly crucial during Week 5 when timeline changes required rapid coordination across multiple stakeholders. I learned to anticipate information needs, provide context in written communications, and structure documents so others could review and provide feedback efficiently without requiring extensive meetings.

This collaborative approach taught me the importance of creating systems that respect others' time constraints while maintaining project momentum. I developed skills in writing concise yet comprehensive project updates, creating decision-focused meeting agendas, and using collaborative documents that allowed for transparent input from all stakeholders. These experiences highlighted how thoughtful project management can be an expression of leadership that enables others to contribute their best work.

Leveraging Diverse Expertise for Collective Success

Working with specialists in marketing, facilitation, and program administration exposed me to different professional perspectives and skill sets that significantly enriched the final program design. The marketing team's understanding of student engagement cycles influenced our session scheduling and promotional strategy. The facilitation experts helped me recognize that interactive learning activities could convey complex concepts more effectively than traditional presentation formats. Program administrators provided insights into logistical constraints that shaped our implementation approach from the beginning.

Rather than viewing these diverse viewpoints as competing priorities, I learned to synthesize different forms of expertise into cohesive solutions. This experience reinforced that effective leadership involves recognizing where specialized knowledge is needed and proactively building teams of experts rather than attempting to master every relevant domain personally. More importantly, it taught me that successful collaboration requires creating space for others' expertise to influence project direction, even when that means adapting my initial vision in fundamental ways.

Conclusion

This Leadership-in-Action project provided transformative insights into collaborative program development, adaptive leadership, and the complexities of creating educational experiences for diverse audiences. The experience challenged my assumptions about effective leadership education while developing practical skills in stakeholder management, content design, and strategic adaptation.

Key lessons learned include the importance of early stakeholder consultation, the value of designing flexible systems that can accommodate change, and the critical role of cultural humility in creating inclusive programming. I discovered that effective leadership often involves maximizing impact through focused, purposeful choices rather than comprehensive coverage of all possibilities.

This experience will significantly influence my future leadership practice by providing a framework for approaching complex collaborative projects with diverse stakeholders. I've developed greater appreciation for the expertise others bring to collaborative efforts and enhanced skills in adaptive planning and

strategic communication. The project also reinforced my passion for leadership development work, particularly in technical fields where such development is often undervalued.

Moving forward, I plan to continue developing skills in instructional design and facilitation, potentially through the work-study opportunity to implement the program I helped create. This experience has also sparked interest in exploring how leadership development can be integrated more effectively into technical education across various disciplines.